

Employment First

Success Story

Oregon Shakespeare Festival employs young actors with disabilities

"We are proud to collaborate with so many local partners to help these young people achieve their goals."

When Zahra Detweiler was in grade school, her teacher asked the class what they wanted to be when they grew up. Her response:

"I told her, 'I want to be an actress,'" Zahra said. "And now my dreams are coming true."

Zahra is one of four young actors with disabilities currently performing in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's production of "[Hairspray—The Broadway Musical](#)." This is a professional theatrical production that has been wowing crowds since it launched in March 2019.

Zahra, 19, is joined in the production by Luke Hogan Laurenson, 14, Oriana Rochlen, 17, and Walker Hill, 19.

The play's director, Christopher Liam Moore, visited Ashland High School's Project UP program in 2018. The club brings students with disabilities together with their peers to do performing arts activities. It was founded by a group of sophomores that included his son, Liam Rauch Moore and Julia Hogan Laurenson, sister of young actor Luke Hogan Laurenson.

"Zahra, Luke, Oriana, and Walker are all rock stars," Christopher Moore said.

"Their work ethic, sense of professionalism, and commitment to the show have made the performances a joy. It would be



my pleasure to work with all of them again and to continue to cast actors with disabilities in future productions.”

“I got involved with Hairspray through the director, Chris Moore,” said Luke, who speaks with the assistance of an assistive technology device. “He asked me if I would be interested in a part in Hairspray. I said, ‘Of course, I would love to.’”

Leadership from Employment First, Vocational Rehabilitation and the Oregon Department of Education traveled to Ashland in June to meet the four actors and their mothers, and also view a performance of “Hairspray.”

“We were honored to be invited to meet these four actors and watch their incredible performances in Hairspray,” said Acacia McGuire Anderson, Statewide Employment First Coordinator. “We are proud to collaborate with so many local partners to help these young people achieve their goals.”

“Having the opportunity to connect with the actors, families, and OSF public relations team was a great example of collaboration and inclusion in employment,” said Heather Lindsey, Secondary Transition Liaison from the Oregon Department of Education.

Luke, Oriana, Walker and Zahra play characters woven into the fabric of the musical, which deals with issues of racial segregation, bigotry and equality.

Sonia Hill, mother of Walker Hill, said the fact that her son has a character, and that this is a paid community job, is meaningful to her.

“People are always amazed like, ‘You get paid to do that?’” she said. “And so, it’s a great way to start a career.”

Walker just graduated and hopes to get a job working for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. In fact, all four of the actors said they would love to continue participating in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, on or off stage.

They were supported in their goal of performing in a professional production by Transition Network Facilitator Cindy Cameron, who helped local offices in southern Oregon to collaborate to make sure supports such as job coaching were in place. Vocational Rehabilitation counselors Brad Haller and Teddy Walston made sure they got a plan and had short-term supports before they transferred to supports through the Office of Developmental Disabilities Services.

“The success of these students is ultimately the result of their desire to work and their resiliency to overcome barriers that lay in their way,” said Keith Ozols, Director of Vocational Rehabilitation. “Vocational Rehabilitation was fortunate to be one of the partner agencies that supported these students reach their goals and I am extremely proud of their accomplishments.”

The musical ends with a big show-stopping number called, “You Can’t Stop the Beat.” The entire cast comes out on stage to dance and sing to the song, which focuses on how progress and equality can’t be stopped. For these four young actors, the lyrics of the song are especially

meaningful, as they have shown that they can achieve their dreams no matter what obstacle they may have to overcome.

From “Hairspray—The Broadway Musical.”

“Cause you can’t stop the motion of the ocean.
Or the sun in the sky.
You can wonder if you wanna, but I never ask why.
And if you try to hold me down, I’m gonna spit in your eye and say:
That you can’t stop the beat!”

The support team for Luke, Zahra, Oriana and Walker includes: Services Coordinators Mike Sweeney, Maddie Morrell, and Heather Thompson with Jackson County Developmental Disability Services; Sara Bales, Services Coordinator with ODDS’ Children’s Intensive In-Home Services (CIIS); Tiffany Hazen with Living Opportunities; Beth Boulay and Gwyn Lema with Creating Community Impact; and Preston Mead, actor and Personal Support Worker.

[View a video with interviews with the actors and their families.](#)