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Kinder
High School
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Visual Arts
Makes its
Downtown
Debut

"There's an energy to Downtown that's fun. And on the flip side, we bring an energy here, too. It's been exciting to be here. We have partnerships with most of the major arts organizations in the city, and I think our students will have new opportunities here."

—R. Scott Allen, Principal

CURTAIN UP!

By Holly Beretto



Matt Hune walks into the new Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts' studio theater looking not unlike his students, dressed in a dark gray hoodie, black pants and sneakers. He's carrying a cup of coffee, a net bag filled with tennis balls and a red rubber ball. At his approach, 30 high schoolers, all wearing some variation on black leggings and T-shirts scatter into rows and begin what looks, to the untrained eye, like a yoga class.

"I want you to focus on your center of gravity," Hune tells them from his perch at the corner of the room, at the edge of the seating risers. "Push into the ground with your feet."

One floor below, Pat Bonner, a petite powerhouse who always seems to be in motion, hurries out of the Denney Theatre doors and pigeonholes principal R. Scott Allen in the doorway of the reception office to remind him about his remarks for an upcoming concert in a couple of nights.

"I've got it down to 45 minutes," he jokes.

"Try to keep it to half an hour," she deadpans back.

On her way back upstairs, she stops into a fourth-floor rehearsal room where a senior named Racquel (Rocky) Leonard is working on *Your Daddy's Son* from *Ragtime*, a piece for an upcoming recital.

"The anger and pain, the blood and pain. I buried my heart in the ground. In the ground. When I buried you in the ground," she sings, coming from a fervent energy to a deep, soul-shaking crash.

"OK, on ground," Bonner advises. "Spin that out forward. You don't want it to be anticlimactic. The audience knows something's coming. They'll come with you."

Rocky sings it again, Bonner and her accompanist nodding at the change.



Meanwhile, on the third floor, in Studio C with its spongy gray floor and mirror-lined wall, Jadelynn Ko, her dark hair in a neat bun and wearing a black camisole and dance leggings, wraps her arms around her slim shoulders, her fingertips peeking over her back as she listens to visiting choreographer Amy Miller from Gibney Dance in New York City.

"Check out your partner," she says. "Think about where you are, your best day, your worst day. We'll run through it again and then you'll go to lunch or we'll talk about astrophysics or something. You all are amazing."

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From its new Downtown home in the block surrounded by Rusk, Caroline, Capitol and Austin streets, HISD's brand-new building is a hive of activity where music literally rings through the halls, and the walls are covered in art. When it opened for classes on Jan. 7 this year, 750 students and 52 teachers moved into their new home. The school's former building, on Stanford Street in Montrose, was beloved by generations of staff, students and alumni, so there was a tiny question of how the transition to the bright, beautiful space would be.

"It's still a little surreal for me," said Allen. "But walking through here now, with the kids in the hallways and seeing them in their art areas, it's magical to see how they've just jumped in and gone from what they were used to, to this without missing a beat."

The new school takes up 168,000 square feet, including an 800-seat main theater, 200-seat black box and studio theaters, a 150-seat recital hall, a recording studio, nearly a dozen sound-isolation practice rooms, costume and scene shops, a ceramics lab with a kiln, digital labs, a sculpture creation space, a creative-writing lounge, library, classrooms and plenty of space for open collaboration. It more resembles a hip office environment, with its chalkboard and whiteboard walls for announcements or doodling, cozy corners where students confer over scripts or books, and office space for the faculty. Designed by Gensler, HSPVA cleanly integrates the arts and academics.

"This is everything we wanted and more," said Allen.



Mariah Adeeko cuts a serious figure, with her corkscrew curls fanning about her face, 1970s-style Gloria Steinheim shaded glasses and bright-red lipstick. But when she grins as she talks about writing, she looks more like the 15-year-old sophomore she is.

"Writing is a method of communication for me that can be translated in so many different ways," she says reflectively as she sits in the space that serves as part office, part break room for HSPVA's two creative writing teachers. "I'm a very eccentric person," she offers with a giggle. "So, sometimes all the things I say don't come out right. But with writing, I really get the time to think about what I want people to know about me and what to know about what I write. I want that message to sing for them."

She came to HSPVA after getting serious about writing in the eighth grade. Her former school was a more conservative environment, one where she learned a lot, but didn't necessarily feel totally comfortable expressing her views. A passionate promoter of social justice causes, she's looking, in the future, to use her writing to tackle issues. Her current plan is to double major in journalism and something else, stepping stones she feels, toward a life of writing and editing.

HSPVA is unique in many ways, and one of them is the way it incorporates the craft of writing into its curriculum. Many high schools offer electives in creative writing, and teach writing as part of regular English classes. But at HPSVA it's one of the school's six disciplines. Freshmen

and sophomores in the program progress through ancient texts, poetry, fiction, story and lyric structure, and playwriting, as well as acting and photography for writers, and screenwriting. They then spend their junior and senior years in advanced workshops, selecting a different focus area each semester. They might write fiction, or craft a play. Maybe they'll write poetry or work on a screenplay. They'll also take various technology courses that introduce them to ways they can not only publish their work in the digital age, but learn valuable workplace skills.

"A day in creative writing is heading into a room, receiving a lesson and then either doing exercises about that lesson or taking it and creating new work out of it, or getting a project and building off that," says Adeeko. "It's very active and you have to participate. You can't just sit back and not listen to the discussion that's going on or what other people are saying because all of it concentrates back on what you'll be doing."

Like every other program at HSPVA, students enter the creative writing program via audition. They must submit a portfolio of work, including short stories, poetry and scenes, and during the two-hour audition process are required to participate in a series of writing exercise. Students who pass the audition are invited to callbacks, which include an interview and another writing exercise.

Getting into the high school is not a cakewalk.

"I tell students at our first assembly to look next to them," says Allen. "For every seat filled, there were eight to 10 students who wanted to be here and aren't."

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—Mariah Adeeko, Sophomore





The school divides the day for students into morning and afternoon blocks, where they typically spend three hours in their chosen study area. HSPVA has six arts disciplines: creative writing, dance, instrumental performance, theater, visual arts and vocal performance. After school, there are rehearsals and opportunities for students to further work on projects. Students might spend their mornings or afternoons in their creative disciplines, then the rest of the day in traditional high school classes. As a public school, HSPVA is required to meet all Houston Independent School District standards. One of those is that each Texas high school student must take one credit of fine arts.

"Our kids take what amounts to two fine arts credits every semester," Allen says by way of comparison.

Students have access to honors and advanced placement courses, and take the same standardized tests as their peers in more traditional schools.

And they treat the academic work just as seriously as the arts. In many ways, students are like double majors in college, with a full load of academic and arts curricula. That kind of rigor is part of why HSPVA is a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School and received a Rockefeller Award for Excellence in Arts Education. The class of 2018 produced two national merit scholars and four national merit finalists, as well as six students named to the National Hispanic Recognition Program, 32 AP scholars and one AP international diploma recipient. All told, the class of 2018 was offered nearly \$33 million in college scholarships.

"So many of our alumni come back after their first semesters in college to tell us it's not that college is easier, but that they've really learned from us how to manage their time," says Allen.

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—R. Scott Allen, Principal

Tyler Henderson sits at a baby grand piano in a fourth-floor classroom-cum-rehearsal space, playing *Almost Like Being in Love*, the Lerner and Lowe classic from the musical *Brigadoon* that has morphed over the decades into one of the most-known pieces of the Great American Songbook. He moves with the rhythm of the notes, closing his eyes from time to time, then concentrating on the keys, on the spin he's giving a song written half a century before his birth.

"At the end of the second section," he plays, singing lightly, "...for the whole human race. It's almost like being in love—I play that F sharp minor 6 instead of an E flat. It fits with the melody note and I think it sounds nice and then going back to E flat. It's something I've practiced a lot, using the melody note and playing something completely different with it."

Henderson has been playing piano since he was five. When he was seven, his parents started him on formal lessons. He gravitated to the stylings of jazz, particularly Vince Guaraldi. Four years ago, his family moved from upstate New York to Houston, specifically so Henderson could attend HSPVA and its jazz program. He plays in the school's jazz combo, as well as a larger jazz ensemble and performs at spots around Houston, including Café 4212 and Kohn's.

"I love those songs," he says of the one he's played and its 1940s and '50s contemporaries. "They have beautiful progressions. His fingers wander across the keyboard picking out the notes the way someone might fidget with a pencil and smiles, showing the braces still on his teeth. "I play that one for auditions."

"I don't usually stick to a medium," says Calista Garcia, leaning against the long wooden counter that overlooks a staircase on the fifth floor. Behind her is a chalkboard wall that lists upcoming senior showcases. Over her right shoulder, a class about digital design is taking place. "I paint. I do ceramics. But I call myself a text artist."

The curly haired senior is wearing jeans, combat boots and a Club Inferno sweatshirt. Her face opens into a wide smile as she talks about the opportunities she's had here.

"I've learned so much from being here!" She emphasizes the "so" happily, stretching it to two syllables. "I've learned every medium you can possibly think of. This program offers everything you could dream of, and they teach it to you and they're like, if you want to, you can keep doing it. If you don't, you don't have to. It's a really comfortable environment."

She loves that she gets to spend three hours a day on art, which has helped her passion for the subject grow. While in middle school, her options for high school came down to auditioning for HSPVA or going to a private school. When she landed a spot in the high school's visual arts program, it was like fate, she said.

"This was the route I'm going down," she said.

She's currently wrestling with where she'll go to college, trying to decide if she wants to go to art school or a traditional university with a graphic arts and design program. She likes the idea of art schools, but laments they're far away from her Houston home. In the meantime, she's got a senior show to work on.

Back in the dance studio, Ko moves with her dance partner, mirroring her actions, rolling her body up from her waist, putting her hand to her head, undulating back and forth with the music, a soulful rhythm punctuated with drum beats. As it changes, Ko leans onto her dance partner's back and spins with her. They separate, Ko moving forward with other dancers, mouthing the count as she transitions to the next step. "Five, six, seven."

She and the other six dancers in Studio C are working on something that may seem unusual anywhere else, but it's part of the fabric of HSPVA. Amy Miller is a choreographer from New York, and she's in Houston setting a piece for high school students. Inviting artists from around the country to share their time and talents with the students and give students exposure to what it means to be a professional artist is central to the school's mission.

"Ballet technique and modern dance are the core of our program," says Janice Carothers, chair of the school's dance program. "And we do tap sessions, as well as teaching about nutrition and costume construction."

The dance program—like others at HSPVA—gives students broad overviews while letting them find their focus in narrower areas. Each student takes survey and dance history courses, as well as serving on technical production crews, taking a semester of selections like West African dance or musical theater, courses in dance partnering and completing a senior project, a common denominator among all seniors. Dancers have a dress code that outlines exactly the kind of shoes, tops and bottoms allowed. Girls are expected to wear a black

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—Calista Garcia, Senior

tank, camisole, short- or long-sleeve leotard and pink tights for ballet classes. Boys are expected to wear dance belts in all classes, white short-sleeve fitted T-shirts deeply tucked in. Students sign a contract that discusses expectations and conduct.

"I didn't start dancing until I was 10," explains Ko, who found out about the HSPVA program while she was a Johnston Middle School, and immediately told her mother she had to go there. Her four years of high school have allowed her to grow as a dancer and, she feels, as a person.

"I've matured a lot and tried to let go of things I don't see as vital to my well-being," she said. "I think I've learned to decide what's good for me and how to balance my workload and also be very independent. After I started driving alone, it was like, I have to drive myself to dance class and I have to drive to rehearsal and all that kind of stuff."

Those survival skills are things she thinks will be useful for her this fall when she starts college. She's attending George Mason University, ranked as one of the top 25 dance schools in the country. She'll be going with one of her best friends, fellow HSPVA dancer Nell Klimas; Ko says the two plan to be roommates.

Back on the dance floor, Ko and her fellow dancers trade partners through the piece, forming duets and trios, seeming to float through the studio, becoming one with the music, which suddenly stops.

"Blackout," says Miller.



**"Our students
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—Matt Hune, Teacher

In Hune's theater class, the yoga warmup is over and half of the students are moving across the floor, seemingly to a beat of their own choosing, alternating their steps with throwing Hune's tennis balls at each other. The others are seated on the floor, along the length of the seats, watching their classmates.

"Be open and available to catch multiple balls at all times," he tells them. "If you drop a ball, both thrower and catcher are out."

One girl skids on the floor as a ball comes toward her. There's a collective gasp in the room. But she manages to both break her fall and keep the ball. "Marla's the dodgeball queen," someone catcalls.

The exercise is about trust and focus, but something more, Hune tells his students.

"It's life, right?" he tells them. "We need to be aware enough to catch flying balls, even if there are bad throws because that's what life is like all the time. And that's a practical application for your scene work. Watch yourself when accidents happen. What do you do? I encourage you to keep going."

Hune has an easy rapport with his students. He graduated from HSPVA's theater program in 2003 and now not only teaches there but is the co-founder and artistic director for The Rec Room, a Downtown organization

dedicated to developing groundbreaking theater and encouraging Houston artists. Growing up in Bear Creek, he says he had theater in his blood.

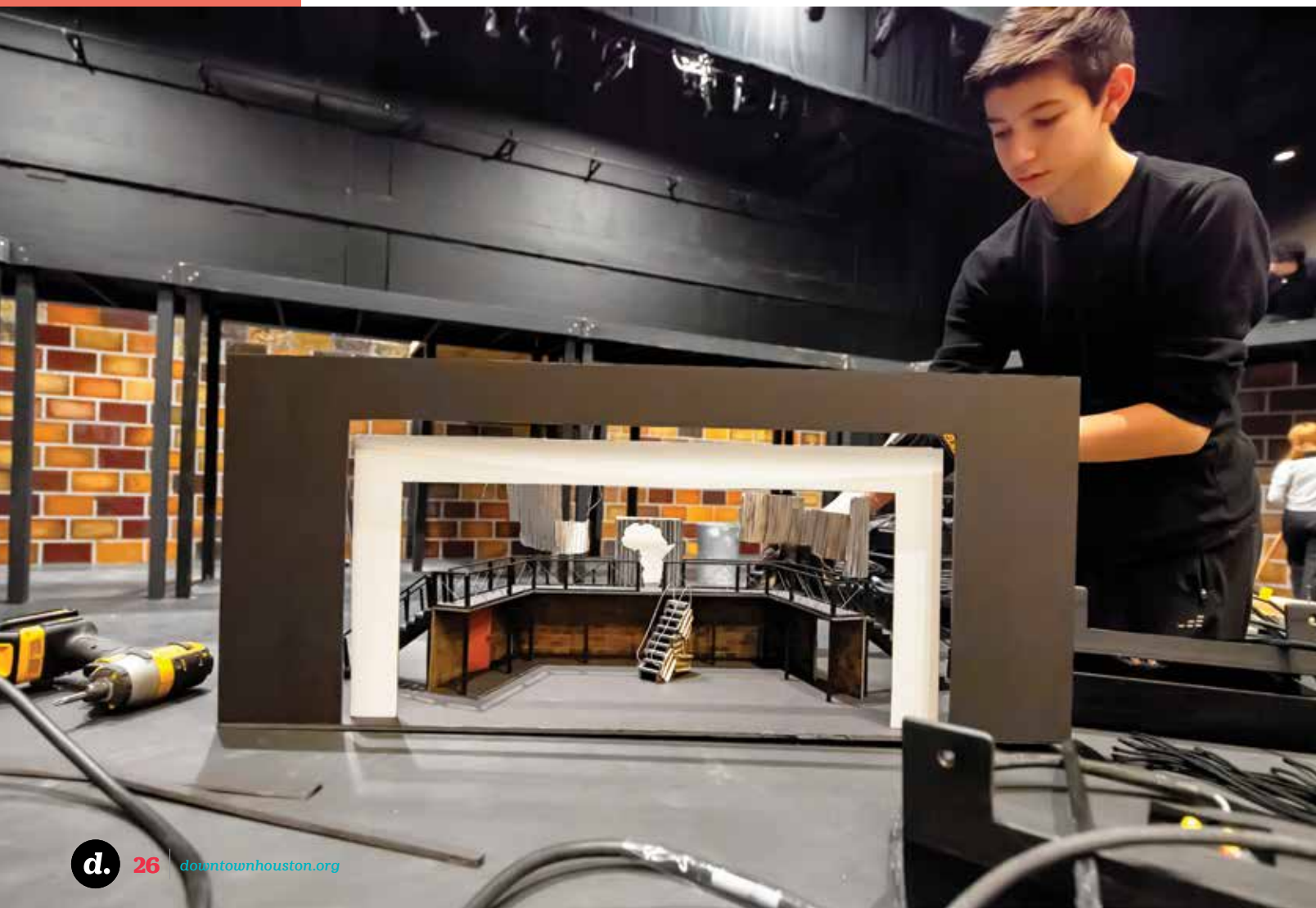
"But I wasn't in theater until I got here," he says. "I auditioned without even knowing what a monologue was."

At HSPVA, he found his tribe.

"These are my people, it felt like. This is where I need to root myself."

He's been on the HSPVA faculty since 2010, taking on a full-time role in 2016. He teaches levels one and two acting in the mornings, levels three and four in the afternoons, with crew work after school. He says one of the things he loves about the school is that it structures its curriculum in a similar way to college BFA programs.

"This is giving actual time to learning," he said of the way classes at the school are set up. "And our students really do everything. We teach them to pitch the shows that will be on stage, but they do the work. They create the set designs, make the costumes, and design the posters to promote shows. My job is to facilitate their learning so that when they leave, they're ready to start a BFA program or work professionally."





Of course, not every graduate will go on to work as a professional actor, dancer, musician or artist. Many will, certainly, like Chandra Wilson, the Emmy-nominated actress from *Grey's Anatomy*, opera singer Camille Zamora and magician Jay Alexander. But being a performer or artist isn't the point.

"Artists bring a different perspective to society," said Allen. "I want every kid here to get what they need academically and artistically to equip them to go study law or be the next great novelist."

In addition to having the faculty to help achieve that, and passionate students who want to learn it, Allen and HSPVA are assisted by the nonprofit organization HSPVA Friends. Headed by Executive Director Alene Coggin, a 2005 HSPVA alumna, the group helps raise funds for the school's needs. Like every other HISD school, HSPVA receives a budgeted amount of dollars for its programming.

"But arts education is expensive," she says. "And it's very specific. Supplies need to be bought. Instruments need to be tuned. Sets and costumes need to be built."

The Friends group solicits much-needed donations for it all, and the organization was instrumental in raising the \$7.5 million gift from the Kinder Family Foundation, part of the eventual \$88 million it took to build the school that now bears the Kinder name. HSPVA Friends raises nearly a million dollars every year for the school, both through private donations and grants.

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Coggin sees the new high school as a continuation of the great work the school does in preparing artists and supporters of the arts, as well as a point of pride among the community.

"When I went to HSPVA, we were told, 'you'll graduate from a new building,'" she jokes. "It's become kind of an inside joke among alumni—we were all told that. But now it's here. The kids feel at home there; you walk around and you see dancers in class and rehearsals happening. Everyone seems to be standing a little bit taller. It's the culmination of a 25-year dream."



When the school opened in January, Pat Bonner became the first teacher to teach at all three of the school's campuses. She started teaching at HSPVA when the school operated in a former synagogue, then moved with it to the Stanford Street location, and came along again when it opened Downtown.

"We are so happy to be here," she says of the new building.

Bonner is legend among students and alumni. The much-beloved chair of the vocal music department is at once demanding of and a cheerleader for her students. She's also a passionate advocate for the arts and arts education.

"The arts make us more civilized," she says. "And I want our students to be good citizens and supporters of the arts."

She knows that HSPVA's vocal music department is special, not just because the opportunities for development it offers its students, but because it exists at all. Many schools around the country, citing funding issues, have cut back on their music and other arts offerings.


"Here, our students do solo and ensemble work. They learn how to work with others and be a contributing member of an ensemble."

The proof of that was on display at the Winter Concert, which highlighted the work of the school's madrigal singers, the Bella Voce group, concert singers, tenor-bass choir, the chorale and the AcaFellas a cappella ensemble. From familiar melodies such as *Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!* and *America the Beautiful*, to a range of art songs and barbershop standards, the ensembles showcased their velvet tones and ability to sound like a single entity, their voices lifting above the piano and, in the finale, charango, guitar and percussion. The concert officially opened the Ruth Denney Theatre, HSPVA's main performing space considered by all to be the heart of the building. The acoustics, like other details of the new school, were exquisite, a tangible demonstration that this is a building built for artists.

Need further evidence of that? Just walk around.

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—Pat Bonner, Teacher



The notes from a sonata flow from a double bass and float down the stairwell. At the top of sits a student behind a music stand. He runs the bow across the instrument, stops and heaves a sigh.

"The recital is in two weeks," he says.

He starts again.

David Waddell, a 1999 alumnus and now a visual arts instructor at the school, just smiles.

"That's what it's like here. Every day," he says.

Walking through the sculpture lab, which sits opposite the ceramics lab separated by a massive outdoor, concrete balcony that's designed to allow students to work on larger projects that may involve spraying chemicals, Waddell stops to listen as another instructor and student rearrange a series of wooden blocks on a table. The structure is a mockup of a sculpture, and they're discussing the best angles for how it should be laid out.

Back outside the digital design classrooms, Garcia is explaining what she's thinking for her legacy project. Every visual arts student has to leave behind a project when he or she graduates. The pieces line the walls of the school.

"I kind of wanted my piece to be something about saying goodbye or I'll miss you or something along those lines," she said. "And it's kind of a conversation between me and the building. Because I will miss the building a lot and I keep thinking about it lately. Like, I'm graduating, and it's starting to freak me out. I'll miss this environment and these people."

"We're exploring how to be creative here," says Hune. "There are smart, funny, compassionate people all around us. And this might sound cliché, but these students want to be here. Many have to be here; they wouldn't thrive anywhere else. This is really a special place for quirky artists. It's kind of like magic."

Sitting in his fourth-floor office, where one bookcase shelf is lined with Playbill binders, and where a massive orange-and-blue neon-light Astros sign is above his desk, Allen contemplates that idea.

"Most of our kids are old souls," he says. "And they are coming here to live their passion. They're very tolerant and very accepting of each other, and they support each other's creativity."

He says it's not unusual to find students working across disciplines with each other, or reading scenes or practicing in the halls. One of the things that happened organically at the old building on Stanford Street was that people collaborated in places outside the classroom not only because they wanted to, but because there weren't really any other places to do it. When the new school was built, putting in collaboration spaces was on the list of priorities. But, some wondered, would that take away from organic happenings? Thus far, it hasn't seemed to.

"The new building is beautiful!" says Garcia, flashing her smile. "It's so clean and there's so much space. Another benefit is that I'm seeing people now that I've never seen, and that's really cool. There are so many kind-hearted people here, and passionate people who are driven and excited about their art. It's so motivating, like I'm going to go make more art!"



"Downtown really feels like a neighborhood of arts and culture. And we're a part of it."

—Matt Hune



In the creative-writing lounge, students sprawl across a sectional sofa and the stools and chairs scattered about the space opposite the high school's library. Some are reading on their laptops, ear buds in. Adeeko has her face buried in a book.

"We encourage them to just read," says Judith Switek, chair of the creative-writing program. "So, we give them half an hour a week to do that, even though we want them to have more. It's a chance for them to read whatever they want."

That space to regroup and find their own interests is important to the program, as are partnerships with individuals and organizations. Earlier this year, the creative writing students took part in a project with the Alley Theatre, a workshop on issues of social justice and how to go about addressing them.

Adeeko loved the collaborative process, not only learning about problems, but talking with others and hearing opinions and discovering that she could be part of the solution.

It's opportunities like that Allen and the faculty want students to have. He thinks being Downtown is a great way to help foster those opportunities. He's already heard from some of the school's neighbors that they can see the classrooms and rehearsal spaces from their offices, and it's been interesting for them to see what the students are doing.

"There's an energy to Downtown that's fun," he says. "And on the flip side, we bring an energy here, too. It's been exciting to be here. We have partnerships with most of the major arts organizations in the city, and I think our students will have new opportunities here."

Hune agrees.

"I think we can take collaboration to the next level here," he said. "Downtown really feels like a neighborhood of arts and culture. And we're a part of it."



HSPVA is as much working space as it is learning space. Hune walks his students through how to be aware of themselves and their partners in scenes. Henderson sits at the piano, fine-tuning his compositions. Garcia contemplates how she'll arrange text on the page to create an art piece to pay proper homage to her high school. Adeeko studies algebra II and looks for ways to express herself on the page. Ko joins the others in the ensemble, running through Miller's choreography one more time. And in the recital hall, Bonner stands in front of a quartet of boys practicing a setting of Edmund Waller's *Go Lovely Rose*.

"Thou art so wondrous sweet and fair," they sing. "There's a rest there," Bonner says, pointing on the page. "One more time."

"Thou art so wondrous sweet and—" they take a breath and break. "Fair."

Bonner nods. "That's it. Yeah." [d.](#)