

**For county teens, acting is a family affair
Aug. 2, 2007 PG Gazette**

One of the oldest surviving summer teen theater programs in the nation calls Prince George's County home. And this summer, the Prince George's Summer Teen Theatre calls the Bowie Center for the Performing Arts home. After nearly 30 years of performing at High Point High School in Beltsville, the teen musical theatre troupe is performing "Beauty and the Beast" in Bowie, the first major production under the center's new management.

"Beauty and the Beast" will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 3 and 4 and at 2 p.m. Aug. 5 at the center.

They could not perform at High Point this year due to renovations, but they plan to return there for future summer performances.

As the organization reflects on its 40th anniversary this summer, co-producer of the production and president of the organization's Board of Directors Rick Bergmann said the group couldn't find any evidence of a group with a similar story.

"As far as we can tell, we're the oldest and longest-running musical theatre group for teens," Bergmann said.

Bergmann said one of the keys to the theater's success is that it is run professionally and puts "a lot of expectations" on the young people who participate.

Yet the atmosphere that is created is one of family – where everyone is accepted and students and volunteers help each other.

"The kids are made welcome and even kids who've been in the program for years are very welcoming," said co-producer Marguerite Connolly.

As a self-sustaining organization funded and managed by adult volunteers, many parents and community members must provide support.

"There have been people willing to take the time, energy and talent into finding the support and keeping it going," Connolly said.

The theater holds auditions and begins rehearsals in late May and continues with a four-hour schedule each night four days a week.

Most of the students learn of the theater through word of mouth from others who have participated.

Connolly's four children have each performed as part of the theatre. Her son, Matt Thorpe, 22, is directing this year's performance and her daughter, Mary Thorpe, 16, is part of the cast.

Mary Thorpe, a home-schooled junior from Bowie, said she enjoys the camaraderie among the students. She plays a napkin and a towns person in "Beauty and the Beast."

She appeared in her first production at age 7 along with her mother and siblings.

"I love acting and singing," she said. "It's just so fun. It's an outlet for every kind of feeling."

As a student member of the organization's Board of Directors, Thorpe also works behind the curtain.

"You get an appreciation for how much they do behind the scenes."

Heather Harris, 19, a Bowie native who lives in Edgewater, also began appearing in Prince George's Summer Teen Theatre productions at the age of seven.

"It's really like a family," said Harris, a student at Anne Arundel Community College. Harris said all the participants having similar ages help add to the fun atmosphere.

"Everyone can relate to everyone else really well."

