



## The Van Wezel Foundation: Enriching Lives

By Lalanena Gonzalez-Figueroa

There's nothing quite like the look in a child's face as she experiences a live theater show. The excitement, the sense of wonder and the innocent acceptance of the presentation contribute to the atmosphere of the auditorium, fueling actors with a palpable energy. Each year, the Van Wezel Foundation makes this happen for upwards of 25,000 children throughout the Gulf Coast region, sponsoring their attendance at delightful programs offered by the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. "For so many of our participants, this is their first experience with live theater," reveals President and CEO Monica Van Buskirk.

Established in 1987, the Van Wezel Foundation is an independent charitable non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization that supports the Hall's programs and educational outreach. The Foundation also provides funds dedicated to the Hall's maintenance, upkeep and capital improvements. To date, millions of dollars have been directed to the Hall, and countless lives have been changed as a result.

"One of our primary missions is our outreach to local youth," remarks Monica. "The funds we raise make it possible for children from kindergarten through high school to attend our performances."

In addition to tickets and transportation to school time performances such as The Math Maniac Show, Stuart Little and Junie B. Jones, the Van Wezel Foundation also

supports students in their classrooms through interactive workshops with curriculum integration. There is even an audition workshop that encourages and empowers future performers.

"At a time when budget cuts continue to impact the scope and quality of arts exposure for our youth, it is so wonderful to provide area children with the chance to experience live theater," asserts Monica. "Study after study has shown a direct correlation between arts exposure and improved math and science scores; we take to heart the importance of giving young people the opportunity to thrive socially and academically."

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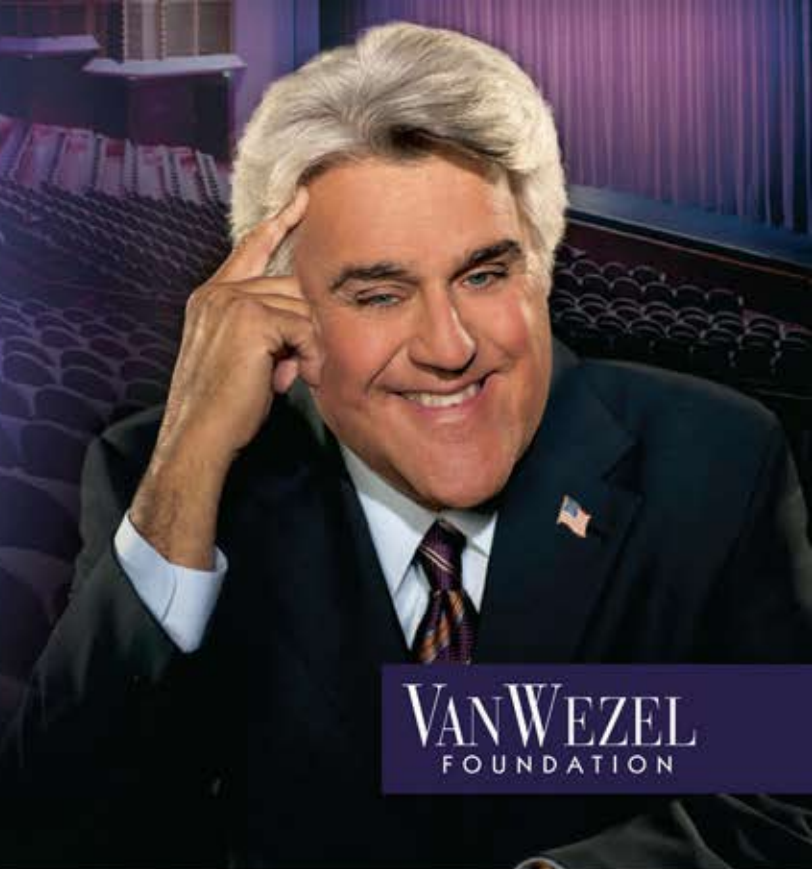
Statistical data is reinforced by the heartwarming letters the Van Wezel Foundation receives from students and educators. "There is such a sense of gratitude for the experience," Monica explains. "It's wonderful to see the impact that we have had."

Students aren't the only beneficiaries of The Van Wezel Foundation's outreach efforts; the organization reports that it recently raised upwards of \$25,000 to apply to military and senior access programs. "Veterans, active duty servicemen and women, and their families will have the ability to take advantage of free or reduced-cost performances, as will area seniors," notes Monica.

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The Van Wezel Foundation's monetary contributions ensure that all Hall patrons enjoy their experience in a well-maintained environment. "As stewards of the Hall, we support the significant efforts of maintaining and beautifying the property," says Monica. "From new carpets and updated bathrooms, to maintenance of the Hall's ample grounds, we are proud to contribute to the atmosphere that makes the Hall such a wonderful place."

With the tremendous support of local volunteers, donors and underwriters, The Van Wezel Foundation continues to thrive. "We are so fortunate to have a wonderful community that understands the importance of what we do, and that believes in the value of giving back," Monica observes. "Opportunities abound for individuals and businesses to contribute time, talents and funds to the Foundation. "We are currently seeking volunteers to assist us with our ongoing initiatives and to be a part of our annual gala," she continues.

The gala, the Foundation's signature event, promises to be a memorable one in 2014. "We are so thrilled to welcome Jay Leno, who will join us just days after his final Tonight Show broadcast. It's always a great party, with cocktails, dinner and a rousing after party." The fundraiser includes a silent auction and a raffle to win a new Lexus IS 250 F Sport. Throughout the year, The Van Wezel Foundation continues its fundraising efforts through special events including Friday Fest and Sunday brunches.

"We are really excited about our future," asserts Monica. "The Van Wezel Foundation is working closely with city officials to best meet the ongoing needs of the Hall and our community. We look forward to ongoing success, and to continuing to make a positive impact on the lives of others."



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