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“We are family”. That’s how I felt leaving the 2024 NYSTEAs Student Conference last week. One of the multitude of reasons why I love this organization so much. Theater is unique among the arts in how it brings a vast array of artist professionals along with their varying skills together and allows us to offer our students one of the most rewarding weekends of their lives. I love hearing students walking out of workshops saying “I learned so much about myself in that class”, or “that was so cool I want to learn more”. In addition to teaching these students our craft, we are also making memories that will last a lifetime and that’s what families do.

It’s frequently the theater students that will return to their directors 10 years later saying, “remember when ...”, or “that show was so epic”, or “the drama program made me feel at home”. I’m sure we have all had these experiences but what really stands out for me are those students who didn’t get the leads, who weren’t naturally gifted, but who worked extremely hard both on and off the stage and needed this family more than we could ever imagine. These are the students that really shine at the NYSTEAs Student Conference. Quite possibly for the first time in their educational journey they get to walk into a workshop on an even playing field with everyone else and are encouraged to perform / experience all of these workshops with their peers. We are all equals regardless of what parts we have in a show, how much experience we have running cues, or how many dance classes we have taken. Thanks to you, all of these students had the ability to learn and shine along with all of their theater friends in a safe and rewarding environment throughout the entire weekend while building that family.

So as we get farther and farther into our productions this year let’s take the time to make sure to remember these students. Find someone to give them the individual attention they need to make sure they succeed. Even a simple stage cross or a single line to allow them to “shine” will not only be immeasurably rewarding for them personally but also provide a sense of contributing to the “family”. Don’t forget those who prefer to remain behind the curtain as well, it’s just as fulfilling to construct a prop or paint a set piece that they can show off to their loved ones and be proud of. These small things will go a long way and you might not hear about it this year, but it is most certainly going to come back in their memories years down the road.

I can't conclude this letter without recalling my HS Drama Club memories. I am so fortunate that I can still talk to my HS directors (NYSTEA Founding Member) Rosemary Evaul and Denny Evaul. They may not have been aware of their impact at the time, but they have shaped the person, director, leader, teacher and performer that I am today. Without the memories of being able to design a set in HS, or organize the entire costume barn, or fall short of getting the part I really wanted (yes it happens to all of us), my students wouldn't have the experiences that they have had over the past 20+ years. I am also fortunate to have so many former students who continue to make me proud by working with children and young adults and fostering the love for performing and the arts. It's a bit humbling to think that what Rory and Denny taught me will continue to live on in my students and eventually be passed onto their students.

We all bring a part of ourselves to our students and we can always hope that they take just a little bit of that motivation and drive with them into the real world and make the world a better place to live. They might not be on Broadway, or star in a motion picture, but they all will have memories of their HS theater programs and will be better people for it. You are that influence and you are that sunshine that they will remember. I love having you all in my NYSTEA family and I can't wait to continue to work with you throughout the years in making our programs strong for our students one rehearsal at a time.

Happy New Year,
Tony Ravinsky