



Vienna Music Teacher Brightens Day of Underserved Children

Taffy brings performing arts to children in need locally

By Donna Mantz **Vienna Connection**

There are scores of kids you do not read about in the newspapers; they're not award-winning students or scholarship-bound athletes. They are just kids ... some with severe medical conditions, some homeless, some physically or mentally-challenged. For many of these children, the performance arts uplift their spirits, give them a common reference point with their peers, and inspire their creative side. Cue TAFFY Presents here, a nationwide program where professional performer come to kids in need, brightening their days.

"We can make a difference in the lives of children who need an extra boost of 'bonding' through their personal contact with our performers," said director of East Coast Productions, Irene Light of Vienna.

TAFFY, an acronym for "Theatre Arts Festival for Youth," is launching its first Vienna-area show at the Kilmer Center in November. Award-winning musician Fred Karam dedicates the show to a local dog, Abby, whose passing touched many in the community. Karam sings "Hound Dog" and "How Much is That Doggie in the Window" in this school presentation.

TAFFY Presents, born in California about 27 years ago, is a nonprofit (501c3) organization created by professional artists whose mission it is to enrich and entertain underserved children and families in schools, hospitals, and community venues incorporating the performing arts. Light took over the reins as director of East Coast Productions six months ago. She services a region north to New England and south to Florida.

Light has brought six productions to D.C.-area hospital pediatric units and to schools. The line-up is building for the remainder of 2015 and through 2016.

In Northern Virginia, TAFFY is partnering with shelters to bring smiles to homeless children and has instituted a mentoring program in which professional artists partner with a child in need.

For all that TAFFY gives, the nonprofit has funding needs. Currently, Light is submitting grant proposals to local service organizations, particularly those that focus on children. TAFFY accepts financial support from individuals and businesses, as well. East Coast TAFFY is projecting a 2016 budget of approximately \$70,000. The budget pays for TAFFY's programming; the Board of Directors serves without pay. Not all performers are paid; many volunteer their talents because they believe in TAFFY's mission of supporting underserved children, Light said. "Our performers are truly dedicated to helping the children."

Once TAFFY decides to adopt a location, Light said they find a way to begin programming there while Light searches for funding.

"Our performers always do interactive visits," said Light. "So they bond with the children at one-on-one bedside visits, create total involvement with the children at performances, and always leave something behind like a CD or a magic trick for each child who they have seen. Magicians teach these tricks to the children so that they can proudly show others their new ability."

Light said her group sends out, annually, 50 CDs/DVDs in the arts and education to each of the facilities TAFFY has adopted or has promised to adopt. "We want to keep the happiness going even when we are not there. We ask the locations what type of content they need for their libraries. At hospitals, many of these CDs are given out as rewards to pediatric patients undergoing uncomfortable medical treatments such as chemo."

Light, a licensed public-school music teacher, is at liberty to create programming that meets the needs of the community. In Vienna, Light hopes to partner with Alternative House and continue to partner with the Kilmer Center. "I like to see TAFFY Presents help the whole child and leave permanent positive imprints in education," she said.

IF YOU ARE FAMILIAR with an organization or business seeking greater community involvement, e-mail Irene Light, at teacher@lightmotifs.com, or call her at 703-281-1536. Visit TAFFY Presents at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Theatre-Arts-Festival-For-Youth/128116700582392> or at <http://www.taffypresents.org/>.