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Principal Bob Wilson



Nashville School of the Arts “The Greatest School on the Planet”

by Rebecca Bauer | photography by Anthony Scarlati

The school motto is a simple one. There’s no ambiguity, no gray area, no soft sell. It states boldly that this is the greatest school on the planet, and after spending a few hours with Bob Wilson, principal of the Nashville School of the Arts, I’m inclined to agree.

His office, a spacious room resembling a teenager’s bedroom, is covered in comic-book-superhero paraphernalia. Superman is his favorite, and although Principal Wilson may not be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, his accomplishments at the school have been nothing short of remarkable.

After graduating as a speech and theater major from Illinois State, the Chicago native arrived in Nashville with music on his mind. Teaching secondary education revealed his calling, and he went on to earn a spot as principal of Bellevue Middle School. “People used to hear about that crazy principal—that was me,” he jokes.

It was during that time that he built his foundation as an educator.

“You’ve got to do your research, know what makes a kid tick. These are the times that are life changing.”

He knew the importance of recognizing and drawing out special abilities in a child and that the arts had the power to do that. “I’d put them in chorus. They couldn’t even sing, but they wanted to do it.” The result was an increase in confidence, self-esteem and higher grades.

While admission to the Nashville School of the Arts is based solely on an artist portfolio or audition, students are also expected to fulfill the same academic requirements as other metro schools. And it just so happens that this art institution ranks number three academically in the county.

I tour the building with Principal Wilson, and along the way I meet two students who make a quick impression on me. Jasmin Offei-Nkansah, 15, loves sculpture and playing the viola and plans to study psychiatry after high school. She names Georgia O’Keefe as her favorite artist and explains, “I like the way her mind works. It’s about reflecting on yourself, not just what’s on paper.” When I ask Jasmin what she loves about her school, she tells me she loves the freedom and choice she has to explore her talent to the fullest.

Sam Hunter, 17, plays *Mr. Sandman* on his acoustic guitar, the same song he sang at his NSA audition. I ask if he plays in any bands after school, and I'm taken aback by his answer: "I do some session work on Music Row." He adds very humbly, "It's hard to find players my age to play with that are as committed as I am." His love for making music has his mind made up on a career. "If I don't do music, there's nothing I can imagine doing."

Walking past classrooms, I see dancers stretching and moving in front of mirrors, painters working at easels, a group gathered around a piano composing a song. The theater has seen its share of major productions. It is alive and bustling with creativity. There's a tech room, a guitar lab, and an elaborate recording studio. The tools of the trade are everywhere.

Demographically, they are a diverse student body from all corners of the county. Many are honors students. There are some, according to Wilson, considered special ed, though he offers, "I have found that many 'special ed' students really are not. We may have thirty to forty kids that have been labeled special ed, but really they are just artistic. It's a common tale."

The correlation between the arts, academics, and student performance is evident here. Wilson knows that when artistic skills are stimulated and appreciated, the students flourish in other subjects; they're more engaged. NSA demonstrates an atmosphere where minds are challenged and imaginations are used. Under positive leadership, all this can have a profound effect on how the younger generation will take on the world as adults with the ability to make a difference.

These gifted students have gone on to enter music programs at Belmont and Berkeley. Some don't make it to college because they've been offered a job on Broadway or in a Vegas show, as staff on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, or dancing behind Celine Dion. Still others go off to West Point or become biologists. The possibilities are as high as the stars and as numerous.

"So many great kids come out of this program. You look at some kids, and it's sad when they're lost. Ask any kid here, and they will tell you what their plans are. They have a purpose in life. Here is where people believe in you and what you're about."

It is clear that Principal Wilson loves his job, and students revel in the opportunities the Nashville School of the Arts offers them. He affirms, "So many cool things happen here; it's a happy creative place to be. What else would you expect from the greatest school on the planet!" ✓

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