

# MAKING KIDS' IMAGINATIONS SOAR!

By Ryan G. Van Cleave

**T**he Van Wezel and the Van Wezel Foundation are not the same thing, notes Kelli Maldonado, the Van Wezel's Director of Education & Community Engagement. The former is a premier performing arts hall that's owned and operated by the City of Sarasota. The latter is a charitable nonprofit 501(c)3 organization that has brought millions of dollars in to support the Hall's capital improvements, programs, and ongoing educational efforts. The former seeks to bring in a range of world-class performances. The latter seeks to "enrich the lives of members of the Gulf Coast community, with an emphasis on children, through the performing arts while supporting the needs of the Van Wezel." So yes, they are not the same thing, but they work together in partnership to create a massive cultural impact on our area. And each is far better off for having the other one around.

*Chris Botti musicians  
work with students*





Maldonado continues to be impressed by the lasting effect of the shows. “I have spoken to high school students who recall coming to the Van Wezel for an event back when they were in kindergarten, and they can tell me details about the performance! I know each time we have a show, we are reaching students and hope that the content will stay with them, or the feeling of wonder they have coming into our building. But it is truly special to hear they remember so much about the experience!”

Approximately 25,000 students attend special schooltime events each year, though this year Maldonado says the number “is at 25,585 and growing!” She furthers this point, adding that the opportunity to attend live theater should be available to everyone, and that the experience should be engaging versus passive. “The arts specifically give students the opportunity to explore new subject areas in ways that the typical school day will not allow.” What parent, teacher, or adult doesn’t appreciate that fact? This past season alone, there were nine special schooltime performances at the hall, and two at the North Port Performing Arts Center in North Port High School.

When asked about a success story relating to the schooltime performances, Maldonado shares this: “We recently had Black Violin — a Florida hip hop duo who were classically trained string players — do a schooltime performance, and I was working with a teacher from Visible Men Academy who wanted his students to attend because he had taught spoken word poetry to his students using the music of Black Violin as an inspiration. The students wrote powerful pieces exploring what it means to be visible. The lesson was so powerful, it was also featured in our Artworks for Schooltime learning module. For the students, however, the chance to see the performers on stage was one of those rare moments you know they will treasure forever. They had listened to their music, it had inspired them to write, and now here they were right in front of the performers who were playing that music live. To make the experience even better, Black Violin did a special meet and greet with the students, and they had an opportunity to ask questions and have their picture taken with the group. One of the students even got to share his own poem!” It’s moments like this where the arts support the students in the classroom and then enhance the experience to make a profound, lasting impact.

“For an organization like ours, educational outreach is important because every single child deserves to have the best education possible, and the arts provides an engaging way for that to happen. To remember content, to inspire students to pick up an instrument, to make them think in new ways, our program can do that for them, and for each child it’s different,” says Maldonado. “We are lucky that we can offer a variety of programming, so there is really something for every child. It’s also important to the arts in general — we are making the Van Wezel a place where young people feel welcome, a place they will want to come back to. These truly are the arts-goers of tomorrow. We need to make sure they are not just future audience members, but future engaged audience members who see the benefit of the arts in a community and support it.”

Young people are really what it’s about at the Van Wezel Foundation. If you get a young person to engage with live theater, the experience is positive and you’ve suddenly got a lifelong theatergoer. That’s the best reward of all. The hall gets a long-time attendee. The attendee gets the joy of witnessing so much entertainment, art, and culture. And the visiting performers get another attentive audience member in the seats. Everyone wins.

Something most people don’t realize is that this year, the Van Wezel educational department started offering professional development and learning modules connected to each of the performances. “This is part of an NEA grant we received that is allowing us to reach more students in new ways,” says Maldonado. So now they can prepare teachers to introduce the arts in their classroom, as they get ready to see the show. Through it, art is created and explored before they even attend, and teachers gain new strategies to better reach their students.

Monica Van Buskirk, President and CEO of the Van Wezel Foundation, says, “Raising money for Title 1 schools is my passion. It is so rewarding for me to know that children who count on our school system to pay for breakfast or lunch can also attend our educational programs at the Van Wezel. I’m bold about asking for money since these designated gifts help a financially less fortunate group of children. I want them to feel they have opportunity to enjoy the gifts of the arts. Arts make the imagination soar!”

For more information on the Van Wezel Foundation’s outreach efforts, please visit [www.vwfoundation.org](http://www.vwfoundation.org) or call 941.366.5578. 📍