

## **When is a pen more than a pen?**

By Jessica Wisser, Development Director, Young Playwrights' Theater

*(This post is a part of series highlighting the work of recipients of TCG's Blue Star Theatres grant program. Young Playwrights' Theater is a recipient of Blue Star Theatres grant funding to support its Military Child Education Coalition.)*

A pen can be so many things. Obviously, it can be a writing utensil, but, with a bit of imagination, it can transform into a toothbrush for a student going through her morning routine, the baton of an orchestra conductor at the loudest moment of a symphony, or a telescope guiding pirates on their latest treasure hunt.

In the second workshop of Young Playwrights' Theater's Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) Student 2 Student adapted playwriting program, we ask students to play this "object game," in which a generic object is passed around to all the students. The only rule of the game is that the object cannot be used as what it actually is—the pen cannot be used as a writing utensil. Each student interacts with the object in a different and creative way, going around the circle and acting out motions like brushing teeth, waving a baton, or searching for treasure. Then, the item goes back to each student, and this time each attributes a personal emotion and story to the object. Through storytelling, the pen becomes the knitting needle that Grandma uses to make scarves or the hammer the student once used to fix up her house with her father.



This is one of the many theatre games that we use to engage our students and get their creativity flowing before they delve into writing. At YPT, we believe that every student has a story to tell and that all students should have the opportunity to discover the power of their own voices through the arts.

Our free playwriting programs reach over 1,000 students in public schools in DC, Maryland, and Virginia annually, including schools in close proximity to military bases such as Bolling Air Force Base in Southeast DC and Fort Belvoir in Northern Virginia. We estimate we reach over one hundred youth from military families each year.



This year, through a grant award from TCG/Blue Star Theatres, YPT was able to partner once again with MCEC, bringing our signature programming to students participating in MCEC's Student 2 Student (S2S) program in the Greater Washington area during spring 2017. The S2S program creates peer-based programs of civilian- and military-connected high school students in order to build a community for transient youth in military families. Through this project, YPT worked with military-connected students at Mount Vernon High School in Alexandria, VA through arts-integrated workshops led by a professional teaching artist. Students learned the fundamentals of playwriting through ten interactive workshops, including visits from professional actors, and worked to create original dramatic pieces on topics of personal significance.



During the second workshop, our teaching artist, Alina, played the “object game” with the S2S students at Mount Vernon. She found this activity to be especially relevant to military children, who struggle with a sense of belonging as they transition between schools and must integrate into new communities, often several times in one year. By sharing these stories with their peers as part of the activity, students were able to recognize that both their military and non-military peers struggle with similar issues. In Alina’s own words:

“I have played this game many times with many groups of students, but this time the game turned into something I had not experienced before. From the start, the S2S students were very open to talking about objects that had something to do with their family and their upbringing. They were immediately open to difficult topics—moving frequently and the stress of re-establishing community, having one or more family members away for long stretches of time. The game really brought out powerful emotions and built strong connection. It was the first time I had a group of students that wanted to talk openly and be so vulnerable about their families. I felt a lot of trust within the group because of the military connection. It was really special.”



This year’s program, made possible by Theatre Communications Group and Blue Star Theatres, gave students a platform to share their unique perspectives on the issues they face in their own lives and discover the power of playwriting and the arts as a tool for self-expression. Ultimately, this project validates our belief that playwriting and theatre arts can be powerful tools to reach young people who may feel isolated in their communities—including communities that are sometimes less visible, such as youth from military families. We remain grateful for the support of TCG/Blue Star Theatres, without which we would not be able to support these students in finding the power of their own stories and voices.

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Prior to joining YPT, Jessica Wisser was employed as Executive Director of the Alexandria Symphony Orchestra in Alexandria, VA. Previously she worked as General Manager at Cantata Singers, a choral organization in Boston, Massachusetts that administered Classroom Cantatas, a residency program in a diverse spread of Boston Public Schools where students create their own musical compositions based on curricular guidelines. She also completed an administrative internship with the Wolf Trap Opera Company in Vienna, Virginia.



Jessica graduated with a B.A. from Duke University, focusing on a double major in music and public policy. While at Duke, Jessica sang with the Duke University Chorale as well as with Duke University's oldest all-female a cappella group, Duke Out of the Blue. An arts lover from a young age, Jessica began her music career as a pianist, debuted on the local musical theatre stage as Fish #2 in *The Little Mermaid*, and studied voice and music theory during high school at the Fine Arts Center in her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina. Jessica currently lives in Arlington, Virginia with her husband, Evan; her daughter, Claire; and her dog, Jefferson.

*Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national service organization for theatre, and Blue Star Families, the country's largest chapter-based military families non-profit organization, are pleased to support the third round of the Blue Star Theatres Grant Program. Through support from MetLife Foundation, the Grant Program funds efforts that deepen the relationship between participating Blue Star Theatres and their local military community: veterans, children of active duty military, military spouses, and/or active duty military. Each theatre received \$5,000 to support activities that could include talkbacks, outreach programs, sponsored tickets, performances, playwriting workshops, readings, or workshops that focus on military themes and service.*



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