



A C T I N G o n P R I N C I P L E

How **THE ROSE** helped .
a child find **HER** *voice.*



Grace and her mother Meredith participate in a class at The Rose Theater

When six-year-old Grace entered The Rose Theater, she looked just like many of our young students. Her wide eyes peered up at the grand space as she held her mother's hand, keeping close and walking tentatively to the theater's classroom. Together they took a deep breath and stepped forward, hoping for the best.

Grace has an anxiety disorder known as selective mutism. A child with selective mutism does not speak in certain situations, not due to a lack of knowledge of speech or a communication disorder, but as a result of other outlying factors. In Grace's case, her mother explains that she is terrified of making a mistake in front of others. At home Grace is a joyful, typical six-year-old; in public situations, she freezes and is unable to speak. Throughout preschool and kindergarten, she would do her paperwork and sit where she was supposed to, but she wouldn't talk, sing, play or even take a pencil from another person's hand. Even at recess, Grace would stand all alone on the playground, the other children just passing her by and treating her as if she didn't even exist.

Her parents, older brother, teachers and therapists watched Grace struggle, determined to find a way to help her manage her anxiety.

Grace's mother, Meredith, a teacher at a local elementary school, had the opportunity to work with The Rose educators who conducted a readers theater workshop. She was

impressed by their ability to engage students on an entirely new level. When she learned about The Rose's classes and the work they had done with children of all abilities, Meredith wondered if they might also be able to help Grace.

She enrolled Grace in a Rose musical theater class for children with special needs. The first day, Grace was very nervous and stayed very close to her mother. She wouldn't make eye contact with anyone. She sat on her mother's lap throughout the class; Meredith would move Grace's arms to the movements. Slowly, she started to engage, first by doing the actions behind her mother's back where no one would see her, then gradually moving forward over the course of several weeks.

Meredith believes Rose instructors Kevin Ehrhart and Olivia Jones' patience and commitment to helping Grace participate in whatever way she could was the key to Grace's successful participation in the class. "The teachers were great at talking to Grace and not putting her into awkward situations that made her uncomfortable," she says. "Because I was allowed to be with her, it lowered Grace's anxiety so she could experiment."

"We just encouraged Grace to do what she was able to do," says instructor Kevin Ehrhart. "As the class session went on, Grace discovered that she was in charge of how much she connected, without any pressure. This helped her feel more and more safe."

This opportunity to try new things without fear of failure eased Grace's fears of being imperfect and let her just be herself. "It was an environment where imperfection was celebrated," says Meredith.

Creative use of technology also helped Grace by giving her an additional way to communicate with her Rose classmates.

The instructors would send Meredith the “question of the day” that kicks off every Rose class. Using an iPad, Grace would record her answer at home, and when it came her turn to respond in class, she was able to play her recorded answer and engage with her classmates.

In this safe environment, free from pressure, Grace blossomed. She began to look people in the eye. She smiled. She came out of her shell.

And then, something truly amazing happened.

Grace spoke.

After two years of public silence, Meredith noticed Grace making sounds to get a friend’s attention during a play date at their house. The next week, she started talking to that friend at home. Then, she whispered a word to a friend at school. Next, it was a quiet message to a friend on the playground. Whispers to one friend became quiet talks with three friends. Gradually, Grace spoke to every child in her class. After two years of working with therapists, teachers and specialists, something awakened during Grace’s experience at The Rose. For nearly two years, Grace had not made a sound in the presence of these children. She was suddenly talking to all of them.

“The Rose was her safe place,” says Meredith. “And that class just made all the difference.”

Grace participated in The Rose’s annual spring Broadway at The Rose concert, standing on stage with her classmates, signing the words to the song “When I Grow Up,” from the musical *Matilda*. “It was beautiful,” says her mother. “It brought tears to my eyes.”

Grace’s parents shared a tape of her Rose performance with her school. “When they saw that she could go on a stage as huge as The Rose Theater’s, they saw a new potential in her,” says Meredith.

A few weeks later, Grace, the little girl who wouldn’t speak, participated in kindergarten graduation with her class – something she hadn’t been able to do in her two years of schooling.

“That wouldn’t have happened without The Rose,” says Meredith. “I am just so grateful for all they have done.”

Today, Grace will play and talk to children she meets, although she is still not ready to talk to adults or let them hear her speak. She continues to work on managing her anxiety disorder with her psychologist, schoolteachers and family. And of course, she is enrolled in class at The Rose.

“Grace still has plenty of goals to achieve,” her mother says. “But the fact that she went from not interacting to talking with friends during the time of The Rose class is amazing. I predict she will do more and more on her own as she gets to know new classmates and teachers. Who knows? Maybe we’ll get her talking to adults by the time her current Rose class is done.”

The Rose By The Numbers

30,260 *students* participated
in *field trips* to
The Rose during 2015-16

1,126 *workshops* conducted
in area *schools* by
Rose artist educators

27,368 *students* served in
The Rose’s *Every Single
Child Program* last year

64 *schools in underserved areas*
participate in The Rose’s
Every Single Child Program

1,526 *students* participated in
Rose Theater *camp*s
and *classes* last year

67 *special needs students*
enrolled in after school and
Saturday *classes* at The Rose
in 2015-16

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stories that happen every day
at The Rose.*

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