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DRAMA MAMA



JASON COVIELLO, JC ARTISTRY

Rachael Harrell

DIRECTOR/OWNER, DRAMA KIDS OF NORTHERN MICHIGAN
TRAVERSE CITY

THE JOB: I recently launched Drama Kids of Northern Michigan, part of the largest after-school drama program in the world, with more than 40,000 students currently enrolled at 1,000 plus locations both in the United States and internationally. We go into schools and community locations from Cadillac to the Mackinac Bridge with an after-school enrichment program designed to build speaking skills, acting skills and confidence in children and teenagers.

THE START: I was working at the American Red Cross in Denver when I found out about the Drama Kids organization. I couldn't get it out of my mind and as I learned more I knew it was something I wanted to do. I had previously co-produced a "tween" film called "The Greening of Whitney Brown" and enjoyed working with the young actors and creat-



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ing a positive experience for young people. Drama Kids was really the perfect next step in my career — I am able to use the knowledge from my acting/fine arts background combined with business and organizational skills picked up as a producer in Los Angeles. Being able to take Drama Kids to my home state of Michigan was the icing on the cake.

THE BEST PART: The best part is the personal connection I feel to the work I do every day. I get up in the morning knowing that I'm working towards my own vision of the program. The successes are mine (the setbacks are mine). I love being in control of my own business and choosing where I put my energy day to day.

THE HARDEST PART: Educating people about the Drama Kids program and getting beyond "stereotypes" associated with children's theater is ongoing. Unlike traditional children's theater, where children focus on memorization and rehearsals geared for the performance of one play, the Drama Kids curriculum utilizes fun, creative and interactive activities that aim to improve communication skills and build confidence and self-esteem. The bottom line is that the Drama Kids curriculum will enhance children's academic experience, whether they are budding movie stars or shy and introverted.

THE PERKS: Classes are fun! We improvise situations in exercises throughout the class and the scenarios can be very funny. When 15 kids and the teacher are all sprouting green ears, we have some very funny conversations. We laugh a lot in Drama Kids. It's also a great avenue to connect and collaborate with the Northern Michigan artistic community.

A DAY IN THE LIFE: A day might start with a teacher-training session, followed by catch-up on emails with potential teachers and after-school program coordinators. Then class, usually directly following the end of the school day. Afterwards, back home to prep for the next day. Or, I might be meeting with potential venues for programs and summer camps or taking a short road trip to schools throughout Northern Michigan, for instance in Cadillac or Petoskey, to introduce myself and the Drama Kids program to the principals and administrators. Some days I'm home taking registrations, catching up on my bookkeeping and updating the website.

EDUCATION/EXPERIENCE: I attended the University of Michigan, where I was heavily involved in the performing arts, mostly vocal ensembles. I went on to get a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Performance from Roosevelt University in Chicago. After spending over 10 years in Los Angeles working in television and film production, development, and casting, I was ready to make a bold lifestyle change. I am not an LA "hater" — LA was full of once-in-a-lifetime experiences and opportunities. I worked on shows like "Survivor" and "Eco-Challenge." I worked with television and film executives and stars like Brooke Shields, Justin Timberlake and Aidan Quinn. But, I was ready for a change and looking for opportunities to make a more personal connection with both my work and my community.

YEARS ON THE JOB: Less than one! I started my company last summer.

THE WORKWEEK: I usually work 40 hours per week. Among the classroom, the office and getting the word out about Drama Kids in the community, it's almost never-ending. I find that everything takes longer the first time you do it, and Drama Kids of Michigan comes with many firsts, so I'm putting in some hours.

SUMMER PLANS: Summer camp, of course! Our camps are one week in duration and we offer fun themed camps with pre-care and aftercare available. Camp themes this year include "Playhouse" (where kids create their own play), "Make them Laugh," and "Storyland" (for preschool and kindergarten aged children). A special Parent Presentation is performed on the last day of camp to culminate the week's activity and demonstrate the performance skills learned. It's a week of confidence building, acting skill development and fun! I'm also excited to be teaming up with Kate Daggett and KidzArt — we will be collaborating to offer two camps in one.

Rachael Harrell does take breaks to enjoy time with new friends and old friends and enjoy the restaurants and local activities Traverse City has to offer. You can reach her (or register for camp) at 231.432.8764 or www.dramakids.com/mi1.

Tips for Parents to DEVELOP SPEAKING SKILLS IN CHILDREN

Listen to what your children are saying. Children must feel that what they say is important. Put down the newspaper, turn off the TV or car radio, and converse. Knowing that you are listening to them will reinforce their confidence in speaking to you and to others.

Practice developing strong eye contact. Require that your children look into your eyes whenever they speak to you. Then challenge them to do the same when talking to anyone else. Praise them when you see this happening.

Develop articulation. Use tongue twisters to emphasize articulation in a fun way. Concentrate on correct articulation. Do not allow your child to speak too fast at the cost of poor articulation.

Ask open-ended questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer. For example: "Tell me more about..." or "How did you feel when that occurred?" If you need a subject to discuss, perhaps read a small story to your child, then ask hypothetical questions about what might happen next, or which character he or she liked. Older children can be involved in discussing national news events, or school activities.

Don't speak for your children. Encourage children to speak for themselves. Have them place their own orders at restaurants. The practice of speaking to others in a clear voice is well worth the extra time it could take to get your food.



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