

# Using Theatre to Help Kids with Special Needs

Coming to Michigan State University, **Ryan Duda** didn't know what to expect. After auditioning for the Theatre program and finding his passion there, he knew he had come to the right place. Now a junior Theatre major with Arts and Cultural Management and Musical Theatre minors, he is not only making strides in his classes but delving into extracurriculars that make a positive impact on the community.

"One of the things I wanted to get into as a Theatre major was educational outreach," Duda said. "I spoke with my advisor, Dionne O'Dell, and she told me about a program called Fourth Wall that is relatively new at the University."

A performing arts program based in Jackson, Michigan, the Fourth Wall Theatre Company empowers people with special needs or seniors looking for fun to break through the fourth wall and start a new adventure.

Duda first volunteered with Fourth Wall Theatre Company's East Lansing performing arts program for students with intellectual disabilities during his freshman year and was hired as a formal instructor in 2015.

"Ryan is not only a really talented actor and a great student, he is also an exceptional human being," said O'Dell, Director of the Arts and Cultural Management program. "His passion that he demonstrates through the residency program with the Fourth Wall students is really inspiring to watch."

Working with Fourth Wall, Duda teaches aspects of performing arts to students with intellectual disabilities, while creating a safe environment for students to learn and to be able to comfortably express themselves. In this capacity, he develops scripts for theatrical productions,



helps students understand and perform the script for their showcase, and communicates students' progress with their parents and guardians.

He also ensures clear, safe communication between other instructors, volunteers, students, and parents, and

acts as the stage manager for final showcases.

"The students learn so much about the art form, and they're developing socially, and it's wonderful for Ryan too, because he's able to see at the ground level how practicing his artistry and his passion can really change people's lives," O'Dell said.

In addition to his studies and involvement in Fourth Wall, Duda is a Research Assistant in the College of Arts & Letters. He works closely with professors who teach performing arts as an additional language about American culture to students learning English. Duda gathers research on previous studies in the field, sets up research plans, conducts research, and organizes and presents data to theatre and other professionals.

After graduation, Duda hopes to continue his acting somewhere that is involved with educational outreach.

"Since I had the opportunity to develop my passion with theatre, I want other people to have that opportunity too," he said. "It's just an amazing thing to be able to help people who truly need it."