

SUCCESS STORY: Theatre & Drama Therapy Innovations at Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School



COVID-19 Innovations and Responses

This is the second in a series of success stories detailing innovations by arts education organizations in response to pandemic-related closures and modifications.

About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 100 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation’s hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts integration across the education spectrum and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.

In 2021, AEP added a fifth priority area to success stories to capture innovations by partners, affiliates and others in AEP’s network in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This success story highlights the work of Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School in Brooklyn, New York. This success story aligns with AEP’s new priority area: “COVID-19 Innovations and Responses.”

Arts Education Partnership interviewed Sally Grazi-Shatzkes, creative arts therapist and director of the arts department at Yeshivah of Flatbush Joel Braverman High School in Brooklyn, New York. Sally described two theatre programs that required significant revisions to continue to benefit students at her school.

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Interview

Please describe the program you implemented to take the place of your school's musical.

Every year, students at our school take a musical script, translate it into Hebrew, which is not their native language, and perform it for the entire school. The goal of this annual musical is to get as many students as possible in the production, and because of COVID, we need to keep gatherings as small as possible. We had to find a way to keep students safe while also providing this rich experience. I thought about the times when musicals are performed on the screen. What first came to mind was the Tony Awards or other awards shows where there are musical numbers interspersed with other content, so we turned our musical into an awards show.

Our school has a choir, which is a separate program from the musical. But our choir wasn't able to perform, so I thought, why not collaborate? All of the choir students became the cast of the musical. I partnered with the choir director, who created the backing tracks and recorded each vocal part to send out to students. We did seven musical numbers; each student had to learn their part and then film themselves singing it. Then we had to collect all those videos and organize them in shared folders so we could easily access material for the video.

We had a separate process for creating material outside of the musical numbers. We had a host and filmed them live performing their scripted parts. We made awards, and then we went around to surprise people who received awards. We filmed their impromptu acceptance speeches. We were trying to find that balance that successful award shows have between pieces that are planned and organized and then pieces that are live and not scripted. We also inserted clap tracks, laugh tracks, graphics, music and rolling credits.

The most important thing was having a strategy before starting. When I'm directing a musical, there's a linear process; we can't do one thing before something else is done. When we moved to a filmed event, those sequential steps had to happen simultaneously. I also didn't have all the required expertise to make this happen, like editing, for example.

What were the precipitating factors that led you to have to do things differently?

Our school was open for in-person learning with safety precautions, but we couldn't sing. We also couldn't be together without masks. This is a problem because if the final product was filmed when we were together, students would be wearing masks and you couldn't see their facial expressions or see their lips move. We would have lost a lot of meaning.

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Who did you need to get involved, and were those relationships you already had or ones you had to build?

The choir director is my colleague and someone I already knew, but this was a new direction for our relationship. We had to engage an audio engineer and a video editor. The audio engineer is my husband, so that was an established relationship. We've been directing shows together for many years, and during the school year, he's the accompanist for our program. The video editor is an alumna of our school and had done some work for us in the past. He wasn't a stranger to the usual process and what we would need to do to accomplish the vision.

What barriers did you encounter, and how did you deal with them?

The awards show was very product-oriented, which is different than usual. As an educator and therapist, I'm usually thinking about the process and how to help students learn and grow. This year's process was not great for students because they were very isolated. They recorded their videos alone, sent them in and waited. To counter that isolation, we planned a VIP showing and red-carpet event for the cast. We had food, decorations and sequined masks, and everyone dressed up. Of course, we made sure we were physically distanced. We watched the show together, which fed the social need that had been missing in the process.

There weren't many other barriers because I had a strong vision and was very organized. There was a bit of a financial barrier, but we didn't spend much more than usual because there wasn't a set designer or set builder, and there weren't many costumes. There were some technical barriers, like when the video editor had to learn a new skill because I saw something on YouTube and asked if we could do it.

If you could go back in time and do the work again, what would you do differently (if anything)?

I would have had more gatherings with students throughout the process to share updates. I was watching their recordings every day and felt connected to them; they didn't have that experience. We had Zoom video conference rehearsals — actually more like instructional sessions to give specific pieces of feedback — and then I sent follow-up emails with instructions, e.g. "hold camera this way while you film." This was much different than the traditional rehearsal experience, which is very social.

You shared that you also run the Witness Theater program. Can you talk about what you've learned in the process of revising that program this year?

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For the last eight years, I've directed Witness Theater. We bring together Holocaust survivors and twelfth graders to engage in a drama therapy journey that builds relationships between those groups. At the beginning of the program, students get to know the survivors as they are today; after six or seven weeks together, the survivors share their stories from the war through an embodied drama therapy process. This year, it's not possible for these elderly people to come to the school. We've moved the program to Zoom because we don't have the luxury of holding off another year. We've already lost many survivors, and COVID has accelerated that loss.

I had to think carefully about how we could make the adults' Zoom experience successful. At the beginning, students had red flowers, and they held them up as a visual cue when they spoke. They counted to three before speaking so the adults could find them on the screen. As each session concluded, students said goodbye and logged off one at a time so the closing experience wasn't as jarring with everyone logging off and disappearing quickly.

The students usually write a script in January based on the stories, process and relationships built during the program, and then they perform it in April. We did the performance through film last year because of timing, but the survivors couldn't participate fully. We've planned for a film from the beginning this year so everyone can contribute. The students will film their parts live with me, and then we'll record the adults on Zoom.

We've had to make changes to how we meet, including meeting more frequently for shorter durations. However, there are some things we can't replace. When you're in a room together physically, a survivor will tell their story, and ten students will stand up to demonstrate an emotion in response. We experience that together in three dimensions. On Zoom, I'm not sure what everyone is seeing and if they're experiencing the same thing. And silence in the physical room when we're together is its own response; silence on Zoom could mean a dropped connection or muted microphone rather than a genuine response. One good thing is that this year, students seem to have the same profound connection to survivors as in previous years. Students are calling survivors to check on them. In fact, the biggest challenge we're facing right now is that students are desperate to meet the survivors in person because we've all been so isolated.

For both programs — the awards show and Witness Theater — having a clear vision and plan have been most important. It's also been imperative to lean on those relationships I've already cultivated. I'm looking forward to the time when we can be in large groups again so my students can take advantage of the social supports that in-person theatre experiences provide.