



FINAL REPORT

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WATERWAYS STAGE COLLABORATION

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Waterways

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Waterways Stage program is in its 8th year of existence, beginning in 2016 with a partnership between Very Merry Theatre and ECHO, Leahy Center for Lake Champlain; this year we added Lake Champlain Sea Grant as an additional partner. This program combines the power of performance art with the joy of scientific discovery by engaging school groups in their local ecosystems, assisting them with research, and guiding them to write and perform an original play. With 9 participating school groups, Very Merry Theater teaching artists delivered 27 theater training units and Lake Champlain Sea Grant delivered 19 science units to 350 Vermont students. Eight plays were created and performed, three of which were on our stage in Burlington at our capstone Waterways Festival. In addition, participating school groups were afforded the opportunity to visit ECHO to deepen their understanding of the ecology, culture and history of our region.

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1. PROJECT SYNOPSIS

The purpose of Waterways Stage is to combine the joy of scientific investigation with the power of performance art to engage children and their communities in their local ecosystems. We offer our program to any school or educational group who is interested and willing to commit to the expectations. The goals of our program are; to engage students with their ecosystems, peak curiosity and wonder, facilitate independent research, teach the foundations of theater, and have a lot of fun while working. We accomplish this through facilitating a hands-on experience, delivering science curriculum, delivering theater units, and on-going coaching. We are able to offer this extra-curricular program to schools and educational groups for free thanks to several generous grants.

Our science partners for this project are ECHO Leahy Center for Lake Champlain and Lake Champlain Sea Grant. ECHO provides our participants with free passes to visit ECHO as well as access to their online Stem Academy teaching units. Sea Grant enrolls our participants in a Stream Monitoring experience to check the water for pollution levels and educate about sources of pollution and solutions. Sea Grant educators provide our participants with a follow-up visit to observe each group's play in progress and provide feedback on the science content included. This year at our capstone Waterways Festival, Sea Grant offered the children an educational plankton exploration workshop. ECHO provided a creative button making station. These two partnerships are very valuable to us at Very Merry Theater as they provided our students with relevant and accurate scientific information that fuels their curiosities and creativity.

2. TASKS COMPLETED

Our first task was to design curriculum and project outreach materials. We successfully completed this task by refining our teaching units, engaging a new partnership to deliver the science curriculum (with Sea Grant), and creating our [2023 Teacher Handbook](#). We also created a short 2 minute [promotional video](#) to hook people for our program. We completed our second task, developing web-based support resources and in-person teaching units. This task was completed by filming videos for each of our teaching units to support classrooms that could not meet in-person or who wanted greater clarity on the content delivered. These videos were posted on our website and available for free on our [YouTube channel](#). We also gained access to [Sea Grant education](#) videos for the participants to watch at their leisure. We developed our in-person teaching units by revising and editing past lessons to fit this year's theme, Water Quality. We created a new theme song, entitled "Water, Water, Ways" complete with body movements.

Each participant learned the song and we all came together in song at our capstone Waterways Festival.

Our third task was, provide watershed content and theater arts training to participants. This year we had 9 participating school groups. Our Very Merry teaching artists delivered at least 2 theatre training units to each group. Several groups received more visits for a total of 27 theater training units delivered. Each group also received 2 science visits from Sea Grant for a total of 19 science units delivered.

Our fourth task was to schedule and perform plays for a public audience. Our goal of between 8-10 performances was met with a total of 8 plays. With our two summer camps scheduled this

year we will have a total of 10 performances made with Waterways in 2023. This year, a number of participating groups chose to perform their plays at their schools, just for their local community, and not attend the Waterways Festival at 20 Allen St. We still accomplished a robust festival where 3 of the plays were performed as well as 6 educational stations available for students to rotate through. The stations were; Button making with ECHO, Fish building with Lake Champlain Basin Program, Plankton Discovery with Sea Grant, Sound Healing/meditation with Stephen, costume and makeup with Lauren, and “teching” on stage with Don and Denise. The stations seemed to be a successful addition to our festival, we plan to keep them for next year’s festival.

3. METHODOLOGY

The main method we used in order to complete all of our tasks and deliverables was meeting regularly to discuss progress and weekly tasks. Throughout this project my collaborator and I had weekly check-in meetings. During these meetings we shared what we had accomplished for the week and what our plans were for the coming week. We would discuss any questions or challenges that arose within the work that we were doing as well as what our plans were for overcoming them. These regular check-ins allowed us to keep in close and clear communication throughout our entire project, working together as a team to effectively reach our goals, complete our tasks, and make our deliverables. Another method that helped us through this project was referencing what we had done in years past. The process of reviewing the feedback and documentation of years past has allowed us to greatly improve upon the program each year. Year over year the program runs more efficiently and with more participants. In order to be successful with putting on the Waterways Festival, we used the method of a highly organized schedule. Our schedule for the day's event was a working document that each 6 of us on the planning committee were allowed to edit and add to. This worked very nicely to get us all on the same page and provided for a smooth day of event. Lastly, we used the method of reviewing and referring to our original workplace and timetable created for this grant. The work that we put into creating the workplan chart really has paid off, as we used it to keep us on track and make sure we were meeting our deliverable goals.

4. QUALITY ASSURANCE TASKS COMPLETED

5. DELIVERABLES COMPLETED

We completed all of our deliverables on time and as indicated in the project workplan. We produced program outreach materials including this [promo video](#), a new logo image featured on our website and festival Playbill ([Cover playbill](#), [inside playbill](#)), as well as a teacher handbook.

We updated our [webpage](#) with links to new curricular program supports, including videos from our new partnership with Sea Grant. We recorded our site visits with pictures. We delivered and took photos of our theater units, our science curriculum units, field trips to ECHO Science Center and final presentations, photos can be viewed in a [folder](#). We documented all 8 of our performances with films and compiled clips of them into a short [festival video](#). The three plays from our festival can be viewed on [YouTube](#) channel. Each of the plays told unique stories, contained 5-10 science facts about our watershed, and provided innovative solutions for keeping our Waters clean. A [sample script](#) from one of our groups will provide a good idea of the play. This year we decided we should acknowledge all the hard work our students and teachers do to pull off their plays, so we made formal [Certificates](#) to hand out along with chocolates. We also created a participant survey to make sure we get valuable feedback from each participant, which allows us to improve and strengthen our program each year.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we have found that we have come a long way with this program in 7 years, and still have a long way to go. This year was a big year of change and nuance for Waterways Stage. Our Waterways Stage program has been running pretty much the same way for 7 years, with respect to our consistent participants, this year we tried a few new things in hopes of increasing interest and impact. We embarked on a new science partnership with Lake Champlain Sea Grant as well adding creative stations to our festival day. Both changes were well received by participants and were great additions to our program that we plan to keep. The creative stations for children to rotate through were very well received and gave children a chance to move around, learn more about our watershed, and socialize. Many groups traveled an hour by bus to get to 20 Allen St. and therefore were ready to move and mingle when they arrived.

As with any new partnership, there are kinks we need to work on for next year. Based on feedback from a survey of participants, we became aware of the confusion in our onboarding process. This year we required participants to register via online forms with both VMT and Sea Grant separately. This process seemed to create a bit of confusion for some group leaders. We met with the Sea Grant team in June to discuss options for streamlining this process. The idea of having an onboarding webinar to get all participants on boarded at the same time and with less confusion has already been discussed. Each year we aim to have more clear and concise communication of the expectations and guidelines of participants, we had gotten very good at what we were doing, and now with the changes it will take a little fine tuning to get there.

We feel proud to say that we accomplished all of our number goals, engaging 350 students from three counties in Vermont. We reached several rural and underserved communities as well as one special needs group. All but one of our participating groups filled out a survey and expressed that they were planning to participate again next year. This was the first year we hosted the festival since COVID-19 shutdowns two years ago. We created a joyous sizzle reel that relays the gist of the Waterways festival. In addition to meeting all of our deliverables, we also began construction of our digital classroom, you can view our [Bitmoji Classroom](#) here, which is still a work in progress. We look forward to being able to include remote school groups and even expand participation into New York with the launching of this virtual classroom. We documented dozens of amazingly positive quotes from students and teachers throughout the program. We filmed all the performances and will be working on editing them over the next month in order to provide each group with a video of their play. Here are few of the student quotes from this year:

Waterways

It's been amazing how much we've learned and how far we've come from the beginning of the project.

Student, Age 9

Water is intriguing in every way. It's been wonderful learning all the facts about our local water source.

Student, age 9

Learning about the Lake Champlain Basin has been amazing but I was very disappointed when I learned about all the pollution. This process has changed my mindset and I'm a protector of the water now.

Student, Age 9

It was incredible to learn about the importance of clean water and then write a play about it,

Student, Age 8

The process of learning about water and then turning that learning into a script has been really fun, I learned so much!

Student, Age 9

It was so disappointing to learn about how people's behavior has impacted the Lake Champlain Basin. This play has made us all think differently about how to treat our water.

Student, Age 10

Learning facts about our water and creating a play about it has really opened my eyes to what people are doing and how we can make change.

Student, Age 10

It's amazing how much we've learned and so exciting knowing that everyone who watches our play will get to know that too.

Student, Age 9

It's been amazing learning about the history and health of our lake and how it's changed my mindset about how to take care of our water.

Student, Age 9

I think it was incredible. It's been a lot of months working on this, but it turned out amazing.

Student, Age 9

It's inspiring to see how all of our minds work together.

Student, Age 10

It was really fun to learn a ton about water and then turn it into a play to help other people learn what we learned.

Student, Age 10

Learning all of the important facts about water and how it's being polluted has been such an incredible process.

Student, Age 9

It was amazing learning about the Lake Champlain Basin and how important it is to thousands of people.

Student, Age 9

Waterways

Learning about what is happening in everyday life and how I can fix it has helped me be able to protect the lake.

Student, Age 10

Our plan moving forward is to continue this valuable work, for ourselves, the children, our communities and our waterways. Beginning this summer, we will be running two Waterways Stage camps for the first time. These camps will generate 2 more original plays to be documented and performed for our community. We at VMT feel very passionate about this work we are doing and the positive change it can create. The next generation needs to be aware of their local problems and to become solution oriented rather than lose hope. Waterways stage is a program that we could envision reaching every county in Vermont and even across the lake into New York. Our plan is to continue growing the curriculum and online resources for this program as well as secure funding for this program to grow and expand its' positive impact.