

THE JUNIOR LEAGUE OF AUSTIN

Summer Placements

BY SARAH GRAHAM

It's the time of year for which everyone waits. School is out. Pools open. The sun appears almost permanently in the sky. Tops are down on convertibles. Vacations are planned. It becomes just a little bit harder to stay in the office past 5pm. And the days go on and on. While many people devote their summer to BBQs, swimming pools, and beaches, some members of The Junior League of Austin are hard at work donating their time to a community project. For some Junior Leaguers, their entire year's volunteer obligation is completed in a few short months through a summer concentrated placement. The summer placement choices vary some from year to year.



For 2009 – 2010, summer concentrated placements were: Animal Trustees of Austin (ATA), Camp Bluebonnet – Children's Diabetes Camp of Central Texas, Faith in Action Caregivers – West Austin, Family Eldercare, Girl Scouts Lone Star Council, Mother's Milk Bank, The Settlement Home for Children, Theatre Action Project and YouthLaunch. Two of these projects were new to the The Junior League of Austin in 2009: Theatre Action Project and YouthLaunch. The Theatre Action Project (TAP) is a team of professionally trained artists and educators that partner with schools and communities to lead unique and engaging arts programs. Their mission is to "provide free and high quality educational arts programming to the youth of Central Texas." Through these programs, young people get an opportunity to learn critical life skills, gain tools for creative expression and have experiences that foster self-esteem and confidence. By using art as a way to teach young people, students become engaged and inspired while having fun. The art programs can occur during the day or after school, often in neighborhoods that are overlooked by extracurricular programs like theatre. Focus is put on providing a safe and supportive environment for children that also cre-



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ates a diversion from riskier choices and behaviors. Serving thousands of children, TAP provides an avenue for them to channel their feelings and emotions and build relationships, rather than turning to gangs, drugs, criminal activity or other negative influences.

The Junior League of Austin is lucky to have a hand in helping touch the lives of children through this unique and powerful program. One League member, Christy Petray, assisted TAP this summer in her placement as a Summer Camp Assistant. At these week-long day camps, children ages five to twelve spend a part of their day bonding with their peers learning about and experiencing life through theater. The camps emphasize teamwork, community building and expression through the arts. For League members with children, this placement offers a particular special advantage – they can bring their own children. This year, TAP offered eight weeks of summer camps during the daytime hours Monday through Friday from June to August. The camps took place at The Griffin School in central Austin. The end goal of each camp is to perform a final production of some sort, possibly a play, festival or other type of performance piece, for a community of family and friends. Activities throughout the week that build up to the performance include group games, craft projects such as making puppets and masks, practicing acting, and of course, rehearsals.

This summer, Christy attended two of these camps to complete her placement. She worked with mostly five and six year olds throughout her two weeks there, providing one-on-one support and direction during art projects and supervised them even at mealtime. "It's a great camp," she said. "It's run really well. The staff is knowledgeable, they know what works and what doesn't, not just on stage but with kids of each age group."

Each week's camp has a theme. The themes of the two camps Christy attended were "Myths & Legends" and "The Jungle Book." Christy explained that the first few days of the camp are spent learning the story, planning the costumes and casting the roles in the performance. The final days are spent practicing for the finale.

During Myths & Legends week, Christy helped teach the children about Odysseus. The group elected to focus on the story of the Cyclops and created a play about the creature. The camp featuring "The Jungle Book" functioned a little differently. The entire camp worked together to put on the production, so Christy's group of younger children took on the role of the Leaf Cutter Ants. They created leaves of foam as props, wore antennae headbands and even wrote their own original song. "The kids really come out of their shells," she said. Families attending the final performance are often overwhelmed with pride. Some film the event and others even bring flowers to celebrate the children's hard work and success.



Christy celebrated the success of the program as well. "It's great to educate those kids in such a fun way. You can tell they are having a ball," she explained. The campers weren't the only ones to benefit from their time with the TAP. "I loved [the placement]," Christy said. "I felt like I was really helping. They needed me and wanted me there, and they were ready for me when I arrived. I want to go back and do it again."

For League members not completing a summer concentrated placement, there will be volunteer positions available throughout the remainder of the year with the Theater Action Project. This includes serving as a First Night Assistant, Youth for Youth Theatre Company Assistant or Marketing Assistant. As one may guess from the name, First Night Assistants will help with the preparation and execution of Austin's well-known family friendly, drug and alcohol free New Years Eve Celebration called First Night. This free event is open to the public and has been very successful, requiring a lot of behind the scenes work from League members and the entire Austin community. Junior Leaguers assisting TAP as Youth for Youth Theater Company Assistants participate in a theatre arts education program with high school youth where teens create original, interactive shows based on their own life experiences to educate their peers on topics like dating violence and drug and alcohol abuse. League members serve as mentors during weekly meetings and rehearsals. As a Marketing Assistant with TAP, League members help streamline the organization's web and print-based graphics and update their public relations and marketing materials. This is a position with a lot of responsibility, evidenced by its requirement for monthly meetings with the Executive Director and Development and Marketing Associate to assist in this process.

Another new program to The Junior League of Austin this year is YouthLaunch. YouthLaunch is a unique organization with an important mission. Founded in 1994, it believes "service is a powerful and effective strategy for positive youth development." Their mission is to create volunteer opportunities or service programs that, by their participation, empower young people. While serving the community, YouthLaunch believes "participants gain new knowledge and skills, form positive and influential bonds with peers and adult role models, improve their self-esteem and efficacy, and develop a strong sense of social responsibility." In order to achieve this social change in young people, the organization comes up with innovative and interesting service-based programs to encourage personal development and transformation. Through these programs, children learn the importance of serving the community, which is an important lesson they can carry into adulthood as well.

The YouthLaunch program with which the League is volunteering is called Urban Roots. Urban Roots uses the lessons taught by sustainable agriculture to positively influence children. In addition, the food produced is used to nourish East Austin residents who may have limited access to healthy foods. This all begins on a farm in East Austin near Johnston High School named Hands of the



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Earth. Teenagers selected to volunteer on the farm are called "Farm Interns," and learn about organic farming, sustainability and healthy eating.

League member Shannan Rolfsen assisted in this "groundbreaking" project, serving as an Urban Roots Outreach volunteer as her placement this summer. Her position had her hunting for and coordinating public speaking engagements for the student farm interns and Urban Roots staff. Shannan explained that the organization is trying to get the word out about their project. "They want the community to buy from local businesses. They are willing to go out and speak at companies and organizations to make their name known in Austin," she said. Urban Roots also sells their produce at local farmers markets with the proceeds going back into the organization.

Another task in which Shannan participated was planning outdoor community lunches to serve about 40 people. Her responsibilities included sending out invitations, organizing supplies, and supervising the farm interns at the lunch service. What makes these lunches so special is the fact that the children prepare and cook the meal. "The lunches were my most memorable experiences. They all seem to enjoy their time at the farm throughout their internships. It's a lot of work, as they are responsible for managing and working the garden." The teen Farm Interns are divided into two groups. One group goes to a restaurant and cooks the meal, the other prepares the venue for the meal. When lunch is ready, the children who served as chefs share with the crowd their experience in the kitchen making the food.

For League members not completing a summer concentrated placement, there is a spring concentration option as well. JLA members can serve as a Roots Farm Volunteer, where they will assist with hands-on work on the farm during the critical spring growing season. Junior Leaguers will have direct interaction with the at-risk high schoolers selected to be farm interns. Activities will include weeding, planting, harvesting and washing produce, which can be a learning experience for both the child and the volunteer.

When the lazy days of summer arrive, it can be a challenge to do anything but be lazy. However, The Junior League of Austin's summer concentrated placements can invigorate and enliven. As both Christy and Shannan can attest to, their summers spent helping others benefitted them as well.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "It is one of the beautiful compensations of life, that no man can sincerely help another without helping himself." This is true for all seasons, even the summer.

