

The Transformative Power of The Foundation of Arts



BY AUDREY HANES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

For close to 40 years, The Foundation of Arts has played a vital role in supporting and growing the arts in the City of Jonesboro. The 2025-26 season promises to be more exciting than ever, thanks in-part to new Executive Director Stephanie Epps and her vision for the nonprofit organization to transform people by helping them discover their inner artists.

A CHAMPION OF THE ARTS

Originally from Mansfield, Texas, Epps moved from Rogers to Jonesboro four years ago and began with The Foundation of Arts (The FOA) in May 2024, bringing with her a lifelong passion for singing and the arts. Coupled with a business background and her strong desire to help nurture and grow a community for artists of all mediums, particularly performing arts, Epps was already serving in the role of programs director and was the perfect fit to take the reins at The FOA when the opportunity arose.

“I spent 10 years in finance before transitioning into this role at The FOA,” said Epps, who attended Ouachita Baptist University and earned degrees in both music and marketing. “I’m a creative, I have that right brain, but I also bring that business mind, as well, which I think is needed. That makes it a good fit for a unique role.

“I also love the arts. I grew up on stage, I did theater my whole life and was in the choir, and I lead worship with my husband, Cory, who is originally from Wynne and is a worship pastor at Central Baptist. I’m no stranger to the stage, but my first 10 years post-grad were in a more corporate setting. But that setting was only appealing to that part of me. I’ve never been able to have a role before where I got to use both of my passions and degrees, so I’m so thankful for this place and this role, where I get to utilize both; it’s a gift.”

The mission of The FOA is something that Epps strongly believes in, as well as the sense of community the nonprofit fosters among artists.

“Being such a long-term steward and student of the arts, I have benefitted firsthand from the powerful transformative ability of being a part of the arts,” said Epps. “My whole family is full of creatives, artists and musicians. A lot of places don’t value the arts as much as others, but I feel very strongly about what we do having a presence in our community; it’s so important. ...

“A lot of artistic people have a harder time finding a place they feel understood, so the idea of having a place where someone can hone a skill and at the same time find a community where they feel welcomed and loved and related to is really important.”

Joe Carr, who began as a volunteer and has been with The FOA on and off for the last 10 years, serves as the nonprofit’s creative director. He embraces Epps’ vision for expanding the arts.

“Stephanie came to The FOA as a perfect fit with her positive energy and attention to detail,” said Carr. “She is a champion of people and ideas alike. She excels at making strong and lasting connections in the community. Her kindness and respect for others has proven essential for helping parents, patrons and artists trust our organization with their time, talent and treasure. Her leadership and wisdom are just what we need to rally people together for a big cause of growing access to the arts in Northeast Arkansas. We are so happy to have her lead the charge.”

Isabel Viala, The FOA’s programs intern, is similarly energized by Epps’ love for the foundation and its place in the community.

“It is evident that Stephanie is working to bring the community in alignment with The FOA’s vision to make arts education accessible to everyone,” said Viala. “I have seen so much growth in

The FOA over this past year because of the new ideas and changes Stephanie is bringing to the table. She continues to challenge and support us as a staff to take ownership of our projects and visions. The FOA could not be in better hands, and I am so grateful to be working alongside Stephanie.”

LIGHTS, CAMERA, CLASSROOMS

The Foundation of Arts is spread over many square feet of Downtown Jonesboro. In addition to The Forum, the foundation also includes a secondary performance and events venue called Stage, Too, along with classroom and office space at the Arts Center. Stage, Too serves many purposes, with free programming for adults every Thursday, Friday and Saturday, occasional shows, as well as events held by patrons who rent out the space.

The Arts Center recently got a facelift, thanks in large part to the skills of local interior designer MG Ferguson-Meyering. The center offers dance, art and theater classes for both children and adults.

“Renovations started in early 2024 with some fresh paint and new floors,” said Epps. “We have done some cool design elements that give the space a fresh face. We renovated the entrance to make it better for flow and access, and we have completely redone the front desk area to make it better suited for our needs.”

New and renovated classrooms were also part of the improvements.

“Basically, our dreams at The FOA are as big as and often bigger than the funding we can raise,” said Carr. “Through a recent fundraising campaign, we have been recipients of some wonderful support in the community that has given our Arts Center on Main Street a major facelift with some beautiful finishes through the



lobby and entryways. We’ve also reshuffled some rooms to create a new theater classroom. If funding continues, we hope to give a facelift to our main ballet classroom.

“These changes are achieving our goal of ensuring our learning facilities reflect the quality of the programming that has always been a part of The FOA. And we have a brand-new website which we are so proud of. Hopefully this will be a valuable tool to communicate what we are all about to people moving into the area and looking for a place to get involved.”

The new and improved classroom space has allowed The FOA to expand its offerings going into the 2025-26 season, which begins this month.

“We are starting our new season with a show at Stage, Too this month that we are excited about, and we start a new classroom schedule mid-August,” said Epps. “We have an open house orientation on Aug. 23, where we will give tours and show off our new space, offer an enrollment discount and communicate about leveled, longer-term approach that we are taking; there is going to be an expectation, it’s not just about meeting requirements to level up, we want to offer additional classes and goals.”

New to the upcoming class schedule is musical theater dance. The FOA plans to encourage its students with the approach of a school. If a student wants to pursue their emphasis, the foundation wants to partner with them to allow them to grow in all the ways necessary to be that actor or artist if they want to go further beyond that point.

“We take pride in the education we provide our students,” said Viala. “An arts education is so transferable to other life skills, and we strongly believe in our programming and education that we provide our students and the community with. I am excited to continue seeing what the Lord does through The FOA, and I know



Karen Batsel



there are great things in store.”

Viala is a perfect example of how involvement in The FOA can lead to a career and future in the arts. In her case, that future remains with The FOA.

“I started as The FOA programs intern in January of 2025,” said Viala, a senior at Arkansas State University who is majoring in business administration and business management. “I have actually been dancing at The FOA since I was 7 years old. I did ballet all my years of dancing at The FOA and fell in love with ballet and performing. I also grew up being in the ‘Nutcracker Ballet’ each year, and it is truly my favorite thing to be a part of. I started teaching ballet for The FOA when I was 16 and am now going into my sixth year of teaching classes. This past year, the programs role became available, and it just fell right in place for me to join The FOA staff in January.

“The FOA will always hold a special place in my heart because I have grown up at The FOA. It is a place of community and deep relationships. To be able to work for a place that means so much to me and that I am so passionate about is truly such a sweet opportunity.”

DREAM BIG

Epps has big plans for the future of The FOA, especially when it comes to increasing the number of people the foundation can impact. There are currently just under 200 students enrolled in year-round classes, and more than 600 members of the community volunteer each year, whether it be backstage or on it.

“I want to pour into our education side of things and really that aspect of The FOA,” said Epps. “If we can grow the number of people who are making monthly tuition payments, it would free us up to pursue more passion projects. As a nonprofit, that’s at the forefront of our minds – we have to consider a show with a recognizable title to bring in a crowd. I would love to put a passion project on the stage that resonates with what we believe or that is just really beautiful art.

“We are also really working within the education side of things. ... Long term, we have been in this capital campaign for a couple of years. We would love to build a new space. We would love to

have a proper scene shop, because right now they are using the stage to build props, which is not typical. We could also offer more classes if we had more classroom space to do so.”

As the foundation approaches its 40th year, Carr says he and the rest of The FOA staff are excited about the future as they build on a rich history and try new things.

“We take care each season choosing our shows and educational program offerings ensuring that there truly is something for everyone,” said Carr. “This season’s stage shows include both classics and modern theater titles, and next summer’s musical, ‘Something Rotten,’ will be hilarious and one that I am personally looking forward to. One of our big challenges every year continues to be thinking of ways to tell one more version of ‘The Nutcracker.’ From the discussions that the director and I have been having, I think this is going to be our best one yet.”

From beloved annual productions to new classes and creative shows, the foundation relies on the community for support with its time and money.

“There are very few places that have as wide of a reach and keep as open of a door to the artistically curious than The FOA,” said Carr. “It is the ultimate place to learn a skill, meet a friend, create a memory or inspire the next generation. If you can’t get involved personally, then you should support it financially so that our reach continues to grow.”

Epps says the biggest way the community can support The FOA and the arts is simply to come – come to shows, come to fundraisers and come to a class.

“I’m so grateful for this place and the people who were in leadership before me who created something I’m excited to carry on,” she said. “That’s a big honor I don’t take lightly. I’m grateful for what it means to me – if people are unfamiliar, I hope they want to learn a little more. We like what we have going on around here.”

For more information about The Foundation of Arts, located in Downtown Jonesboro, visit foajonesboro.org or find the nonprofit organization on Facebook.



125 YEARS OF HEALING BEYOND MEDICINE.