



Theatre Professor Captures National Award

Story by Thressea H. Boyd & Kate Elliott

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY THEATRE AND DANCE Professor Jacque Wheeler received the 2011 Kennedy Center Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Award for mentoring and inspiring hundreds of students.

Nominated by alumna Debra Fordham, Wheeler was honored along with nine other inspirational educators for extraordinary impact on the lives of students by expanding horizons, challenging deeper understanding, and encouraging achievement.



Theatre & Dance Professor Jacque Wheeler prepares for her role as Ouiser Boudreaux in the play adaptation of “Steele Magnolias” performed at the Show Palace Dinner Theatre in Hudson, Fla. The show’s artistic director and production stage manager was Matthew McGee, a 1988 graduate of Valdosta State, and former student of Wheeler.

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Wheeler began her tenure-track career at Valdosta State in 1986, working alongside her husband of more than 40 years, Dr. Randy Wheeler, who retired in 2006. Wheeler, who also serves as artistic director for Peach State Summer Theatre, specializes in dialects, movement, playwriting, acting, and musical theatre.

“Most of all, I love the students. Interacting with them and seeing what they make of their lives is a great pleasure and continually excites me. I am a lifelong learner, and I gain so much knowledge and understanding from my students and the work we do together,” said Wheeler, who received the Georgia Theatre Conference Leighton Ballew Award for Distinguished Service to Theatre in Georgia. “Theatre is amazing in that it involves nearly all other disciplines. You learn so much about other people, cultures, behaviors, and just life in general. I also love the collaboration it requires, constantly working with others to create.”

Back on Stage

The Chicago native said that she comes by her love of the theatre and music from her mother, a Polish immigrant, who took Wheeler and her sister to the theatre as young children.

“My family placed a high priority on the arts. My sister and I both played the piano, and one of the big deals for us was to go to the movies in downtown Chicago. They were one of the last places to still have stage shows when you go to the movies ... I remember that was a big deal,” said the mother of three. “My mother was born in Poland and came to this country as a young child. It was a tradition of a lot of immigrant families, particularly Eastern European people who came to this country. The families were very committed to artistic activities.”

Wheeler remembers her first role as writer, actor, and producer, when she was in the fifth grade attending Girl Scout camp.



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“For whatever reason, we wrote plays as part of the activities,” Wheeler fondly remembers. “When I came back home, a group of friends and I put the play on in the basement and raised money for the March of Dimes.”

Wheeler, who has directed more than 70 plays, still enjoys the excitement and challenge of acting on stage. Her most recent theatrical performance was playing the cranky and wealthy Ouiser Boudreaux in the play adaptation of “Steel Magnolias, at the Show Place Dinner Theater in Hudson, Fla.

The role had great appeal for Wheeler, not only because of the complexity of the character but the opportunity to work with artistic director and production stage manager Matthew McGee, a 1998 graduate of Valdosta State’s theatre program.

“In a weird way, she has always been not just my teacher but my mentor and very close friend, and I don’t think that will ever change,” said McGee. “She came here and did her job as an actress, as a performer, just like anyone else would have done.”

McGee said that, even on stage, Wheeler was still the teacher and mentor.

“The other cast members really connected to her. I think she brings to the show as Ouiser, which is a very crabby character, but she still makes it very funny, and she also brings a sweet side to the character that is not usually seen,” said McGee, who has performed in Valdosta State’s Peach State Summer Theatre. “Everyone kind of gravitates towards her, and I think that is all the years at VSU; all these kids come through. She is just as proud of her students; she keeps up with all of them.”

