

## FEATURES

### Bringing magic into schools

#### *Special to Ticket*

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BATH — A woman in black tights with a long red braid stands in the middle of the gymnasium, doing movements, making motions. Hands up. Hands down. Head right. Head left. Step forward. Step Back. Wave hands. Spread fingers. Make two fists. Shake whole body. Repeat.

Twenty-five fourth-graders follow every move of the woman. Tentative at first. Then with more confidence. Then with real energy. Their attention never wavers during this demonstration, not even for a second. Not even once during the next hour.

Every once in a while the woman pauses and walks up to a student and lovingly but firmly imparts some advice. "Spread your fingers more." "Stand tall." "Focus." "Energy."

Who is this woman and who are these kids and why aren't they in class learning what kids need to know to pass a test and be successful? Has the world of education gone haywire?

No, the world hasn't gone haywire. It's just that Heartwood Regional Theater Company has gone to school. Heartwood Theater is a professional theater organization headquartered in Damariscotta, and its Heartwood Goes to School program has come on this icy cold day to bring magic to Fisher Mitchell School in Bath.

The woman is Karen Montenaro, a world-renowned dancer and mime artist, an award-winning choreographer, and the innovator of "mimedance," the fusion of two classical art forms.

Montenaro leads four workshops on this day, each with a different class of students. After each workshop students leave the gym with eyes shining and an extra bounce to their steps. Something has happened during that hour. But what?

Montenaro explains. "We help kids use 100 percent of their energy in a positive way, not in a win-or-lose, right-or-wrong way. They learn the power of absolute focus, and they get immediate feedback, unafraid of getting the 'wrong' answer because there is no 'wrong' answer. They learn that what they do, who they are, has value. That experience stays with them."

The feedback goes both ways. "I'm passionate about my work," says Montenaro. "And I get my reward from seeing the light behind a kid's eyes. My job is to keep that light lit."

The Heartwood Goes to School program, launched in 2008, brings mime, theater, puppetry and

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Millie Santiago of the Heartwood Regional Theater Company, left, works with students at the Fisher Mitchell School in Bath.

storytelling to schools throughout the region. Last year, the program reached more than 2,700 K-12 students in 15 schools across four counties from Bath to Lincolnville. Many of these students had never even seen a professional theatrical production, let alone tried their hand at mime or acting.

Griff Braley, the director of Heartwood, explains the thinking behind the Heartwood Goes to School program. "Kids benefit on three levels: they engage in a short-term, one-time experience which might spark future interests; they build skills, ranging from kinesthetic to critical thinking to imagination to group dynamics to performance protocol; and in some cases they identify a lifelong vocation or avocation."

Elise Voight and Kevin Kiley, skilled actors who have led several Heartwood Goes to School programs, came to the Fisher Mitchell School on this day to observe — and learn from — Karen Montenaro.

"We're bringing something to students outside the rigid structure of the classroom," says Voight, "and students learn skills without even knowing it. "

Kevin Kiley laughs when he asks, "How often does a kid get rewarded for going crazy in the classroom?"

Nancy Harriman, principal of the Fisher Mitchell School, is a strong advocate for the Heartwood Goes to School program. "Students in this age group have a tough time focusing. They often need to be moving to be processing. These actors are absolutely mesmerizing and engaging."

Braley expands upon Harriman's point. "Many administrators often remark upon the overall dynamic of visiting artists and the importance of professional mentoring. Many artistically motivated students are malnourished in our schools. Teachers often feel students who 'act out' would be good for dramatic activities, which is often true. But many quiet students simply have a different view of the world and need to be drawn out and encouraged. It's a subtle balance in the teaching of the arts."

An amazing phenomenon often occurs during Heartwood Goes to School programs, be they one-day workshops or week-long residences that end with a theatrical production in which every student in the school performs.

A girl who tends to be invisible, say, or a boy who is perceived as a troublemaker in class really shine in a workshop or a play. They get positive feedback — something they've seldom experienced in school — in front of their peers. And the glow from that feedback can last a lifetime.

During one of the morning workshops, for example, Montenaro took a timeout and there was total silence in the gymnasium. She walked up to a boy who had been following the instructions along with the others. She stood right in front of him.

The boy was of small stature. He wore glasses. His shoulders were slumped. Karen looked right at the boy and said, "That was terrific!" And she meant it. And he knew it.

The boy looked at her, seeming unbelief on his face. Then he stood up a little straighter. A small smile came to his face.

Simply magic.

**For further information** on the Heartwood Goes to School program and other programs offered by Heartwood Theater, go online to [www.heartwoodtheater.org](http://www.heartwoodtheater.org) or call (207) 563-1373.

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