



First college program opens for adults with disabilities in Central Georgia

In a recent class assignment, everyone in Betsy Short's arts and literacy class expected Maddie to volunteer for an acting role. But, as parts were doled out, she never raised her hand.

Until the leading role, that is.

That's when Maddie's hand shot up. She got the part and "performed brilliantly," said Dr. Nicole DeClouette, interim associate dean and professor of Special Education.

Madelyn St. John of Milledgeville is one of two young adults with intellectual disabilities in Georgia College & State University's new GCSU Thrive initiative. The two-year certificate program operates through the university's School of Continuing and Professional Studies to give these individuals hope, options and a place in the community.

"We think this will transform campus and the surrounding area," DeClouette said. "There's a huge potential to make this program more dynamic and inclusive. Disability is often forgotten when we talk about diversity."

GCSU Thrive is one of more than 300 Inclusive Post-Secondary Education (IPSE) programs nationwide—eight in Georgia—that offer adults with disabilities the chance to continue their education and access resources their peers often take for granted. The program is a modified path to college, where individuals develop work skills.

Georgia College's IPSE has an interesting distinction.

It's located where "150 years ago they warehoused people like this. They were institutionalized just down the road," said Dr. Rob Sumowski, co-director of GCSU Thrive and associate professor of Special Education.

"Milledgeville was home of one of the biggest mental hospitals in the United States," Sumowski said. "That we can come full circle to the point where, rather than warehousing and writing these human beings off, we're helping to plug them into society as active members—that does our hearts good."

"In the land of Central State Hospital," he said, "this is how far we have come in our treatment of people with disabilities."

DeClouette and Sumowski discovered four years ago they were working



Maddie St. John (above) stands with her class. Spencer Kirkley (below) in his class.



toward the same goal. Both wanted to provide a higher education experience for adults with intellectual disabilities. They sought and received "amazing support" from Georgia College President Cathy Cox and Provost Dr. Costas Spirou, who immediately said, "Of course, we will do it. It's the right thing to do."

"I'll never forget that," Sumowski said. "We walked out of that meeting and Nicole said, 'We've got an ally.' That's what these kids need. Somebody who believes in them."

The pandemic slowed things a bit, but the program finally launched in January with the help of several start-up grants from the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD).

During two years on campus, GCSU Thrive students take eight classes with Georgia College students. They get practicum jobs on campus and do internships in the community. Currently, they're on campus two days a week taking courses in media literacy, arts and literacy, contemporary health issues and writing life stories.

Directors plan to increase the number of GCSU Thrive students this fall to five and add choices in curriculum.

Some intellectually disadvantaged students maneuver classes by themselves, take online tests and complete class projects without modifications.

Others get support from Georgia College education students, who sit in class with them. Peer mentors quietly discuss the lesson, help with note taking, read instructions, go to lunch with GCSU Thrive students and help them study.

Spencer Kirkley of Eastman has autism. First-year special education major Kaylin O'Riordan, serves as his mentor. She enjoys the work and said it's great preparation for teaching.

"Each student has a different way of comprehending and learning. You have to adjust to each individual personality and needs," O'Riordan said. "I love genuinely forming a connection and being a teacher to them and being able to help them with school—give them that experience that they're in a college life adulting on their own."

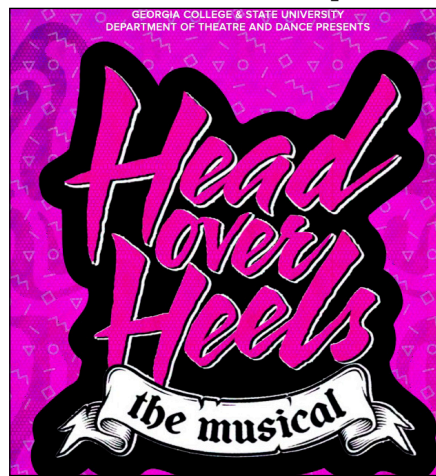
GCSU Theatre & Dance presents romantic romp with message of inclusion

Just past St. Valentine's Day, Georgia College & State University (GCSU) presents its romantic spring musical, Feb. 22-26. "Head Over Heels" is an upside-down, frolicking fairy tale about prophetic doom, mistaken identities and self-discovery set in a kingdom with 1980s punk costumes, Elizabethan Old English and upbeat music from the Go-Go's.

But, mostly, it's a play about love, inclusiveness and acceptance.

James Magruder's adaptation of the original book by Jeff Whitty, "Head Over Heels" opens with the Go-Go's hit "We Got the Beat." The beat is what sustains the town of Arcadia. An oracle warns the town it's about to lose this essence, due to the king's refusal to change. The king is played by freshman mass communication major Jonathan Doss of Gwinnett County.

The beat is "like the force in Star Wars," said freshman management major Ben McPherson of Sharpsburg, Georgia, who plays Musidorus, a lowly, forlorn shepherd looking for affection. He



loves the king's younger daughter, who's barred from marrying beneath her status.

To marry, the princess must wait until her elder sister weds. But the haughty sister, played by sophomore theatre major Lexi Gordy of Covington, rejects every suitor.

It's a story of unfulfillment and awakening, of

staunch traditions and tolerance—accompanied by 18 great songs by the Go-Go's including "Head Over Heels," "Vacation," "Our Lips are Sealed," "Get Up and Go," "Lust to Love," "Mad About You," "Cool Jerk" and "Heaven is a Place on Earth."

The hot-pink set opens like a fairytale book. There are sword fights, baggy pants from the '80s and lots of 'thee' and 'thou' language set in a kingdom where people are not who they appear to be.

It's retro. It's ancient. It's modern. It's timeless. "It all comes together in a wonderful, magical mesh of personality, song and dance," said Director Amy Pinney. "You're going to feel great when you leave."

GCSU's production of "Head Over Heels" premieres at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 22, in Russell Auditorium and runs through Saturday, Feb. 25, with a matinee performance at 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 26. Tickets can be purchased at tickets.gcsu.edu.

Did you know?

Georgia College & State University offers new resources for exploring history and the evolution of the printed page.

Georgia College's Ina Dillard Russell Library recently celebrated the opening of a major addition to its Special Collections & Galleries department.

The expanded facilities provide new space for collaborating on digital history projects; analyzing and preserving artifacts in the university's collections; and putting history on display.

This initial phase of a two-part renovation includes new digital humanities and oral history labs, an expanded room for archival research, a larger work area for library staff to process and preserve collection materials and a rare book room with additional exhibit space.

"For its size, our institution owns some very unique and special materials," Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Costas Spirou said. "Now we're able to exhibit and make those available in this fabulous new space."

Alumna makes nationwide impact as event specialist celebrating others

Olivia Steimle Kelly, '17, is a "people person," and it shows.

As an event specialist on REI's Retail Store Grand Opening Team, Kelly led the opening of the outdoor recreation equipment retailer's new store in Athens Feb. 10. It's the 13th REI grand opening she's helped organize. Her job has taken her across the country, opening stores in Colorado, Florida, Maine, Massachusetts, Tennessee and Wyoming.

Within a week of REI Athens opening its doors, Kelly was already coordinating another grand opening in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. It opened the following weekend.

REI is a nationwide cooperative owned by its members. Anyone is welcome to shop at the co-op and tap into the company's resources in

support of an active lifestyle, but members enjoy a range of benefits.

"The people make these events special," she said. "All we have to do is celebrate them."

When a new REI opens, several teams across the co-op collaborate to support each event. Kelly says the best part of her job is working with others.

"The people make what we do happen," she said. "They show up every day really stoked and excited for the grand opening to make it the best possible experience for everyone."

Each opening celebrates REI Co-op members and the community. The multi-day events include giveaways, a party and more. Kelly and her team coordinate a preview party for co-op members. On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, they celebrate

community members and make the experience interactive for everyone.

"[Our] community members are passionate about recreation," Kelly said. "It's really cool that we can combine those partnerships and build relationships," she said.

Kelly's passion for building community began when she "found her niche" at Georgia College & State University. She wanted a university that would provide a nurturing learning experience. She got that from Georgia College's professors and small class sizes.

"Georgia College is special, because it allowed me to find my space and be unique," she said. "That's what made the whole experience great."

Outdoor Education Associate Professor Dr.



Olivia Kelly with her Events Team at the Athens' store grand opening.

What's going on in Bobcat Territory?

Visit frontpage.gcsu.edu/events

Tuesday

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Wednesday

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2-6 p.m. GCSU Softball doubleheader vs. Anderson S.C. at Peeler Complex.

5-9 p.m. GCSU Baseball vs. Newberry College at John Kurtz Field.

5:30-9:30 p.m. GCSU Basketball doubleheader vs. Flagler at Centennial Center.

7:30 p.m. GCSU Theatre & Dance premier performance of "Head Over Heels" at Russell Auditorium.

Thursday

23

7:30 p.m. "Head Over Heels" theatre production at Russell Auditorium.

Friday

24

2-5 p.m. GCSU Women's Tennis vs. Texas A&M-Kingsville.

7:30 p.m. "Head Over Heels" theatre production at Russell Auditorium.

7:30-9 p.m. GCSU Pohl Observatory open house. Come view celestial objects through university's 24-inch telescope. Top floor Herty Hall.

Saturday

25

7:30 p.m. "Head Over Heels" theatre production at Russell Auditorium. The last performance is Sunday, Feb. 26, at 2 p.m. in Russell Auditorium.