

Unique **performing arts** programs for people with physical disabilities



Dear Friends and Supporters of AWB,

As I reflect on Acting Without Boundaries' (AWB) remarkable 20-year journey, Coordinator, Sharon Yun's tireless efforts I am filled with deep gratitude. Your belief in our mission and unwavering support have been instrumental in bringing the transformative power of theater arts to individuals with physical disabilities. Together, we have created an extraordinary ecosystem of support, collaboration, and innovation that continues to inspire and empower.

This ecosystem also thrives because of our invaluable program partners, including Inglis, Magee Rehabilitation Hospital, and Widener Memorial School. These partnerships have allowed us to expand our reach and deepen our impact. Our largest funding partners, the William Penn Foundation, Connelly Foundation, and Widener Memorial Foundation—have provided crucial resources that enable us to dream big and achieve even more.

We are also fortunate to have a dedicated Board of Directors who guide our vision and mission with wisdom and care. I want to particularly recognize our board members for their committment, dedication and steadfast leadership. Each of these components—our staff, partners, funders, and board members—works collaboratively to ensure AWB's continued success.

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to the dedicated staff who have been the backbone of AWB's success. Managing Director, Jules Catania, along with our Artistic Directors, Neill Hartley and Maria Ceferatti, bring unparalleled passion, creativity, and commitment to their work. Additionally, Associate Program and Development Director, Erika Dandridge and Program

ensure that every program and performance reflects the excellence and heart of AWB.

The past year has been a milestone for AWB. In the spring, our AWB Jr. actors performed We Want to Go to School, a play adapted

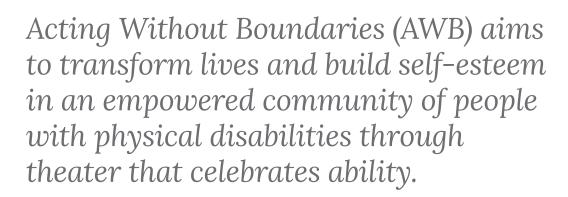
> from the book of the same name about disability rights in education. Artistic Director, Maria Ceferatti crafted

> > this production with the invaluable input of the actors, making it a deeply personal and powerful performance.

In the fall, we celebrated our 20th anniversary with a gala and the AWB 20th Anniversary Extravaganza. This special performance featured actors from both our Sr. and Jr. programs and included video messages from alumni actors. It was a heartwarming reminder of the lives we've touched over the past two decades. Additionally, we produced a retrospective video capturing our journey, celebrating our achievements, and envisioning the future.

Our Masters program this year focused on Advanced Acting in Contemporary Drama, featuring guest artist Leah Walton, a Philadelphia-based actor who brought her expertise and inspiration to our participants.

The AWB Melodies program continues to grow, reaching new audiences in schools, medical institutions, and even an out-of-state presentation via Zoom at Vermont State University. A Melodies program highlight was



performing at the Kimmel Center during Philly Theatre Week, And we are most proud of our original production of Disable the Myths, a powerful video which serves as a disability sensitivity training tool and showcases our actors' talents and advocacy.

This year marked the launch of our first Youth Acting Lab at Widener Memorial School, where 45 students performed The Wizard of Oz. For many, it was their first time on stage, a transformative and joyous experience.

Our newest curriculum, Page to Stage, and program, Connects, have also made a significant impact. Page to Stage empowers participants to create original material, fostering creativity and ownership in their performances. The Connects program provides a vital social outlet for our actors and their families through outings, weekly support groups, and monthly parent meetings.

Looking ahead, AWB is poised for continued growth and impact in the cultural arts sector. With your support, we will build on these achievements and ensure that our actors continue to shine, inspire, and break boundaries.

Thank you for being an integral part of AWB's ecosystem of support. Together, we have accomplished so much, and I am excited for all that the future holds.

With gratitude,

Christine Rouse, Executive Director, Acting Without Boundaries



Executive Staff



Neill Hartley, AWB Artistic Director Maria Ceferatti, AWB Jr. Artistic Director and AWB Sr. Musical Director Erika Dandridge, Associate Director of Programs and Development

Sharon Yun, Program Coordinator

Jules Catania, Managing Director

On September 18, 2024, over 160 guests gathered at the iconic Water Works in Philadelphia to honor 20 remarkable years of Acting Without Boundaries—and

it was nothing short of extraordinary!

From the moment attendees arrived, the evening was brimming with joy and celebration. Guests were treated to a delectable array of gourmet food while mingling and enjoying the company of friends, old and new, in a setting as elegant as the occasion itself.

The highlight of the evening was an unforgettable performance by AWB's talented actors, joined by board members and Hero Award honorees, that brought the house down with their artistry and passion. The program also featured the world premiere of *Disable the Myths: Interacting with People who have Disabilities*, a groundbreaking disability etiquette video that promises to be a valuable resource for years to come.

Excitement filled the air during the live and silent auctions, featuring dazzling prizes like a luxurious week-long stay in Cape May, NJ, a once-in-a-lifetime African Safari, and premier tickets to watch the Philadelphia Eagles take on the Jacksonville Jaguars—a game made even more memorable by Running Back Saguon Barkley's jaw-dropping 14-yard catch-and-run.

As the night unfolded, guests reflected on the profound impact AWB has had over two decades, transforming lives and creating inclusive spaces in the performing arts. The celebration raised nearly \$200,000, an extraordinary show of support that will enable AWB to continue its mission of serving individuals with disabilities and building a brighter, more inclusive future.

The 20th Anniversary Celebration was a resounding success, filled with laughter, inspiration, and camaraderie. It was a testament to the power of community and the magic of AWB. Here's to the next 20 years of breaking boundaries, creating art, and making memories!



WITH AN OUTPOURING OF GENEROSITY, AWB RECEIVED A STAGGERING \$40,000 OF DONATED GOODS AND SERVICES FOR ITS LIVE AND SILENT AUCTIONS—THE MOST EVER! THIS MILESTONE STANDS AS A BOLD, INSPIRING REMINDER OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE WHEN COMMUNITIES COME TOGETHER.

"AWB's 2024 journey is a testament to the life-changing power of inclusion—breaking barriers, broadening perspectives, and laying the foundation for lasting impact in the arts." —JOHN GUERRIERI, AWB BOARD MEMBER

The AWB Acting Lab ignites a spark of courage and creativity, to inspire individuals to take center stage in their lives and embrace their unique abilities. In 2024, the AWB Acting Lab reached new heights, proudly launching our first-ever

year-long, Acting Lab for Youth curriculum, engaging 45 students aged 5-21. The program culminated

in a magical performance of The Wizard of Oz, featuring two witches, two lions, and

boundless creativity.

AWB also introduced its three-month *Page to Stage* curriculum at Inglis, where participants wrote and performed an original live production. The curriculum encouraged adult students to explore their creativity through immersive and collaborative performing arts. By drawing from their own experiences and imaginations, participants developed comedic material, fostering a deeper connection to their work and instilling a sense of pride in their accomplishments. Collaborative group dynamics enhanced diversity and inclusivity in the final performances.

Through *Page to Stage*, students learned essential theatrical skills, including scriptwriting, character creation, dialogue development, and blocking. These skills were complemented by moment-to-moment acting techniques and creative movement, providing a holistic arts education.

From 52 participants in 2022 to an incredible 89 in 2024, the Acting Lab's growth is extraordinary. Our innovative approach brings the magic of performing arts directly to partnering organizations through our commitment to making the arts accessible to individuals with physical disabilities, eliminating transportation barriers and amplifying impact. AWB Acting Lab isn't just a program—it's a life-changing journey of empowerment and artistic discovery.



"Thanks for your willingness to accommodate all. Your commitment to the students and exposing them to the world of theatre is greatly appreciated."

—TEACHER, WIDENER MEMORIAL SCHOOL



IN A YEAR OF REMARKABLE GROWTH, THE AWB ACTING LAB PROGRAM, FUELED BY FRESH CURRICULUMS AND PARTNERSHIPS, TOUCHED THE LIVES OF 89 INDIVIDUALS EMPOWERING EACH TO DISCOVER THEIR UNIQUE VOICE AND CREATIVITY!

The AWB Melodies program aims to be a leading resource for disability awareness, education and outreach. Our mission is to celebrate the diverse talents of individuals with physical disabilities, educate the public on respectful interactions and

foster meaningful conversations. This year, we hosted 10 Melodies programs and launched a groundbreaking

disability etiquette video titled Disable the Myths: Interacting with People Who Have Disabilities.

In partnership with Big Picture Alliance, AWB actors, volunteers, and staff created a film that educates the able-bodied community on how to support individuals with disabilities. The video provided AWB actors with film industry experience and will be incorporated into all future outreach programs. Expanding into the digital landscape, AWB can now share the exceptional work we do with thousands of people.

AWB partnered with five new institutions: Fountain Wood Elementary School, ArtsAbility, Nemours Children's Health, Vermont State University and Sacred Heart Academy. With ArtsAbility, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering women and girls of all abilities, we hosted a dynamic session filled with improv games and musical theatre, which was enjoyed by all participants. For the third consecutive year, AWB continued its outreach at the Lewis Katz School of Medicine, helping to shape a new generation of empathetic doctors. The AWB Melodies program went national in 2024, guest lecturing during a Special Education course at Vermont State University.

AWB's impact was further highlighted during Philly Theatre Week at the Kimmel Center, where actors from our Senior and Junior programs performed *Time Frame*, a compelling exploration of time through the disability lens. 2024 was a year of growth and impact, serving approximately 1,712 live audience members.



100% OF VERMONT STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS SURVEYED RECOMMENDED THE AWB MELODIES OUTREACH PROGRAM TO OTHER UNIVERSITIES/COLLEGES.







"I think that the program was so informative, and it made me wish that there were more programs like this around the country." —AWB MELODIES AUDIENCE MEMBER

The AWB Junior actors come together to create an entirely new musical each year for audiences to enjoy! Every month, they collaborate on crafting a unique script, writing original song lyrics, and rehearsing their lines, culminating in a spring show that promises to evoke laughter, tears, and deep admiration for the boundless creativity of our youngest performers.

In 2024, the AWB Juniors performed *We Want to Go to School! The Fight for Disability Rights*, inspired by the children's book by Maryann Cocca-Leffler & Janine Leffler. This compelling true story follows the families who fought for equal education. In 1971, seven children and their families went to court advocating for the inclusion of children with disabilities in public schools. The case Mills vs. Board of Education of the District of Columbia led to laws that ensured children with disabilities would receive a free, appropriate public education.

This production marked the first time the Juniors performed a story not based on a traditional fable or children's tale. The experience challenged them to empathize and identify with the struggles faced by children in the 1970s. They rose to the challenge, asking thoughtful questions throughout the process and imparting valuable lessons about the importance of disability rights to the audience.

Our partnership with Agnes Irwin students, both on and off stage, has been truly extraordinary. Their dedication as volunteers has been a cornerstone of our success, reinforcing the sense of community in the Greater Philadelphia area. Together, we have furthered AWB's mission, reaching even more people and spreading our message of inclusivity and creativity.



"My favorite part of the show was the talent, the inclusivity, the music, learning the history, seeing my pal up on stage and hearing his beautiful voice." —AWB JR. AUDIENCE MEMBER





2024 SAW A RECORD HIGH OF 15 PARTICIPANTS, AN 87% INCREASE FROM 2018.

Led by Acting Without Boundaries' vibrant artistic leaders, Artistic Director, Neill Hartley, and Music Director, Maria Ceferatti, AWB's 20th Anniversary Extravaganza showcased the incredible talent and dedication of the AWB Seniors in an unforgettable celebration of inclusive theater.

The AWB actors delivered a captivating original performance written and directed by Neill Hartley. Set in a 1940s radio station, the show was a delightful blend of comedy, commercials, timeless tunes, and family fun. Drawing inspiration from historic radio broadcasts and featuring original songs that celebrated AWB's journey, the production brought to life the organization's incredible impact over the past two decades. Period details and vibrant radio-show accents added to the immersive experience, enchanting audiences of all ages.

The path to the stage was as inspiring as the performance itself. Through monthly workshops and a four-day intensive summer workshop, actors collaborated tirelessly to master blocking and props, culminating in a special preview for local campers in July. The magic continued in late September with a full-scale public performance that united family, friends, and the community. AWB Juniors joined the cast for this milestone event, adding youthful energy and charm to the final production.

In a groundbreaking commitment to accessibility, AWB integrated audio description and open captioning, ensuring dialogue and lyrics were accessible to all attendees, including those with low vision or hearing impairments. This dedication to inclusion resonated deeply, earning widespread acclaim.

The performance was a joyous tribute to AWB's enduring mission, a celebration of creativity, resilience, and community that left a lasting impression on everyone involved.



THE MAJORITY OF AWB ACTORS AND FAMILIES CITE TRANSPORTATION COSTS AND ISSUES AS THE GREATEST BARRIER TO PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.



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ACTING WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

"Being nonverbal, I'm grateful to the AWB team for all the special attention given to me. Everyone has helped me blend my need for a communication device into all activities and plays." —AWB SENIOR ACTOR



The AWB Master's Program is designed for adult participants from the AWB Seniors and AWB Acting Lab programs. Each year, we delve into a new area of the performing arts with an intensive 4-day course. Actors develop technical theatre skills through focused training, supporting their evolving performing arts goals.

This year, we explored Advanced Acting Technique, Text Analysis, and Character Development, led by AWB Artistic Director, Neill Hartley, and guest instructor, Leah Walton. Leah has performed with many prominent local theater companies, including the Philadelphia Theatre Company, Walnut Street Theatre, Arden Theatre, and Delaware Theatre Company and is a talented Philadelphia-based artist and teacher. A Barrymore Award recipient and nominee, Leah brought a wealth of experience to the program. AWB Artistic Director, Neill Hartley, also guided the group, leading deep discussions on character development and the art of crafting authentic, truthful characters that honor both the text and the performer.

Participants were paired and assigned scenes from either Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* or Aaron Posner's modern adaptation. Throughout the week, they worked closely with their partners, focusing on actor impulses, discussing the "why" behind the text, and building trust and chemistry between characters. Students learned how objectives, actions, and sub-text can be applied to the given circumstances of the play to create impactful scenes and storytelling. On the final day, each pair performed their scenes before an audience of family and friends, showcasing their hard work and newly developed skills.

"I especially enjoyed that we were able to spend so much time on one scene. There was a strong emphasis on character development, and I enjoyed how much the instructor shared with us and was willing and eager to learn from us as well."—AWB MASTERS PARTICIPANT





100% OF PARTICIPANTS SAID THE PROGRAM MET THEIR EXPECTATIONS AND PROVIDED THEM WITH A PLACE THEY FELT ACCEPTED AND VALUED FOR WHO THEY ARE.

Aiming to foster stronger relationships within the Acting Without Boundaries community, AWB Connects was launched in 2024 as a social engagement initiative designed to build community, cultivate friendships, and create opportunities for exploration in other art mediums.

Research has highlighted the strong connection between mental health and social community. Cognizant of this, AWB Connects creates a safe space for our actors to unite outside of scheduled rehearsals. AWB hosted two special in-person events in 2024. In March, we offered an art workshop led by Desiree Cantwell, an AWB parent, where our actors learned about the culture and history of commedia dell'arte while decorating their own masks. Later, in August, AWB partnered with So Much to Give, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating social and vocational opportunities for adults with disabilities. Together, we hosted a karaoke party featuring live acoustic music. Participants joined together to sing, dance, and celebrate experiencing joy and camaraderie!

Originally developed as a way to stay connected during the pandemic, TGIF Socials have since grown to include TGIF Social: Guest Speaker Sessions. This expansion allowed us to invite 4 remarkable guest speakers who have made a significant impact in the disability community: Jimmy Curran, Maryann Cocca-Leffler, Janine Leffler, and J.R. Martinez. Each guest speaker brought a unique perspective, leaving a lasting impression on our actors as they empathized with the diverse, yet parallel, journeys of these individuals.

AWB continued its weekly online socials, infusing extra fun and warmth by celebrating holidays like Valentine's Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving. These themed gatherings in addition to regular meetings remained a welcoming space for all!



"I like the opportunity for fellowship between us actors (outside of workshops and performances). It has been a fabulous experience." $_{-AWB \, SENIOR \, ACTOR}$

82% OF AWB PARTICIPANTS SAID THAT THEY PLAN ON CONTINUING TO PARTICIPATE IN

AWB CONNECTS PROGRAMMING.



Volunteers are integral to the success of Acting Without Boundaries' performances, workshops and

programs. Each year, the Devon Lengel Memorial award is given to an AWB Junior's volunteer

who shows commitment, excitement and

devotion to AWB.

Devon was a member of AWB from 2014 to 2018 and participated in multiple performances where she displayed her remarkable talents. The honoree's character embodies the enduring light and positivity that Devon Lengel brought to AWB and every other facet of her life.

This year's recipient was MaryPat Heilmann. MaryPat has volunteered at six AWB shows including Meet Me in St. Louis, The Contrast, Newsies, The AWB 20th Anniversary Extravaganza, Will the One-Winged Eagle and We Want to Go to School. MaryPat has devoted countless hours to AWB, and we are grateful for her commitment to our mission. We appreciate her generous time, energy, and creativity. During our rehearsals, MaryPat helps our actors rehearse their lines, encourages them to sing out, to let their voices be heard and always shares her smile and enthusiasm with our actors, staff and volunteers alike. MaryPat adds her own blend of humor, encouragement, and rigor to our rehearsals, making each performer feel seen and valued. She loves working with the AWB, Jr. actors because she loves to see them grow year after year. A nurse for over thirty years, her special calling has been in pediatric care.

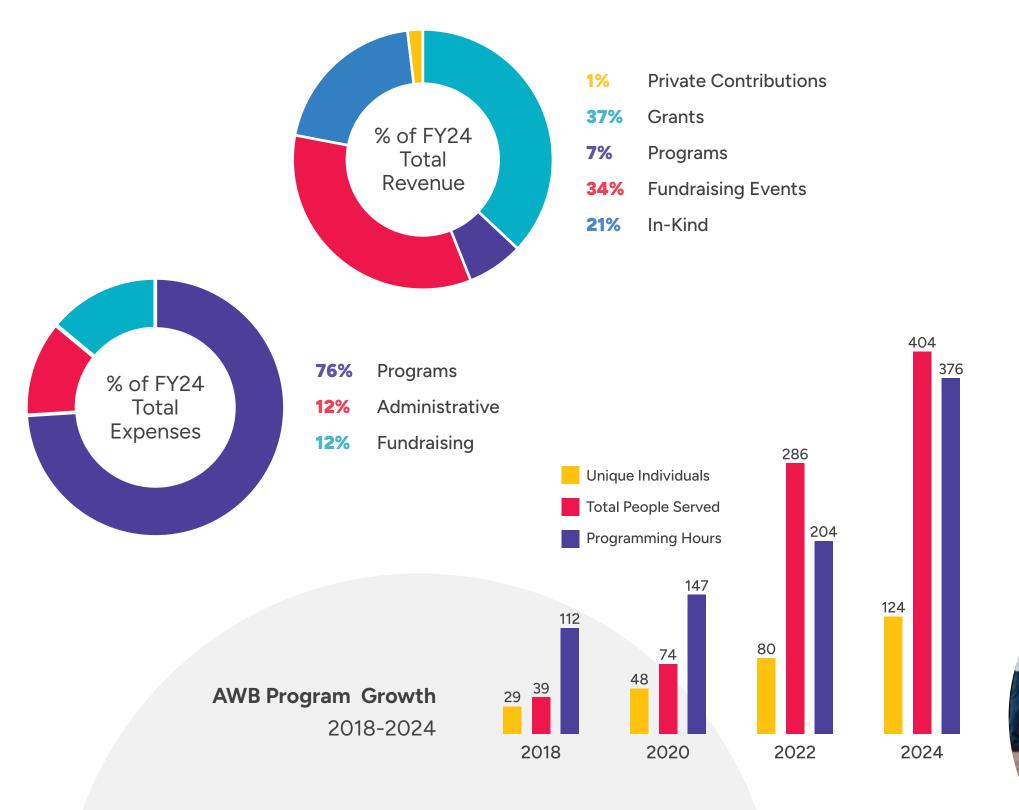






THE Devon "I don't see disability—I see each

-MARYPAT HEILMANN, 2023-2024 HONOREE





Thank you to our incredibly generous sponsors, donors, and supporters.
We couldn't do it without you!

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Connelly Foundation

Mary Thomas

Philadelphia Kids in Care (and Kimberly Crowley)



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under \$100

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Maria Ceferatti

Chanticleer Garden

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Delaware Art Museum

Julia Judson-Rea and Craig Dulniak

Eastern State Penitentiary

Alysse Einbender

ESF Camps

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Lisa Kabnick and John McFadden

Mercer Museum & Fonthill Castle

Normandy Farms Northeast Fitness

Nothing Bundt Cakes

Karen Odden

People's Light Theatre

Philadelphia Auto Show

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The 2024 Acting Without Boundaries Board of Directors is comprised of 14 dedicated individuals. AWB's newest board member. Lisa Abraham reflects upon her first year at AWB.

"I am honored to serve on the board of directors for AWB! 2024 proved to be a great year to join as the organization experienced tremendous growth. The number of our participants increased by more than 40%, a direct result of our strategic focus on Accessibility & Economic Inclusion. I witnessed pure joy on the faces of the children who performed for the very first time and it confirmed the importance of AWB and my role in it."—LISA ABRAHAM, AWB BOARD MEMBER



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