

Shuler's long-time director lives for life in theater

By Tim Keller
Special to The Chronicle-News

RATON — From the moment she commits to directing a play, Gail Dixon-Willden can't read another play or listen to her beloved soundtracks from favorite musicals. "I have such tunnel vision," she says, "that my brain is constantly working, thinking of casting and costumes, staging and blocking."

Her focus is so complete that when she's directing a musical, she runs through all of the songs in her sleep at night. How to escape? She leaves the stereo on overnight so she can leave her work for a few hours of actual rest.

She needs such strategies more and more these days. Since her arrival in Raton exactly four years ago, the match between her and the Shuler Theater has proven to be made in heaven. Her work reached a feverish peak this summer as she's directed four of the season's five plays. One of her three professional productions is still up: the musical comedy "Church Basement Ladies" closes with matinee and evening performances Saturday.

Her Raton Youth Theater summer musical, "Roald Dahl's Willy Wonka, Jr.," will have three performances Aug. 10, 11, and 12.

The theater bug bit early. A traveling Vaudevillian tent show called "The Toby Show" used to set up camp every summer just two blocks from her home in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. She used to love hanging out there in an environment that evoked Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. "Growing up in a town called Mt. Pleasant," she says, "how could it not be a happy childhood?"

It didn't last. Her mom, an upholsterer, and her dad, an electric lineman, decided to escape the bitter Iowa winters and moved the family to Farmington, NM, where they proceeded to immerse themselves in Jehovah's Witnesses. It wasn't a good fit for 12-year-old Gail.

She suffered eating disorders for the next several years, but at Farmington High School she found a healthy refuge in the theater department. "Theater became my life. Ever since, it's been my place of comfort, my place of escape."

As though to seal the deal, fate set the hook in her junior year. "Our theater teacher got a kidney transplant and missed most of that year's shows. When he returned, he had me direct the beginning acting group during my senior year."

She went off to Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff to earn a degree in English, attracted by the literature of the theater. She taught English for one year in Kingman, Ariz., before returning to Farmington to help raise her younger sisters when her mom got sick.

Farmington High School's theater department had withered. The school hired Willden to rebuild the program; she spent most of the 1990s



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One of Gail Dixon-Willden's summer hits was the classical comedy "Servant of Two Masters," with a cast that included Brenda Ferri and David Trudeau.



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Theater-lover Gail Dixon-Willden directs four of this summer's five plays at the Shuler Theater, where she has been the artistic director since 2009.

there. The first year, she taught English and one drama class. The second year she taught two drama classes. The third year she taught four drama classes. By the fourth year she taught drama all day. She directed plays. She wrote the theater arts curriculum still used by the state of New Mexico. The FHS program she built remains strong.

She earned her masters degree in theater with an emphasis in directing, spending three summers in the intensive program at Roosevelt University in Chicago, completing other coursework during the intervening school years.

In the fall of 1998, the principal of Farmington's new Piedra Vista High

School wanted a strong fine arts school. He hired Willden as the chair of the Fine Arts Department. She taught and directed theater there for seven years, taking the school to two state championships in one-act play competition, and two state runner-up awards. She was on the design committee that created the school's 800-seat theater.

The city of Farmington hired her to direct its professional summer stock theater. There, tragedy struck. She befriended a promising young professional actress from Texas, 22-year-old Heather McGaughey, casting her in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and in the lead role in "South Pacific."

One Saturday night after a performance, McGaughey

was crossing an intersection with a green light when two cars started a drag race, ignoring their red light. McGaughey was killed.

"It was a life-changing event for all of us," Willden says. "Farmington hired me to develop the Helen McGaughey Children's Theater, which uses the Sandstone Amphitheater, the site of Helen's last performance." Willden continued to direct professional theater, as well.

The city of Farmington liked her so much that it hired her to do marketing on the side, for the parks and recreation department and the animal shelter. Soon, though, she found herself working, in 2007, as Farmington's director of marketing; she calls it "a forced transfer." She hated it.

"My career was taking over my family life. I wanted to take my life back, to become more of a mom and a part of my family."

Her children, Clair and Spenser, were in school and her husband, Dave Willden, was a high school principal. When he started applying for a job as a school superintendent, the family towed its camper to various towns, none of which pleased Gail until they came to Raton, which she immediately loved.

"Raton reminded me of Mt. Pleasant, of growing up in a small town where children can play in the streets and people sit on the porch in the evenings."

Little did she know, yet, what a perfect match she'd found. When she first walked into the Shuler Theater, she remembers thinking, "How can this be here?" It was almost too good to be true, a beautiful and storied theater in a

small town that evoked her happy childhood.

When Dave Willden was hired as Raton's superintendent of schools in 2008, The Chronicle-News published a lengthy profile that included three columns on Gail and her history in the theater.

Shuler Theater impresario Bill Fegan read it. He immediately started courting her for the Shuler. "He started sending me post cards even before I moved here," she recalls with a smile.

She arrived in August 2008. That fall she directed a high school play for the Santa Fe Trail School for the Performing Arts, then the December's annual production of "A Christmas Carol."

The next spring, she helped Raton High School resurrect its drama club while simultaneously directing "Man of La Mancha" for the Raton Choral Society. By the fall of 2009 she'd become the Shuler's artistic director, alongside Bill Fegan who has continued as producer.

"Bill's become my mentor," she says. "I learn so much from him, and we get along so great."

Fegan has many reasons to like Willden; one is that she can keep up with him in games of "What play is this line from?"

For the past three years, Willden has direct two to three plays every fall and again every spring.

She started directing the Shuler's summer professional productions in 2010, first with "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," then last year's "Little Shop of Horrors" and "Red, White, and Tuna."

This summer she directed "Unnecessary Farce," "Servant of Two Masters,"

and "Church Basement Ladies."

She can hardly believe her good fortune. "Being in Raton has afforded me the opportunity to direct community theater, professional theater, and children's theater," she says.

The latter is a particular joy. "I love children's theater," she says. "I love what it teaches, and I love the kids' energy and imagination. It rejuvenates me, keeps me young."

The kids like her, too. She had only a dozen kids the first year. Now she's up past 60.

After building the summer children's theater program with "The Adventures of Dr. Dolittle" in 2010 and "Seussical, the Musical" in 2011, Willden and Raton Youth Theater launch this summer's Willy Wonka production next week with 7:30 p.m. performances Friday and Saturday nights, Aug. 10-11, followed by a 2:30 p.m. Sunday matinee Aug. 12.

Meantime, Willden and the Shuler's Kaleidoscope Players close their professional season with the mystery "Web of Murder" this Thursday and Friday night, then "Church Basement Ladies" Saturday at 2:30 and 7:30 p.m.

If it sounds like Willden may have lost her balance again, neglecting her family, not to worry. Her kids are active in the children's theater. "My life has come full circle," she says. "Now both of my children are hooked on theater." When the family makes one of its long-distance drives across the state, the car stereo blasts show tunes and everyone sings along.

"Getting to do this with my kids," Willden says, "I feel like I'm the luckiest woman in the world."

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He has served in a leadership capacity on the Board

of Directors of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Las Animas County Rehabilitation Center and the Las Animas County of Economic Development.

The allegations against him are false and vicious. Please show your support by voting NO on the Recall Election. We thank you in Advance for your support.

FACT: The Recall Group, **Not Pando**, is costing the city over 14,000 dollars by initiating this recall! They do not represent the majority yet YOU the taxpayers are paying for their false and negative actions

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