

ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

2022-2023

WHAT'S INSIDE:

WARM WISHES FOR
BETSY CORRY'S
RETIREMENT

INCLUSIVE
SENSORY FRIENDLY
PERFORMANCES
DRAW CROWDS

CALLING
ALL ALUMNI!

As we reflect on First Stage's 36th season, we extend our deepest gratitude to our community of generous supporters. This season was not without its challenges, but your belief in our mission has helped us to inspire young people with high-quality Theater Productions, nurture life skills through stage skills of future leaders in our Theater Academy, and educate local students through art-integrated Theater in Education Programs. Thank you!



ARTHUR™ AND
FRIENDS MAKE A
MUSICAL, 2022
PHOTO BY
PAUL RUFFOLO

First Stage touches hearts, engages minds, and transforms lives by creating extraordinary theater experiences for young people and families through Professional Theater Productions, Theater Academy Training, and Theater in Education Programming.

[FIRSTSTAGE.ORG](https://www.firststage.org)

 **FIRST
STAGE**
TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH THEATER



“ First Stage has been a safe space for me since I was three years old. My childhood was chaotic, messy, and often unpredictable. But whenever I spent time at First Stage, I felt grounded. I could feel the care and dedication that defines every member of this community even before I knew how to give those feelings a name, and it provided stability that I didn’t have in many other parts of my life.

As I grew older, First Stage fulfilled another need for me: companionship and with it, self-confidence. I didn’t like to go along with the crowd. I didn’t feel the need to seek approval from my schoolmates through my clothes or behavior, and as a result, many of my friends began to drift away. First Stage actively pushes back against that kind of pettiness.

For the past fifteen years, I have heard, seen, lived, and felt the unconditional support that this community provides – support to be ourselves, to follow our passions, and to always, always be kind. That is a rare thing for an institution that serves as many people as First Stage does.

Each of us is uniquely gifted with our own talents and perspectives, and for as long as I can remember, we have been encouraged to celebrate one another and learn from each other instead of comparing our differences and tearing each other down. That kind of environment doesn’t simply spring into existence on its own. It is thanks to the work of countless teachers, TAs, interns, students, and people behind the scenes, each of whom has poured their heart and soul into their work here.

This place is one of the main reasons I maintained hope in my worth as a person during some of the toughest times in my life. I have not gone to school in one place as long as I’ve been here. I have not lived in my house as long as I’ve been here. None of my friendships have lasted for as long as I’ve been here. My mom and my stepdad have not been married as long as I’ve been here.

As I prepare to leave for college in the fall, it’s probably going to be harder to say goodbye to this incredible, inspiring, comforting community of beautiful human beings than it will be to anything or anyone else other than my parents. All of you have left an indelible mark on my character – and, let’s be honest – on my soul, too. I will forever be grateful for everything the community of First Stage has done for me. Thank you for touching my life so deeply. ”

– Graduating Theater Academy Student

CALLING ALL ALUMNI!

First Stage is updating our database and want to stay in touch. If you are an alum, we’d love to hear from you!

[ALUMNI CONTACT FORM](#)

2022-2023 PRODUCTIONS

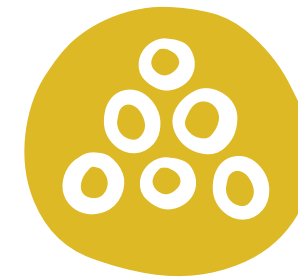
As a national leader in the Theatre for Young Audiences field, First Stage is committed to presenting professional theater productions that inspire and educate young people and families.

On average, it costs approximately **\$235,000** to present a Theater Production, and **ticket sales only cover roughly 50% of that cost.** The remaining expense is covered by the generous contributions of our donors.

Thanks to our community of supporters, First Stage can keep our ticket prices affordable for young people, schools, families and ensure that the stories we tell on stage are presented at the highest artistic caliber for our young audiences who are among our most discerning audience members and deserve the best.



THE SPONGEBOB
MUSICAL™ FOR YOUNG
AUDIENCES, 2023
PHOTO BY
PAUL RUFFOLO



60,567
total audience
members



58
adult actors



300
total
performances



105
young
performers



2022-2023 SEASON OF PLAYS



IT IS INCREDIBLY SPECIAL AND SO VERY FREEING TO BE ABLE TO BRING OUR AUTISTIC LOVED ONES TO PERFORMANCES LIKE THIS ONE. SHARING SPACE IN A JUDGMENT-FREE ZONE WHERE COMFORT HAS BEEN MADE A PRIORITY IS AN ABSOLUTE GIFT. THEATRE ENRICHES ALL OUR LIVES. THANK YOU FOR MAKING IT ACCESSIBLE TO MY CHILD AND OTHERS LIKE HIM.

AUDIENCE MEMBER



SENSORY FRIENDLY PERFORMANCES

First Stage's **Sensory Friendly Performances** are a part of our **Next Steps Program**. Next Steps expands First Stage's Theater Academy Classes and Theater Productions by tailoring the curriculum and content specifically to the needs of young people on the autism spectrum.

At these select performances, autistic children and their families and friends can enjoy live theater in a welcoming environment featuring reduced seating capacity, lower sound, lights up, and quiet areas staffed by experienced educators. First Stage served 822 people with our Sensory Friendly Performances this season.

Sponsored by  

822

people served with
Sensory Friendly
Performances

AMPLIFY READING SERIES

Understanding the power of connection that young people feel when they see themselves and their stories on stage, this season welcomed the third installment of AMPLIFY – the play reading series that features newly commissioned work from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color playwrights and directors. First Stage presented these readings free of charge throughout the community and at the Milwaukee Youth Arts Center.

AMPLIFY was supported in part by a grant from the Milwaukee Arts Board and the Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin.



THIS REMARKABLE PLAY BY SHÁ CAGE CELEBRATES THE BRILLIANCE AND CREATIVITY OF THESE YOUNG GIRLS AS THEY BREAK BARRIERS, CONQUER THE SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE AND BECOME THE WOMEN WHOSE WORK IN MATHEMATICS AND ENGINEERING WOULD HELP MAKE SPACE EXPLORATION POSSIBLE.

JEFF FRANK, FIRST STAGE
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
HIDDEN HEROES

HIDDEN HEROES

AUGUST 13-14, 2022

Based on the book *Hidden Human Computers: The Black Women of NASA* by Sue Bradford Edwards and Duchess Harris

By Shá Cage | Directed by Samantha D. Montgomery

Presented as part of the Milwaukee Black Theater Festival

FRANKIE: THE UNTOLD STORY OF A GURL FRANKENSTEIN

OCTOBER 15-16, 2022

By José Casas | Directed by David Flores

THE FORGOTTEN GIRL

APRIL 26, 2023

By India Hill Brown | Adapted by Idris Goodwin
Directed by Jon Royal

First Stage looks forward to fully producing **THE FORGOTTEN GIRL** during our 2023-2024 season. We welcome you to see how this play took shape since it's AMPLIFY reading and be among the first to experience this world premiere.

FRANKIE: THE UNTOLD STORY OF A GURL FRANKENSTEIN, 2022





MY FIVE-YEAR-OLD GRANDSON AND I HAD SUCH A WONDERFUL TIME AT RUDOLPH! I PARTICULARLY LOVED THE PRODUCTION'S ENRICHMENT GUIDE. HE AND I WENT THROUGH IT PRIOR TO THE SHOW, AND HE LIT UP WHEN HE HEARD A LINE IN THE PERFORMANCE THAT WE DISCUSSED WITH THE GUIDE. THANK YOU FOR CREATING SUCH A WONDERFUL PRODUCTION AND MEMORIES TO LAST A LIFETIME!

AUDIENCE MEMBER



ARTHUR AND FRIENDS MAKE A MUSICAL! OCTOBER 7 - NOVEMBER 6, 2022

Book and Lyrics by John Maclay, Music and Lyrics by Brett Ryback, Adapted from the books and characters created by Marc Brown

Sponsored by  Kids deserve the best.

RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER™: THE MUSICAL NOVEMBER 25 - DECEMBER 24, 2022

Based on the animated television special "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and the stage production directed and conceived by Jeff Frank and First Stage
Script adaptation by Robert Penola

Sponsored by  

CARMELA FULL OF WISHES JANUARY 20 - FEBRUARY 12, 2023

Adapted by Alvaro Saar Rios
From the book by Matt de la Peña

Sponsored by 

“Our class is currently reading *ESPERANZA RISING*, and we used this theater experience as an opportunity to compare and contrast the two stories while also exploring figurative language. It was also nice to have a performance that our EL students could understand more of – they really enjoyed it.” – Classroom Teacher

THE HOBBIT FEBRUARY 3 - MARCH 5, 2023

Based on *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien
Adapted for the Stage by Greg Banks

CARMELA FULL OF WISHES, 2023
PHOTO BY PAUL RUFFOLO



THE HOBBIT IS A STORY OF SELF-ESTEEM, COURAGE, AND STEPPING INTO YOUR OWN POWER. AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PLAY, BILBO DOES NOT BELIEVE HE IS A HERO BUT THEN LEARNS IT IS NOT ABOUT BEING SOME KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR... A HERO IS SOMEONE WITH COURAGE, HEART – SOMEONE WHO CARES FOR OTHERS AND WANTS TO DO THE RIGHT THING AND WILL DO WHAT IT TAKES TO REALLY STEP UP.

ANGEL RIVERA,
YOUNG PERFORMER
WHO PLAYED THE ROLE
OF BILBO BAGGINS IN
THE JOURNEY CAST



THE HOBBIT, 2023
PHOTO BY PAUL RUFFOLO





THIS PLAY ENCOURAGES US TO ENJOY THE ADVENTURES OF LIFE BY NOT ALLOWING OUR FEARS TO STIFLE US. INSTEAD, WE MUST REBUILD OURSELVES AND OVERCOME OUR FEARS BY FINDING THE STRENGTH WITHIN OURSELVES TO MAKE BRAVERY OUR ONLY CHOICE.

DIRECTOR OF
THREE LITTLE BIRDS,
SAMANTHA
MONTGOMERY



THE SPONGEBOB MUSICAL™ FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES MARCH 3 - APRIL 2, 2023

Based on the series by Stephen Hillenberg
The musical production was conceived by Tina Landau
Directed by Tommy Novak

Sponsored by Molitor
FOUNDATION

“...The lessons were: never give up on your dreams and work hard toward your dreams. And I think that lesson is really good for young kids who don't know that yet. Also, the food was really good at the play, and there was really good cookies and Rice Krispie squares, which I took home and still haven't eaten. I felt really excited to be at the musical, and it was a really exciting play to go to. I think it's good for young kids because it is really funny, and my dad also went to the play and he's not a young person and he liked it too.”
– Calvin Krzykowski (age 8), Radio Milwaukee Review

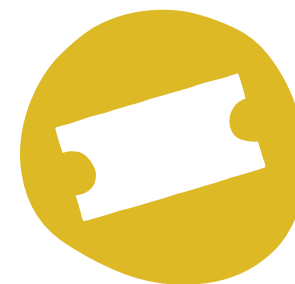
BOB MARLEY'S THREE LITTLE BIRDS APRIL 21 - MAY 21, 2023

Based on a story by Cedella Marley
Music and Lyrics by Bob Marley
Adapted for the stage by Michael J. Bobbitt
Directed by Samantha Montgomery



PAY WHAT YOU CHOOSE

During our 2022-2023 season, First Stage ensured that **1,650 young people and families** experienced our Theater Productions at no or little cost to them – thanks to our “Pay What You Choose” performances, “First Stage for \$5” ticket offers, and a select number of free preview performance tickets given to our nonprofit partners and Theater Academy families who receive financial aid.



1,650
audience
members attended
performances
at little or no cost
to them



WORLD PREMIERE WISCONSIN

First Stage was doubly represented in the **World Premiere Wisconsin** festival with a full production of **THE GRACIOUS SISTERS** by Alice Austen, and a reading of **THE FORGOTTEN GIRL** by Idris Goodwin. It was an honor to be able to shine a light on all the new play development both at First Stage and throughout our state!





2022-2023 THEATER ACADEMY

One of the nation's largest high-impact theater training programs for youth, the Theater Academy teaches *life skills through stage skills* to young people ages 3-18 – offering a challenging curriculum taught by professional teaching artists.

Some of our most popular classes this season were the following:

- **Costuming Elective:** Students received an in-depth look at what it takes to be a costume designer – learning the role, responsibilities and what it means to be an artist and a valuable team member. This class was taught by First Stage Costume Designer, Jazmin Aurora Medina.
- **Stage Combat Elective:** Students learned the art of creating realistic looking – but safe – stunts, falls, and fights through hands-on lessons in a safe and controlled classroom taught by Fight-Director, Christopher Elst. Students gained trust in each other and their own physicality.

Performance Experience Classes retired at the end of our 2022-2023 season and did so with a fantastic finish with the presentation of NEWSIES.

Program evaluation demonstrated the following skill development in our Theater Academy students this season:

91%

of Academy students experienced growth in teamwork

87%

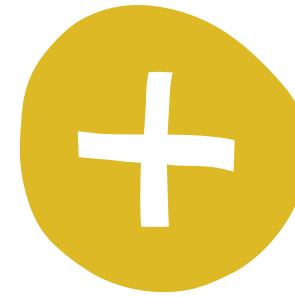
of Academy students developed their Actor Toolbox skills

84%

of Academy students experienced improved self-confidence

83%

of Academy students were more open to trying new things



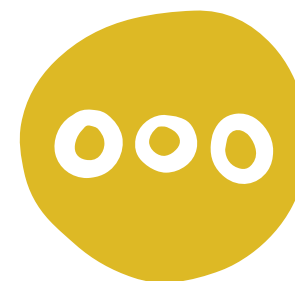
1,484

total enrollments



1,002

unique students



148

unique classes

I CAN'T IS NOT IN MY VOCABULARY! I TAKE RISKS! I CONQUER MY FEARS! I AM NOT AFRAID TO LEAD!

“ My granddaughter truly enjoyed herself. She grew with more confidence in herself and began to speak with volume. She’s already asking if she can attend First Stage next summer. This has been a blessing to me and our family watching her blossom more in HERSELF. ”

“ I appreciate how engaging and warm First Stage teachers were. My kids were very apprehensive at first, but both wanted to continue. ”

“ The Theater Academy is wonderful. Thank you for providing high-quality and accessible opportunities! ”

“ My child had a lot of fun! I am thankful that the program has a cheer in relation to their character! After her first class, my child came out of the session with a BEAMING smile – the biggest one I have seen in a LONG time! She was very empowered during and after the class. ”

Only 79% of the costs associated with First Stage's Summer Theater Academy classes are covered by tuition payments. The remaining expense is covered by contributed revenue. First Stage's community of supporters makes it possible for our organization to keep the Theater Academy's tuition cost lower for our students and their families. Our donors also help us to never turn students away due to financial limitations. First Stage's **Family Partnership Program** removes barriers and ensures access to our Theater Academy by providing need-based scholarships and other logistical support—all of which is made possible by donations.



YOUNG COMPANY

Young Company is First Stage's award-winning and nationally recognized training program for advanced high school actors. This season, Young Company members completed up to 300 hours of college-level instruction in Voice, Movement, and Shakespeare as well as electives ranging from Auditioning to Stage Combat to Dialects.

Unfortunately, Young Company was not able to make it out west for the annual Utah Shakespeare Festival High School Competition this year due to canceled flights. Though disappointed and heartbroken, our dedicated and resilient Young Company Members salvaged their work with a public performance and a video of their **Shakespearean Showcase**.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM DECEMBER 9 - 18, 2022

By William Shakespeare

LITTLE WOMEN MARCH 24 - APRIL 2, 2023

By Kate Hamill
Adapted from the novel by
Louisa May Alcott

THE GRACIOUS SISTERS MAY 5 - 21, 2023

By Alice Austen
A free adaptation of
The Eumenides, by Aeschylus
World Premiere

Sponsored by



45

Young
Company
members

3

Performance
Projects



YOUNG COMPANY MEMBERS SHARED ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE THIS SEASON:

“ Through my time in Young Company, I have learned so much about acting, myself, and the world. ” – Maya

“ First Stage has always been a constant in my life throughout all of the craziness, and joining Young Company has only expanded this incredibly safe and loving presence in my life. ” – Hazel

“ First Stage, but especially Young Company, has been a safe place for me for over half of my life. It has shaped me both as a performer and a person. ” – Eleanor

“ Joining Young Company is perhaps one of the best decisions I have ever made. Young Company is a family and a home; The friends, opportunities, and experiences I have been given are unmatched. ” – Rose



BARD-O-THON

Forty-nine young company members performed more than 450 monologues on Saturday, April 22, 2023. The fundraising efforts of these talented young people raised more than \$15,000 to support Shakespeare programming at First Stage. In addition to performing as many memorized monologues as possible, Young Company members also participated in a masterclass facilitated by **Nate Burger**, American Players Theatre Core Company Member.



NEXT STEPS

Next Steps expands First Stage's Theater Academy Classes to autistic young people with high and low support needs allowing each student to take their "next step" as an artist and as a person. Students experience the joy of acting and musical theater with a team of professional teaching artists with special education training.

First Stage's Next Steps Program also includes our **Sensory Friendly Performances** that provide accommodations to create a welcoming theater experience for autistic people, their families and friends.



25

unique students
(30 enrollments)

822

people attended
Sensory Friendly
Performances



FEEDBACK FROM NEXT STEPS FAMILIES:

“ My daughter is not shy anymore. She seems to be getting a lot more out of the whole Next Steps experience now. ”

“ My child grew in confidence! Thank you! ”

“ What a wonderful program! My son was excited every morning and did not want it to end. He loved his group and teachers. ”

“ After participating in Next Steps, my son is more imaginative. He has always been factual, but now he plays pretend with his sister much more. He used to just tell her 'go away' right away. But now after Next Steps, he plays with her for more prolonged amounts of time. ”



FAMILY PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

Thanks to our community's support, First Stage has never turned a student away due to their family's inability to pay for classes by providing financial aid awards and other logistical support as needed. Financial aid is based on families' financial situations, adjusted gross income, and their past Academy experiences. Prior to COVID-19, First Stage provided more than \$100,000 in financial aid to nearly 400 students (more than 600 enrollments) per year.



25

students received

118

scholarships

\$42,613

total scholarships awarded



EDUCATION PROGRAMMING,
PHOTO BY MYA GIULIANI

2022-2023 THEATER IN EDUCATION

First Stage serves as Wisconsin's leader in arts-in-education programming. By cleverly blending the arts with standard curriculum, First Stage Theater in Education Programs provide the opportunity for students to learn traditional academic subjects through creativity and self-expression. All of First Stage's programs are directly linked to the Common Core State Standards, Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards, 21st Century Learning Skills, and ReadyGen Standards.

First Stage's Theater in Education team visits local classrooms throughout the year to provide arts-integrated workshops that teach core curriculum and nurture students' social and emotional development through theater. Our workshops are provided at a highly subsidized rate or free of charge in order to keep them accessible to all schools. In fact, **without the support of our generous community of donors, 37% of the classrooms we serve today would not be able to be served with our programming.**

Peek into First Stage's Theater in Education Programming pillar [here](#).

This season, First Stage provided the following programs and more:

- **Gold Field Trip Package:** Formerly called Literacy Plus, this residency included a field trip to the theater and four weekly workshops leading up to the performance to ignite students' love of reading by connecting our professional theater productions with the English Language Arts curriculum, while simultaneously developing students' social and emotional skills.
- **Young Leaders Residency:** Through drama activities, books, and creative writing activities, students explored the true stories of six young leaders and their contributions to society (Louis Braille, Ruby Bridges, Greta Thunburg, Jahkil Naeem Jackson, Malala Yousafzai, and Amanda Gorman). Lessons were designed to enhance literacy, creative and critical thinking skills, and one's own change-making ability.
- **Touring Show:** This 35-minute performance was a fun and interactive take on well-known stories, such as TORTOISE AND THE HARE. Students were invited to enter the story through storytelling, song, dance, and tactile experiences.

Seventy-eight percent of the 91 schools and community organizations served were within Milwaukee County, and 55% were within the City of Milwaukee.

First Stage evaluated our in-school programming through pre/post-program student evaluations—including post-program writing reflections, observer's guides, and comprehensive teacher surveys. Past feedback has refined workshop curriculum, influenced the development of new workshops, enhanced curriculum connections to academic standards, including the Common Core, and influenced the development of enrichment guides and professional development materials for classroom teachers.

First Stage evaluated our Gold and Platinum Field Trip Packages this season. Results demonstrated the following:

57% of students demonstrated growth in language comprehension skills following participation.

48% of students improved in teamwork and collaboration following participation.

43% of students demonstrated growth in social and emotional skills following participation.

42% of students increased their use of creativity and imagination following participation.

100% of classroom teachers felt their students gained new perspectives and experiences by having a guest teacher.

67% of classroom teachers observed their students engaging in curricular-based lesson plans in new and creative ways.

67% of classroom teachers observed their students utilizing skills in teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

The student population at the participating schools located within the City of Milwaukee reflect the following demographics: 43% African American, 5% Asian, 31% Latino/a, 17% White, and 4% two or more races. Seventy-six percent of students are considered economically disadvantaged, according to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.



91
schools and
organizations



55%
located within
the City of
Milwaukee



1,021
workshops



9,999
students



**MY STUDENTS LOVED
THE EXPERIENCE!
THE FIRST STAGE
TEACHING ARTIST
WAS AMAZING.
THANK YOU!**

EDUCATOR

TOURING SHOW,
PHOTO BY
MYA GIULIANI





FIRST STAGE STAFF AND BOARD ALSO SHARED THE FOLLOWING WELL-WISHES AND MORE AT BETSY'S RETIREMENT PARTY:

“ One of the happier days of my life – and one for which I am continually thankful – was the day Betsy chose to come back to First Stage for a second life with us. First Stage wouldn't be where we are today without Betsy, and I wouldn't be who I am had she chosen a different path. ”

“ I enjoy seeing Betsy's beautiful smile every day. She is a joy to be around, and I feel blessed to know her. ”

“ Betsy's kindness, warmth, and strong leadership are some of the main reasons I wanted to work at First Stage. You can clearly see the years of sacrifice and devotion that Betsy has put into First Stage. We hear time and time again from our students that First Stage feels like home and that is because of Betsy. I'm grateful for everything Betsy has done to make First Stage the incredible place it is today. ”

“ Betsy leads with compassion, and I am constantly moved by how much she cares about this company and its people. ”

“ I owe much of my many years at First Stage to Betsy, who shared enthusiasm for my ideas and provided me the space to bring those to reality, always happy to genuinely support, and all with the biggest smile. She is what every leader should be—strong, knowledgeable, supportive, open-minded, empathetic, and caring. Betsy, congrats to you on your next adventure in life! ”

“ There aren't enough words to thank Betsy for all she has done for First Stage, for the families of southeastern Wisconsin and for me personally. Her depth of caring, work ethic and love for young people and for theater are unmatched. I'm excited about what is next for her and thankful for how she has helped me grow. ”

“ I love Betsy's enthusiasm when we share good news and her sincere interest in our well-being. I have never met a leader quite as special as Betsy. ”

“ I'm having a hard time putting into words my extreme gratitude for Betsy's leadership and friendship throughout the years I have known her. I admire how she leads with genuine care and integrity and tackles some extremely tough challenges with immense grace. I can't thank her enough for believing in me throughout my career! Her belief in me has helped me reach new heights that I didn't think were possible. ”



BETSY CORRY'S RETIREMENT

At the end of this season, we had to say a bittersweet farewell to our longtime Managing Director, Betsy Corry, as she embarked on her next adventure – retirement.

Betsy has been involved with First Stage in multiple roles for 28 years of its 36-year history. Since returning to First Stage as Managing Director in 2012, Betsy has been a close friend, role model, and leader to many faces throughout the organization and the Greater Milwaukee Area. Now, after ensuring that First Stage has been able to fulfill its mission of *transforming lives through theater* for so many years, Betsy looks forward to spending some much-needed time with her friends and family.

As Betsy reflected on her long history with First Stage, she remarked, “I look at all of the people that I have been so fortunate to partner with – the board, the staff, the students – all work together to make First Stage a place that feels like home for me.”

While we will miss the empathy, knowledge, kindness, and boldness that Betsy has brought to First Stage all these years, we wish her well on her new journey!

See the heart-warming performance dedicated to Betsy by a selection of our students, staff, and alumni [here](#). Betsy has been a role model to all our First Stage students, families, and staff for many years – and we all just want to be like her “When I Grow Up.”

“

I LOOK AT ALL OF THE
PEOPLE THAT I HAVE BEEN
SO FORTUNATE TO PARTNER
WITH — THE BOARD, THE
STAFF, THE STUDENTS — ALL
WORK TOGETHER TO MAKE
FIRST STAGE A PLACE THAT
FEELS LIKE HOME FOR ME.

BETSY CORRY





WINE TASTING & DINNER, 2022
PHOTO BY PAUL RUFFOLO

WINE TASTING & DINNER

NOVEMBER 5, 2022

Wisconsin Club - Country Club

Gondolas whisked guests away for a *Venetian Masquerade* for First Stage's 13th Annual Wine Tasting & Dinner.

Entertainment included:

- Bella Via Dance Studio performed "Masquerade"
- Josiah Williams, a First Stage Alum, shared how his First Stage experience shaped his path in life through [this video testimonial](#)
- Angel Rivera and Leo Madson, two members of First Stage's Young Company, performed a scene from Shakespeare's TWELFTH NIGHT

Thank you to our Sponsors and Committee for making First Stage's 13th Annual Wine Tasting & Dinner bellissimol!

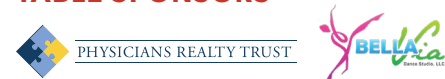


\$122,105
raised

PREMIER SPONSORS



TABLE SPONSORS



Amy and Bob Arzbaeher, Boerke Family Foundation, Ellen and Seth Dizard, Caryn and Jim Esten, Megan and Tim Lantz, Melissa and Eric Nelsen, The Ziegler Family

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Amy and Bob Arzbaeher, Beechwood Sales and Service, Capitol-Husting Company, Inc., The Chef's Table, Melissa and Patrick Horne, Milwaukee Bucks, Hunzinger Construction Company, Mikkelson Builders, Well Family Chiropractic

WINE EVENT COMMITTEE

Co-Chairs Megan and Tim Lantz, Bob Arzbaeher, Sally Cartwright, Secily Clason, Dan Grenda, David Magnasco, Melissa Nelsen, Corrie Prunuske, Gail Teigeiro

MAKE BELIEVE BALL

MARCH 4, 2023

Hilton Milwaukee City Center

Families sailed on the S.S. First Stage for First Stage's 29th Annual Make Believe Ball! Managing Director Betsy Corry was honored for her years of dedication to successfully *steering* First Stage and guests delighted in a *boatload* of talent: Thatcher Jacobs and Zachary Church from First Stage's Starfish Cast of THE SPONGEBOB MUSICAL FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES.

The Make Believe Ball could *knot* have been possible without the generosity and support of our Sponsors and Committee. Thank you!



\$153,591
raised

PREMIER SPONSOR



CORPORATE SPONSORS

A.O. Smith Foundation, Astor Street Foundation, Associated Bank, Foley and Lardner LLP, Godfrey and Kahn S.C., KPMG, Marcus Hotels and Resorts, Milwaukee Bucks, Physicians Realty Trust, PNC, We Energies Foundation

FAMILY SUPPORT

The Esten Family, The Gilpin Family, The Hirano Family, The Mehigan and Swoboda Families, The Orr Family, The Pence Family, The Pilarski-Haller Family, The Singh Family, The Townsend Family

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Beechwood Sales and Service, Paul Ruffolo Photography

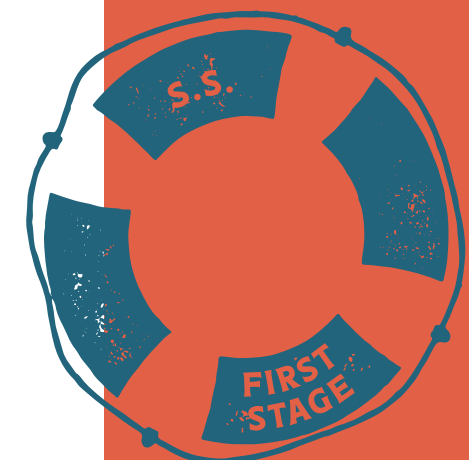
MAKE BELIEVE BALL COMMITTEE:

Co-Chairs Julie and Brian Gilpin, Monica Arnstein, Jennifer Burfeind, Maggie Corry Steinbach, Ronda Davis, Laura Hirano, Marlee Jansen, Maggie Marks, Mary Mayne, Meredith Pence, Piper Plummer Mehigan, Melissa Radtke, Sheree Rhodes, Amanda Singh, Anne Swoboda, Julia Westphal, Heather Whitmill



MY FAVORITE THING ABOUT THE MAKE BELIEVE BALL IS SEEING DIFFERENT FAMILIES COMING TOGETHER FOR A UNIQUE, FUN AND FORMAL EVENT. IT IS SUCH A RARITY FOR PARENTS AND THEIR YOUNG PEOPLE TO GO SOMEPLACE TRULY SPECIAL AND HAVE A MAGICAL AND MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE. THE BALL ALSO RAISES A LOT OF MONEY TO HELP OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE COME SEE SHOWS AT FIRST STAGE OR TAKE THEATER ACADEMY CLASSES. ALL AROUND IT IS JUST A SPECTACULAR EVENT.

JEFF FRANK, FIRST STAGE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



COVID RECOVERY

COVID-19 left no area of First Stage's operations untouched and severely limited our ability to generate earned revenue. Our organization's recovery has been slow-moving, but thankfully, in the right direction. Our earned-to-contributed revenue ratio is now 43% earned to 57% contributed – closer to our pre-pandemic 50/50 ratio – but still a ways to go. Overall, it has been a difficult road back to this point.

Similar to other organizations, the staffing transitions we have experienced over the past few years have been some of our biggest challenges. The local arts sector, as a whole, cannot support artists with a livable wage and has too long relied on artists' love for the art to get the job done. For some theaters, it makes sense to raise ticket prices to support the demand for higher salaries; however, the unique challenge for First Stage is that our reason for existence is to serve young people, families, and schools with professional Theater Productions, high-quality Theater Academy training, and arts-integrated Theater in Education Programs. The margins we must work with in ticket prices, class registrations, and program fees are minimal, as our target audience—youth and families—has also been the hardest hit during the pandemic and a period of high inflation.

This predicament, along with the slow-moving financial recovery that First Stage has been experiencing over the past few years, prompted our board and staff leadership to research ways to regain our organization's financial stability and sustainability. Working with a local financial consulting firm this season, we created a Bridge Plan.

This Bridge Plan includes recommendations for operational decisions that will need to be made over the next three years in order to bridge where First Stage is now (operating with a deficit of \$1.2 million dollars that is being covered by our board-restricted reserves) to where we want to be (financially sustainable). The goal of the Bridge Plan is to propel First Stage past the crippling effects of COVID-19 to not only regain our previous level of impact but to deepen it over the next

three seasons.

The Bridge Plan contains the following recommendations:

- **Program Enhancement:** Broaden our impact with new program opportunities while maintaining our core programming.
- **Revenue Enhancement:** Determine untapped internal resources (such as our production shop) that could generate additional income streams and support other company areas.
- **Shared Services:** Identify joint ventures that do not directly influence our brand or deliverables by discovering ways to spread costs across several organizations with shared services in HR, IT, etc.
- **Strategic Philanthropy:** Invest in fundraising while building an Alumni Engagement Program and other ways to support the three pillars of our organization.

Another focus of the Bridge Plan was succession planning for the retirement of our Managing Director, Betsy Corry, at the end of our 2022-2023 season. Working with Management Consultants for the Arts (MCA), First Stage conducted a national search for prospective Managing Director candidates. Betsy has also agreed to continue her support of First Stage until December 31, 2023, on average 10 hours per week, to help us and the new Managing Director transition into their role.

Throughout this past season and looking ahead, First Stage remains committed to fulfilling our mission of transforming lives through theater while regaining financial stability and creating organizational sustainability. Our entire staff and board are committed to nurturing young people's creativity, literacy, communication skills, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, collaboration, empathy, and confidence—through the stories our Theater Productions tell on stage, the lessons we teach in our Theater Academy Classes, and the connections we reinforce in Theater in Education Programs.





DONOR LIST

Thank you to our community of donors for helping First Stage continue transforming lives through theater! Below is a list of donors of \$1,000 or more that contributed to the First Stage community during our 2022/2023 season:

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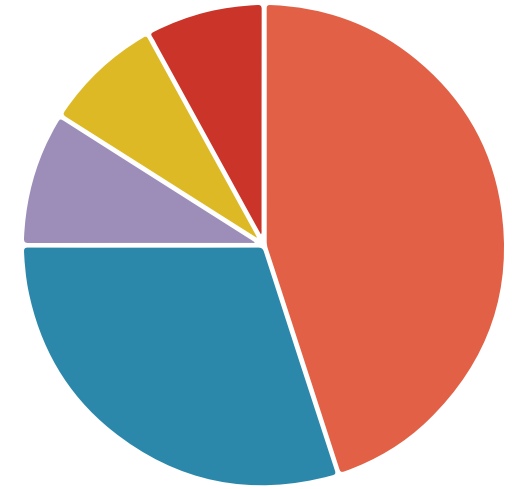
* GEMS (Giving Every Month Society) – Donors who make ongoing gifts via monthly payments

+ Contributing Members – Individual donors with All-Access Memberships during the 2022-2023 season



2022-2023 EXPENSE BREAKOUT

- 45% Production
- 30% Management & General
- 9% Fundraising
- 8% Education
- 8% Academy



OPERATIONS BUDGET
\$4,534,000

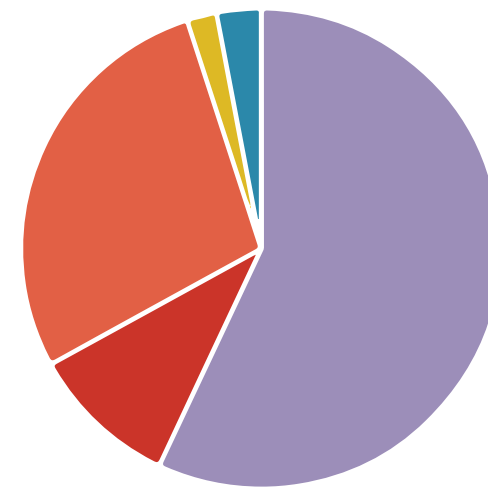
43%
Earned
Revenue



57%
Contributed
Revenue

2022-2023 INCOME BREAKOUT

- 57% Contributed
- 10% Academy
- 28% Tickets
- 2% Education
- 3% Other Earned



*unaudited numbers



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Photos by Paul Ruffolo. Cover: Sanaiah Hibbler in ARTHUR™ AND FRIENDS MAKE A MUSICAL. Page 2: Alice Rivera and Katya Ravie in LITTLE WOMEN.
Page 4-5: Thatcher Jacobs and Zach Church in THE SPONGEBOB MUSICAL™ FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES. Page 6: Lucia Harris in RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED
REINDEER™ THE MUSICAL. Page 9: (upper left) Isabel Scardino in CARMELA FULL OF WISHES, (lower) Angel Rivera and Matt Daniels in THE HOBBIT. Page 10: Maya
O'Day-Biddle in THREE LITTLE BIRDS. Page 11: Gracie Halverson and Natalie Ortega in THE SPONGEBOB MUSICAL™ FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES. Page 14: Elena
Marking in THE GRACIOUS SISTERS. Zachary Nowacek (center) and cast in A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM. Page 25: Matt Daniels and Leo Madson in THE HOBBIT.
Page 26: Silver Anderson in ARTHUR™ AND FRIENDS MAKE A MUSICAL. Page 28: Marilyn De La O in CARMELA FULL OF WISHES.