

Samantha Gray leads the Theatre Bristol family

Samantha Gray's relationship with the arts revolves around family — her family and her theater family.

"My mother was great to take us to live theater as children, and I realize how fortunate we were. My husband Dan and I enjoyed shows at the Kennedy Center, Arena Stage and other local theaters when we lived in Washington, D.C. Dan even performed in 'Shear Madness' on the Kennedy Center stage — in fact, he surprised me with an engagement ring on the top of the Kennedy Center.

"Our daughter (Camille) loved to act out nursery rhymes and stories and moved on to a bit of an obsession with 'Godspell' at the age of 2. By age 4, she was trying to get her friends to perform it with her but they preferred playing with her toys. Looking for some like-minded friends, Camille auditioned for 'Scrooge! The Musical' at Theatre Bristol when she was 5 and was cast as an urchin. She loved it and continued to audition for shows and perform with the ballet. I would help wrangle the children backstage at Theatre Bristol and help with other tasks for ballet performances. Her brothers, Luke and Zaiah, joined her in both ballet and theater over the years, and they all enjoyed performing.

"Along the way, I was asked to write a book about the founder of Theatre Bristol, Cathy DeCaterina, working with Dr. Fred Slaughter who had the vision that our community should know Cathy's contributions to our community. I began my research. I met Cathy and her husband Frank and learned about the history of Theatre Bristol, about their passion for children and our community," she says.

She ending up writing two books about Theatre Bristol: "Directing Confidence: Cathy DeCaterina's Theatre Bristol" for adults and "Let's Dress Up and Pretend: How Cathy DeCaterina's Love Built Children's Confidence and Theatre Bristol" for children.

Just a couple of years after they were published, Theatre Bristol's Board decided to cut back programs and staff. Gray was invited to join the Theatre Bristol board, but she was working for Attachment Parenting International at the time and decided the most she could handle was to be on the finance committee.

She eventually became president and served for two terms. She now helps coordinate activities as well as produce shows. She has produced more than 30 shows and worked on more than 50 in costuming, set design, stage management, props and wrangling.

Gray's background is in international development, with a B.S. in journalism from Ohio University and an M.A. in international affairs from The George Washington University. She served in the Peace Corps and has written publications for the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Population Services International. Among the topics she has written about are parenting education, HIV/AIDS prevention, and maternal and child health.

In Bristol, she is a La Leche League Leader, facilitates parenting education workshops, coaches the FAR robotics team, volunteers with Bristol Ballet and serves as a board member of Bristol's Promise. She has been the executive director of Attachment Parenting International, a 25-year-old parenting resource non-profit organization, since 2008.

"For me, working with Theatre Bristol is community service and ministry, helping instill confidence in children and adults, providing important skills, opportunities, and recognition. So, I became involved with my children and in support of all children, and much of this passion is written in the introduction of 'Directing Confidence,'" she says.

Gray says that when she was young she didn't imagine a life in the arts.

"I'm sure I lacked the confidence that Cathy wanted to instill, and the opportunities that she created with Theatre Bristol. I'm glad to have the chance now," Gray says.

"It's been an enjoyable challenge to learn about theater; and fortunately I have had great people to turn to such as Cathy DeCaterina, Camille Gray, Fred Slaughter, Glenn Patterson, Ken Cornett, Kenn Naegele, David Hyde, Will Hankins,



Samantha Gray is a promoter of community theater.

Mike Musick, Chris McVey, Michele Plescia, the network of community theaters, AACT, Theatre Bristol Board members and many others over the years.

"I plan to continue to learn and do what I can to help grow our theater community so that Theatre Bristol thrives. Our dreams are to expand the seating at Theatre Bristol and continue to implement best practices for community theater. I'm very interested in how we can create a healthy model for theater for our participants. We would like to grow our live performance entertainment and our performing arts education opportunities, undertake social enterprise strategies, vary the types of productions presented, recognize our volunteers and increase our staffing.

"Arts are a significant part of my life, as a consumer of the arts and a contributor. I am passionate about how vital community theater is and write on this frequently. I've been inspired by Cathy and Frank DeCaterina, Fred Slaughter, and my family, and it fits with my professional work as well to provide safe and caring opportunities in our community.

"There is no substitute for community theater. While it can be a stepping stone to professional theater on or off stage, it is much more powerful than being a gateway to something else. In and of itself, community theater is important for sustaining storytelling, for a shared narrative experienced through live performance, to wrestle with difficult topics together, for a chance at an opportunity to grow and shine, and to spotlight the creativity of a community. It is not professional big business. It is deeply personal. Shows are staged at a sacrifice of time, personal cost, sleep, work and classes because of daytime school shows, vanity, pride and more. Even so, ask a theater person to do something, and they will probably say, 'I can't, I have rehearsal.' The rewards are terrific, as the cast and crew celebrate the accomplishment of together transporting the audience for a couple of hours.

"Community theater is like the local public library and a local health clinic — important community resources. Theater contains important stories and knowledge. It builds empathy, expression and skills. It fosters networking, community and exposure to new ideas. It provides joy, happiness and fills the soul; it provides healing, purpose and finding one's voice, and it can even be life saving. Even those who do not attend the theater benefit from its impact on our community, from stronger employees to increased economic activity.

"I am honored to be nominated and selected for the Arts Achievement Award. It is wonderful that the Arts Alliance of the Mountain Empire takes time to recognize the arts and everyone who has been awarded. A! Magazine is vital to Theatre Bristol, helping our community know about audition opportunities, performances and recognizing our cast and crew. I am very grateful to the people who nominated me and am encouraged by their thoughtfulness," Gray says. A!