



# Mrs. Charlotte Dougherty Shares the Lessons of the Theater

When Charlotte Dougherty shows up for work at MICDS as the 7th Grade Dean, drama teacher and director of Camp Pegasus, she brings her adolescent self with her. She remembers how difficult it was to be a middle schooler, the angst over a changing body and conflicting emotions. And she remembers how theater changed her life.

## Finding Her Place in the World

The oldest girl of five children in her Canton, Ohio family, Dougherty struggled to find her voice within her family and to sit still at her Catholic school. "I spent a lot of time in the hallway," she said. Thankfully, a music teacher recognized her spirit – and her proclivities towards drama and singing – and called her mother to ask if she could take Dougherty to audition for a local production of *Carmen*. She earned a role as one of the street children, and a door opened to a different world.

She met teenagers from all over who were unlike the people in her family and small community, and they accepted each other without reservation. "It was amazing. Everyone was so nice and sweet and kind. And I loved being on stage." Dougherty's experience led to classes at the Players Guild every Saturday. The cast and crew engaged in vibrant discussions that showed Dougherty that the world was much larger and that she had a place in it.

Later in high school, Dougherty's theater mentor became an extension of her family, providing her with a place to do homework and relax. "She was there for me, and I know how that can be life-changing. Kids need to know someone loves and respects them, that they can be themselves, feel safe and flourish." She sees her work today as an opportunity to provide that safe place for her students, beginning each August when she learns every single 7th grader's name. It continues throughout

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the academic year, even in disciplinary situations. “The first thing I say is ‘Let’s talk about you,’” she said. “I can’t make a decision about discipline if I don’t know whom I’m talking to. What’s going on in their lives has a lot to do with the choices they make.”

She thinks it’s important to always keep the students as the first priority. “Our primary focus is not our boss, not parents, not the curriculum, but the kids,” she said.

## Making Her Way to the Lou

After high school, Dougherty went to college to study theater performance. She graduated with a bachelors of fine arts from Otterbein College and moved to New York. She found a husband-and-wife-run theater company that wanted to also produce children’s theater. Together they started Piwacket Theatre for Children where she wrote plays and performed, touring at hospitals, migrant centers and children’s homes. The company eventually moved its base to St. Louis. With no ties to the Gateway City before, Dougherty agreed to make the move, too. The company is Edie’s Fairytale Theater now, and she still writes and serves on its board. Along the way, Dougherty met her husband Chris and had two children, Mason and Olivia. She then began her teaching career with a part-time position at MICDS.

“Teaching theater is really my calling. I knew after the first year. I like the fact that students are in that malleable age where they need someone to help them build empathy, discover themselves and think globally,” said Dougherty.

She eventually went back to school to earn a child development certificate from the Psychoanalytic Institute of St. Louis and a masters in educational psychology from Webster University.

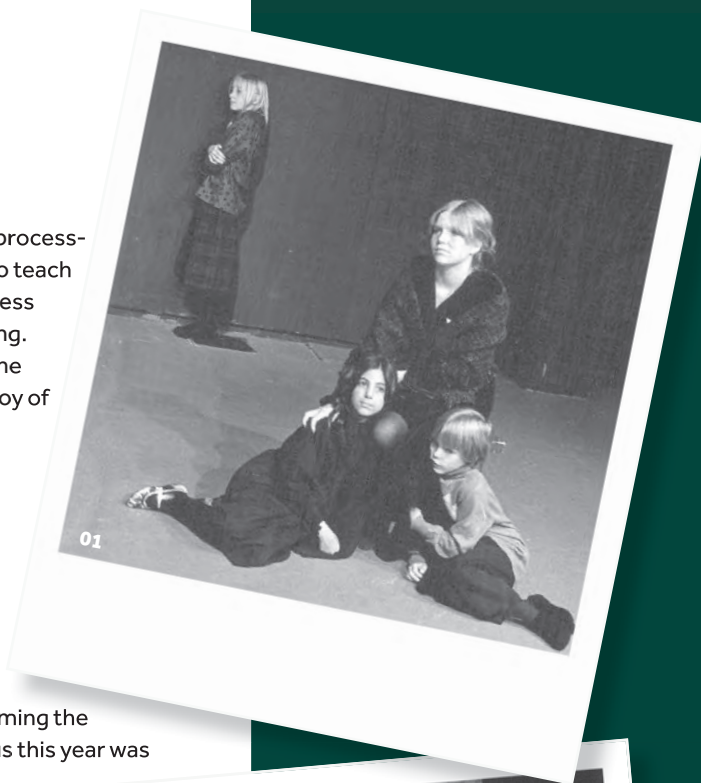
“I love the outlet of creating art,” she said, “but I really love teaching.”

Dougherty admits she is process-oriented, and her goal is to teach children to enjoy the process of life, learning and creating. “We’re in such a race for the product that we lose the joy of the process.”

She embraced the opportunity to serve as 7th Grade Class Dean and enjoys being able to interact with the entire class now, instead of only those students in her theater classes. Becoming the director for Camp Pegasus this year was a natural extension. She’s excited when the campers she taught in Summer Stock return as counselors.

## Passing Along Her Passion

The theater world that threw an antsy girl a lifeline continues to influence the life lessons Dougherty applies to her teaching today. When she’s working with young people, she stresses flexibility and creativity: “Theater—and life—are never finished products. They’re messy and chaotic and unfinished, and that’s what is exciting.” She strives to make sure middle school students feel loved, as she felt when she joined the cast of *Carmen*. She said, “Theater people are the kindest you’ll ever meet, they’re ragtag misfits who welcome everybody, no matter the color of skin, sexual orientation or the pimples on a middle schooler’s face. When middle schoolers look in the mirror they see the process, not a finished product. If I can get them to appreciate the process of becoming who they are, they will love themselves.”



01. Charlotte Dougherty comforts two children in her 1979 role in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*.
02. Charlotte Dougherty (right) performs in *Ah! Wilderness* in 1986.