



**Grit,
Guts &
Gratitude**

COMMONWEALTH
CTC
THEATRE CENTER

GRATITUDE REPORT | 2023

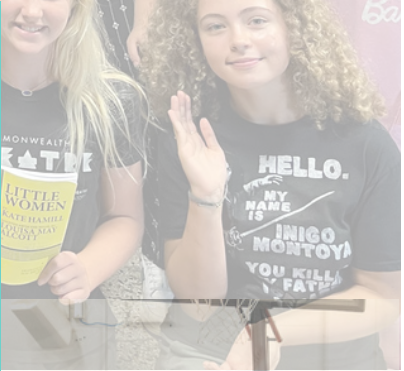


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History & Legacy

While formed in 2015, the history, heritage, and legacy of Commonwealth Theatre Center date back nearly five decades. The organization was created after the merging of two great Louisville arts institutions: Walden Theatre and Blue Apple Players. Both independently founded in 1976, these two companies contributed to Louisville's vibrant theatre scene by creating a pipeline for generations of theatre professionals and patrons.

Nancy Niles Sexton founded Walden Theatre as a conservatory for young people with a serious interest in theatre studies. Regarded by her peers as one of the finest theatre instructors in the United States, Nancy was also an accomplished actress, singer, costume designer, and playwright, having written 15 original plays for Walden. In her tenure as Producing Director, she founded the first Shakespeare Festival by and for young people as well as the Young Playwrights Festival. Nancy firmly believed that the benefits of theatre education come from the discipline and rigor of artistic training and practice of the craft.



Founders Nancy Niles Sexton, Geraldine Ann Snyder and Paul Lenzi

The Blue Apple Players' long tradition of innovative and inspirational theatre programs began with founders Paul Lenzi and Geraldine Ann Snyder. Their goal was to bring theatre education into the classroom for all ages. Over the past 47 years, the Blue Apple vision built a legacy of joyful, community-driven learning through accessible, quality arts experiences. Today, CTC's Blue Apple Outreach programs use drama as a tool to increase emotional literacy and resiliency skills and build bridges among diverse groups in our community.

As the region's most comprehensive theatre arts program, CTC creates space for young people to thrive even during challenging times.

In 2023, CTC reached more than 19,000 youth and 7,500 adults with its programming.

CTC students have gone on to theatre programs at Juilliard School, Carnegie Mellon University, Brown University, Princeton University, DePaul University, Indiana University, and more. CTC alumni live in our community, across the nation, and around the world, pursuing careers in a variety of industries and serving as prominent examples of how arts engagement enriches lives.

Letter from the Artistic Director and the Board Chair

First and foremost, we want to share our profound gratitude for your support of CTC. It has truly made all the difference.

To say that this year at CTC has been a challenge would be a huge understatement. The headwinds and obstacles we have faced in 2023 have been unprecedented in our history. And CTC is not alone. Performing arts organizations nationwide have felt the lingering effects of the pandemic, and lifestyle-altering habits and routines have changed the way arts groups maintain financial viability. However, we have been so humbled and honored at the level of support our programs have received from people all across the region. From Walden Theatre alums and people who still remember their first arts experience with Blue Apple Players to arts patrons who appreciate the power and positivity of arts education, this community has shown that an arts organization like CTC holds a special place in our arts scene and provides remarkable benefits for children, families, and our community.

Mostly we have been awe-inspired by the resiliency and love from our students. The students of the Walden conservatory have remained positive and forward thinking. They have embraced challenges and overcome obstacles and they remind all of us of the beneficial and life-changing experience CTC provides for young people and their families. As we look forward to a new year, we at CTC can see a bright horizon full of hope and promise.

With deepest gratitude,
Charlie Sexton and Elizabeth Zimmerman

Staff

Charlie Sexton
Heather Burns
Aletia Robey
Meg Caudill
Tessa McShane
Lindsay Chamberlin
Hannah Brooks
Keith McGill
Zach Stone

Board of Directors

Elizabeth Zimmerman, PhD
Anita Streeter
Patti Clare
Jimi Fitch
Mark Gomsak
Angie McCorkle Buckler
Brad Keeton
Kevin Hyde
Tamekka Cornelius, PhD
Kathy Campbell
Tricia Lister

Special Thanks to the many folks who are part of our team

Joe Legel; Neville Blakemore, Jr.; Robert McFarland; Sandy Bowling; Paula Lockhart
Hallie Dizdarevic; Alex Biscardi; Lindsay Krupski; Nyazia Martin, Paul Robey; Tony Smith
Caisey Cole; Angel Kean; Kellye Schalk; Compass Hernandez; Brooke Morrison; Mel Beck;
Hard Core Club; Parent Volunteers of Fall Festival; Student Summer & Alumni Volunteers

Blue Apple Outreach Touring Productions

The Inventive Princess of Floralee by Maggie Lou Rader



January – March 2023

4,215

students reached

No Turning Back by Keith McGill

January – March 2023

2,264

students reached



Dragon Up by Maggie Lou Rader



October – December 2023

6,000

students reached

Outreach Impact

Sites served in 2023

4

55

Jefferson County Public Schools

Elementary Schools

Blake Elementary
Bloom Elementary
Breckinridge Franklin Elementary
Camp Taylor Elementary
Chenoweth Elementary
Cochran Elementary
Coleridge Taylor Montessori
Dr. William H. Perry Elementary
Eisenhower Elementary
Engelhard Elementary
Field Elementary
Frayser Elementary
Hartstern Elementary

Middle schools

Olmsted Academy North
Olmsted Academy South

High Schools

Fern Creek High School

Public Schools in other counties

Crossroads Elementary
– Bullit County, KY
Franklin Square Elementary
– Clark County, IN
Thomas Jefferson Elementary
– Clark County, IN

Early Childhood Centers

Auburndale Learning Academy
Neighborhood House/Keystone Academy
St. Benedict Center for Early Childhood Education

Special Needs Communities

Breckinridge Metro High School
Brooklawn Child and Family Services
Bullitt Alternative School
Dreams with Wings
Holy Trinity – Clifton Campus
Home of the Innocents
Friends School
Gilda Club of Louisville
Newcomer Academy
Summit Academy

Private Schools

Notre Dame Academy
St. Stephen Matryr School
Village School of Louisville

Community Partners

Girl Scouts / Sacred Heart
Logan Street Market
Smoketown Family Wellness Center
Southeast YMCA
United Crescent Hill Ministries



Outreach Impact

In Others' Words

5

"I was lucky enough to get to watch this performance of DRAGON UP from Commonwealth Theatre Center this morning – **it is stunning to see a group of a hundred or more 3rd and 4th graders completely gripped and utterly engaged in a show that helps them to develop their emotional intelligence**, and to figure ways of channeling their frustrations and their needs into words.....it was exactly the kind of thing that all kids – and most adults – should see!"

–Martin French, Theatre Professional

"**Engaging, interactive, funny and extremely relevant** are all words that I would use to describe Dragon Up!! As I scanned the room, I noticed that the students and staff were tuned into the show and awaiting the next words to come out of the mouths of the performers. If you've ever been in an elementary school, conflict is an ongoing thing! Not just between students but also staff. Everyone is stressed, which can often lead to conflict. The show gave our students and staff additional tools to assist them with resolving conflicts both in and outside of school."

–Family Resource Coordinator, JCPS Elementary School

"The Discover Drama and Emotional Literacy program offered by the Commonwealth Theatre Center was an enriching experience for the at-risk kids at our residential facility this summer. These students face various behavioral challenges and have had traumatic experiences. Through a series of engaging acting exercises, this program aimed to enhance their emotional awareness, and provided them tools to confront and cope with their feelings effectively. By immersing themselves in a safe and supportive environment, the students participated in improvisational games that utilized essential actor tools-- body, voice, imagination, and courage-- to engage with their peers, fostering a significant positive impact on their emotional well-being and personal development. The activities helped the students identify and build context for their feelings and see that others all experience those same emotions. By becoming more attuned to their emotional states, they gained insights into their thought processes and behavioral patterns, enabling them to respond to challenges in healthier ways.....**This newfound self-assurance has extended beyond the theater environment and positively influenced their daily interactions and academic engagement as well. By nurturing emotional awareness, promoting effective coping mechanisms, fostering empathy, and boosting self-confidence, the CTC program has empowered our students with essential life skills and tools.**"

–Elyssa Thompson, ESL Teacher at Brooklawn JCPS School



Benefits of CTC's Theatre Programs on Youth Development is Proven in Long-Term Scholarly Study

In March 2022, the **American Psychological Association** published a study by former CTC Associate Artistic Director Julane Havens and George Mason University colleagues in [Translational Issues in Psychological Science](#).

"Developing creativity and other 21st century skills through theater classes."

Stutesman, Megan G., Havens, Julane, & Goldstein, Thalia R.

[Translational Issues in Psychological Science](#), Vol 8(1), Mar 2022, 24-46

The study followed CTC students aged 5 to 18 over six years and found increases in 21st century skills across age, gender, and race. 21st century skills include communication, initiative, collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity. These are skills that connect people to their peers and are invaluable for navigating life and every kind of career. This peer-reviewed, academic study by researchers at George Mason University highlights the uniquely effective Walden model of training at CTC.

In January 2023, [The Washington Post](#) published an article by Alexandra Moe discussing the George Mason University study about CTC students, alongside a few other studies.

"How Theater Can Teach Our Kids To Be Empathetic"

Moe, Alexandra. The Washington Post. January 10, 2023

In addition to recognizing the George Mason University/CTC study as the longest study ever conducted of theatre education and the significant growth of 21st Century skills, Moe recognizes research showing how the "active learning" in theatre boosts brain activity, and how studying theatre creates the opportunity for learning empathy.

"It's the social dynamic of theater, the give and take, the volley of listening and responding, that expands kids' capacity to read cues, think quickly and creatively, work as an ensemble and see things from another perspective. Theater provides an awareness of space, pausing, waiting for somebody else to talk."

On the Stage in 2023

7



August Osage County by Tracey Letts
Directed by Paula Lockhart



Young Playwrights Festival
YPF Festival Director Keith McGill
7 short plays by 7 young playwrights
Directed, designed, and performed by students



The Tempest by William Shakespeare
Directed by Jessica De La Rosa



As You Like It by William Shakespeare
Directed by Charlie Sexton



Dear Brutus by J. M. Barrie
Directed by Meg Caudill



Little Women by Kate Hamill
Directed by Tessa McShane



Frankenstein by Danielle Mohlman
Directed by Heather Burns and Meg Caudill

7 Productions
2,017 Audience Members

Class of 2023

Senior Sendoff

This past May, the Walden Theatre Conservatory at CTC said goodbye to 16 very special seniors during the annual Senior Sendoff ceremony at the theatre. The class was one of the largest and most accomplished in Walden's history, with seven students attending the unified auditions in Chicago and continuing their theatre studies at universities across the country.

Here are what a few of them said during the always emotional and cathartic Senior Sendoff.

"I cannot explain how important this place is to me. And I know that that's the most broken-record thing to say, and everyone else has said that, but it's true. I also know that it's true that I simply would not be alive today standing here, without the support of every single one of you ... and every single one of the support beams holding this building up. I cannot explain how much I owe you for that."

Lucy Dingman-Root
Currently at Northern Illinois University



"This place has brought me out of my comfort zone so many times ... I have met so many amazing people here, and amazing teachers here, who have taught me so much about myself and about being myself. Walden is really special to me. You all need to take care of it, because I don't know where I'd be without this place."

Nolan Brown
Currently at Bellarmine University

"When I came [to CTC], I was very shy, but now I'm talking to all you lovely people and I feel so comfortable doing it. Back before Walden, I would never have had the confidence to make those connections and I would never have had the trust in myself and other people to do that ... I just love this place so much."

Sophia Retone – Currently at Ball State University



Class of 2023

Chloe Fitch	Long Island University Brooklyn
Georgia Diakov	University of Kentucky
Emerson Tuttle	University of Louisville
Summer Clark	Belmont University
Lucy Dingman-Root	Northern Illinois University
Laine Lloyd	Columbia University
Alexander Diakov	University of Kentucky
Ollie Gibson	Centre College
Bea Frieson	Northern Illinois University
Alex Miguel	Pomona College (CA)
Lauren Wood	Harvard University
Lilly Cobb	Ball State University
Sophia Retone	Ball State University
Sierra Conner	Northern Kentucky University
Aidan Garrison	Thomas More University
Nolan Brown	Bellarmino University
Audrey Scott	Gap year for extensive travel and experience.
	University of Louisville in following year
Stevie Mears	New York Film Academy

Justin Jackson: A Defining Moment

Walden alum spotlight



When Louisville-based actor, Justin Jackson, was in middle school, his family lived in Old Louisville, “pretty much across the street from Central Park.” In the summertime, Kentucky Shakespeare would bring its Free Shakespeare Festival to the neighborhood and Jackson remembers thinking: “That looks fun.”

He showed enough interest for his mom to enroll him at Walden Theatre and, while he didn’t stay with the program long, his time there made a huge impact and was the site of what he describes as “a defining moment” in his life.

It’s a moment I’ll never forget. It’s really a core memory of mine. It was that first time I felt confident on stage, and for that to happen in middle school — a time when most of us are not confident about anything — was important

“It was during 1001 Arabian Nights,” Justin says. “I remember being so nervous waiting to go on. I entered the stage, delivered my first line, and it got a big laugh from the audience. It’s a moment I’ll never forget. It’s really a core memory of mine. It was that first time I felt confident on stage, and for that to happen in middle school — a time when most of us are not confident about anything — was important.”

Since his time with Walden, the stage seems to always call Justin home. He enrolled at Savannah School of Art and Design (SCAD) to study sequential art, which combines the narrative skills of a writer with the drawing skills of an illustrator to tell stories. But the performing arts came calling again.

“Since I also had done plays, and musicals, and theatre before, I decided to take one performing arts class and just see how it feels to me,” Justin says.

“I always just wanted to perform, and bring people joy, or sadness or laughter ... It’s just always been a part of me in terms of a form of expression.”

After graduating from SCAD in 2017 with a B.F.A. in Performing Arts, he came home to Louisville to be a writer. He wasn’t interested in pursuing acting further. But then 2020 happened ... and he experienced an emotional, artistic, and spiritual awakening.

“I needed a place to examine these strong emotions I was feeling,” he says. “I needed to talk to somebody about this, to talk about art and exploration. It eventually led me to meet Robert Barry Fleming [Executive Artistic Director of Actors Theatre of Louisville] and brought me back to the theater. I was feeling the call.”

Perhaps owing to that formative experience during 1001 Arabian Nights at Walden, Justin’s favorite part of any production process remains opening night.

“Because as soon as it’s places and the curtain is up, I get butterflies,” he says. “Whenever I get butterflies before a performance, I know it’s going to be good because the energy is high.”

When we caught up with Justin in December, he was starring in Jack Frost Saves Christmas at Derby Dinner Playhouse and was in rehearsals for Kentucky Shakespeare’s production of Sense and Sensibility at the Kentucky Center’s Bomhard Theatre, Jan. 6-14. His past credits include Romeo & Juliet at Actors Theatre Louisville in 2020. Film: Frat House (2018); Five Minutes (2016). TV: Kanceled (2020). Other Theatre: The Flick; Two Gentlemen of Verona; Julius Caesar.





Catching Up with Helen Lister

Walden alum spotlight

Years at Walden 2007 – 2017

What was your favorite production at Walden?

The 2017 production of A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM in which I played Hermia.

I can be anything I want to be ... I can be kind and caring while still being strong and confident

It's nearly impossible to pick just one memory out of the hundreds of wonderful ones I made at Walden. At the end of the day, I think my favorite thing I did at Walden was work as a camp counselor/stage manager during the summers. One memory that sticks out in particular was during a summer where the kids were putting on Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. The campers had just been assigned their roles and one of the youngest ones was very upset to have been cast in the role of a squirrel. I remember sitting with them and sharing with them the times that I'd had a role that I thought of as "small" and how they almost always ended up being my favorites. I was able to get them to be hesitantly optimistic about the idea of stealing the show as a squirrel. And by the time opening night came I remember watching from the light booth as that kid put their entire heart and soul into every second of stage time they had, and they did in fact steal the show.

After Walden

I went to Cornish College of the Arts to pursue my BFA in Original Works and Acting. I stayed there until halfway through my junior year, studying everything from Shakespeare to Clown. Then I decided that, although theatre can change the world, I wanted to do something concrete to help people every day. So, I transferred to the University of Cincinnati and graduated with my bachelor's in Law and Society. Now I am a law student at the University of San Diego School of Law.

How did your time at Walden shape the person you are today?

Walden has shaped every part of me. Growing up Walden was my home away from home where I met so many wonderful people, both students and teachers. I learned how to perform, be confident, and empathize. But it is the mentors I made along the way that truly shaped me. Alec Volz taught me to laugh in the face of adversity and to get up every time I fell. Melinda Crecelius, Hallie Dizdarevic, and Jennifer Pennington taught me I can be anything I want to be and that I can be kind and caring while still being strong and confident. Walden taught me how to use my skills, whatever they are, to help others and fight for the world I want to see.

How often do you call on the skills and knowledge you gained from Walden?

I am about to enter my final semester of law school and, when I graduate, I will be pursuing a career as a public defender. I use the skills that Walden taught me every day at work. When I go to jail to talk to clients before their first court appearance, it's the skills that Walden taught me that allow me to actively listen and be present with them despite the limited time I have with them and the outside distractions. When I speak in court, or compete in Mock Trial tournaments at school, the stage presence that Walden helped me craft allows me to be the best advocate I can.



Catching Up

with Kathleen Lister – Perlman

Walden alum spotlight

Years at Walden 2005 – 2010

Breaking Out of Her Shell

"When I was in middle and high school, I was extremely shy. I am only 4'10" and I have always been timid both physically and socially. Also, I'm a nerd. My time at Walden helped me out of my shell, and this impacted me in big ways which I still feel today at the age of 31."

Shoulders Back

"One of the most impactful experiences for me at Walden was participating in the production of Coriolanus. I was cast as Cominius, a general. I had a ton of work to do to embody that role. Through that process, I learned to walk with my shoulders back rather than hunched. I learned to speak with confidence, to have a presence, and to take up space. By the end, I felt like I knew how to interact with the world with a new confidence."

Confidence, Teamwork, and Empathy

"I brought these lessons with me when I left for college and used my newfound confidence as I formed new friendships and social connections. I still draw on these lessons today in my career. My most recent role was as Front-End Tech Lead at an ed-tech company. As a leader in tech, I use the skills I learned at Walden every day. The confidence I gained helps me navigate leadership, and the lessons of teamwork and empathy are invaluable in a professional setting."

After Walden

Kathleen went to Brown University and studied Computer Science and Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

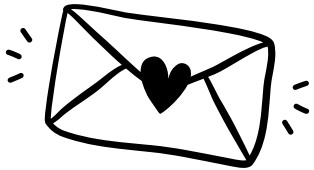
Meet You in Brooklyn!

In October, current Commonwealth Theatre Center senior, Sophia Hyde, paid a visit to the CTC Class of 2023's Chloe Fitch at Long Island University Brooklyn, where Chloe is working on her B.F.A. in Acting for Theater, Film & Television. Chloe earned a full tuition and room & board scholarship to the university.





CTC LOVES PAM!



This past spring, when the Commonwealth Theatre Center made the difficult decision to embark on an emergency fundraising campaign to keep its doors open for the coming school year, Sophia Hyde, a student at CTC since 2013, decided to reach out to one of her favorite actors, Jenna Fischer.

Best known for her portrayal of Pam Beesly on the NBC sitcom, "The Office," Fischer also co-hosts the popular series rewatch podcast, "Office Ladies," with co-star and best buddy, Angela Kinsey.

"I had been listening to her podcast a lot and rewatching, 'The Office,'" says Sophia of her inspiration to reach out to Fischer on Instagram. "I thought that working actors, if they read a message from a theatre company that really needed help, would understand how important that is. I didn't expect an answer, but I was happy to at least be trying.

"I sent her a long message about what she meant to me, told her about CTC and how much I loved it, and that we were struggling."

Later in the summer, when members of CTC's "Hardcore Club" gathered to write thank you cards to donors, someone casually mentioned that Fischer had donated. Nobody knew Sophia had reached out to her.

"I think they were confused about how she heard about us," she says. "I was, like, 'She donated!?' Then I told everyone how I reached out to her. I was so so so so happy!"

Sophia insisted on writing her the thank you letter.

"And anybody who watched me write it will tell you that I was in a state," she laughs. "I made sure I had the perfect pen, and I filled the entire card, adding a doodle for her at the end. I again explained how much she meant to me, that she is inspiring to me as a young actor, and how her donation really meant a lot to me."

About a month later, Sophia was told she had mail at CTC.

"I was, like, 'Why would anybody send me mail here?' Then I saw the name, 'Jenna Fischer,' on the card and I freaked out. I started crying. There were a bunch of people there who wanted to see my reaction. I will keep that card forever. It means the world to me."





La Bête

January 19–20 & 26–27, 2024

by David Hirson. Directed by Charlie Sexton

History of Now

February 3, 2024

by Keith McGill. Directed by Keith McGill

Young Playwrights Festival

February 16–17 & 23–24, 2024

Directed by Keith McGill

25th Annual Young American Shakespeare Festival

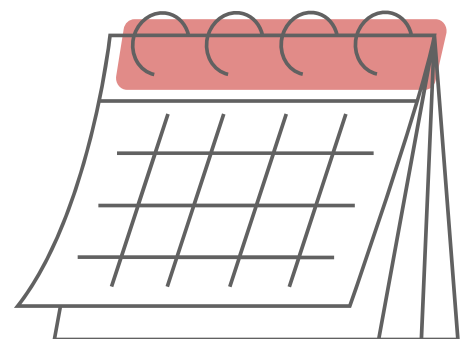
May 9 – 18, 2024

Twelfth Night – directed by Charlie Sexton

Cymbeline – directed by Meg Caudill

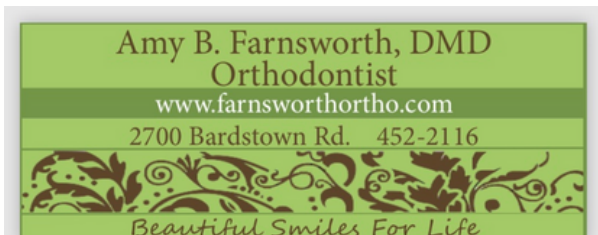


The next performance is always
right around the corner. Join us!



Special Thanks to the following businesses for their support:

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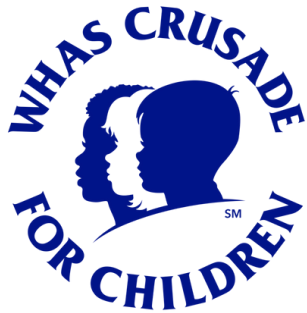
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WITH
WINGS



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ENDOWMENT for the **ARTS**
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LGE and **KU**

Foundation

The Kentucky Arts Council, the state agency, provides operating support to CTC with state tax dollars and federal funding from the the National Endowment for the Arts.

We thank you for your ongoing support of our program.

Individual donors like you make a big difference.

350 donors gave over \$154,000 in 2023.

We invite you to be part of our story.



Donate now

<https://ctclou.org/donate>

"I contribute to Commonwealth Theatre Center every year because I believe CTC is a unique force for good in the lives of young people. While CTC students work hard and have fun creating new worlds through theatre, the lasting effects of their experience and training are more profound. Through the awareness and sensitivity they find in class and on stage, they develop self-confidence. They learn to understand ... and be understood. I have seen a teacher's simple instruction of 'listen, think, react' blossom into empathy, creativity, and a generosity of spirit — indispensable tools and virtues in this fractious world."

– Anita Streeter, CTC Board Member

"The LG&E and KU Foundation is proud to support Commonwealth Theater Center, whose mission aligns with our focus on STEAM education. CTC's focus on empowering youth through theater education, outreach, and live stage productions is a valuable asset to our community."

– Chris Whelan, President, LG&E and KU Foundation



Commonwealth Theatre Center

1123 Payne Street

Louisville, KY 40204

502-589-0084

www.ctclou.org

business@ctclou.org

In Memoriam

Kenneth Thomas Maier

1971 – 2023



Kenny Maier, a Louisville native, was proud to be part of the CTC family.

Kenny got his start in production with Currie Sound and Security, where he worked as a sound tech around the Louisville area. In 2008, he began working for Infinity Productions, where he assisted on the touring production of Evil Dead and In Love with Tyrone, with Robin Givens. During covid, he worked at Willis Klein, before returning to CTC as Maintenance Associate/ Assistant Technical Director.

Kenny made a tremendous impact on the CTC community. He anticipated our needs, helped us solve problems, gave countless hours of work to support our artistic endeavors, and joined us in creating art for the stage and for our outreach work in schools.

His helpful nature and his humor bridged outside the workplace into our personal lives as a reliable friend.

We're grateful to be the recipient of his skills and talents. We're still finding bits of his magic just when we need it. His influence lives on at CTC and in our hearts. We miss our friend.

