

Peninsula News

RHE teacher brings lessons from 'Grease' into her RHE classroom

By Annie Lubinsky
Peninsula News

When the Hollywood Bowl presents its "Grease" Sing-Along this weekend, some of the movie's original cast members will be there to reignite the spark that made the musical so popular in 1978. One of them is Deborah Fishman Wilcox, who was in the ensemble cast. She has taught performing arts at Peninsula Heritage School in Rolling Hills Estates for the past eight years, passing on to her students lessons she learned while filming "Grease."



Peninsula Heritage School teacher Deborah Fishman Wilcox had fun and worked hard while filming "Grease," and she encourages her students to do the same.

"This is the third summer that the Hollywood Bowl is having its 'Grease' Sing-Along," Wilcox said. "Seeing the film projected on the Bowl's giant screen and watching the audience relive every musical number, many in costumes, is a truly dynamic experience. It's a big feeling of community, and everybody is living the moment. It unites people. It's like a sporting event, and everybody's on the same team."

Wilcox attended the Bowl's last two screenings of "Grease." Last year, she and Didi Conn ("Frenchy"), director Randal

GREASE A4

GREASE

FROM PAGE A1

Kleiser and other cast members helped with the children's costume parade. She said the sing-along is a reunion for some of the cast members.

"It also reminds me of how fortunate I have been to work with such iconic performing artists and legends, like Sid Caesar, Eve Arden, Frankie Avalon, Sha-Na-Na, Annette 'Cha-Cha' Charles, John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John," she added.

Wilcox, along with 19 other eclectic performers, was cast by Kleiser and Broadway choreographer Patricia Birch as principal players to round out the star-studded cast. For Wilcox, the experience started when a friend told her about the audition on the Paramount Studios lot. She later learned that more than 1,000 hopefuls had auditioned for the movie.

"We were taught the choreography, and some of us were asked to read lines," she said. "A few days later, the phone rang at my house and my mom answered. I wasn't home at the

time, and she was informed that I had been cast in the film. I was ecstatic that I got the job — it was a dream come true!"

After three weeks of rehearsal, the cast began four months of filming at different locations in Southern California and at Paramount's sound stage.

"I learned so much about directing, staging and choreography from Patricia Birch," Wilcox said. "The 20 of us ensemble players, 10 boys and 10 girls, were chosen for our varied uniqueness in size, shape, talents and personalities. No one fit into a mold. She would observe our creative instincts and choices, and then shape our performances into whatever scene or production number we were working on."

Wilcox never forgot what she learned from Birch.

"She had a huge influence on me, and that is what I aspire to when working with the children at Peninsula Heritage School — honoring each and every child's uniqueness and valuing their creativity," Wilcox said.

She remembers the songs and choreography from "Grease," and says "We Go Together" is a good number for

the children she teaches, who are in kindergarten through sixth grade.

"The thing about performing, you have to be a really good listener and know when to improvise, fill a gap, make something bigger or pull back," she said. "You're always committed in the moment, focused, listening, reacting."

The commitment she sees in her students makes her proud.

"The kids at Peninsula Heritage School are really good performers," she said. "I always tell them what they do at school is not different from what professionals do on Broadway, in films or on television."

She remembers filming "Grease" as being "very fun, but also a lot of work and long days. People were serious about doing a good job."

She continued, "Working on a film is very much like working at Peninsula Heritage School. We all work as a team and support each other's individual skills and talents."

For more information about Peninsula Heritage School, visit www.peninsulaheritage-school.com. For more information about the "Grease" Sing-Along, visit www.hollywoodbowl.com.



Wilcox (in back, wearing sunglasses) cheered on her students at Peninsula Heritage School's 50th anniversary assembly.