

THE COMMUNITY WITHIN

The Teen Arts Council works to build a community where teens can explore their artistic interests

It's 6:30 pm on a Wednesday evening. Upon entering the Teen Arts Council's weekly meetings, unfamiliar faces are rushed with an enthusiastic greeting from the council's many members, immediately sparking close-knit connections that enhance the high-school experience.

Teen Arts Council (TAC), a group run by Palo Alto teens, strives to provide high schoolers with a welcoming and open space to express their artistic creativity through various forms of art: music, comedy, visual art, poetry, film and fashion. In the midst of challenges posed by Covid-19, TAC maintains its interactive environment to engage with PAUSD students.

For Co-Presidents Pheobe Berghout and Nila Nag, the opportunity to lead TAC has been a source of excitement and a way to bring teens together to engage in enriching cultural experiences, rotating every week between the Mitchell Park Teen Space and the Palo Alto Children's Theater. From improv and open mic nights to clothing swaps and mural painting, TAC provides a lot for the Palo Alto community.

"In our themed events, open mics, comedy night and clothing swap, we try and extend our events to a variety of interests and really span a bunch of different genres

of art," Berghout said.

With these primary goals in mind, TAC aims to plan events that align with the community's interests and values.

"Bringing [events] to our community is really fun, and it gives teens a really good opportunity to share their art in all different ways in a non-judgmental space [which is] exactly what we want to do," Berghout said.

Throughout the planning process of their events, TAC strives to incorporate a large variety of artistic styles, so that events are more enjoyable and accessible to everyone.

"We want to really work with our audience and create a more positive experience for everybody," Nag said. "We want all the planning and the

creation to come from the people who are going to be experiencing the events."

Despite TAC's expertise in planning engaging activities for those around the community, TAC has had its fair share of obstacles.

One of the biggest struggles the members of TAC faced was the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to all their in-person events and meetings shutting down.

"Covid has changed really everything about how we operate as a council," Nag said. "We had to totally rethink how we went about keeping people engaged while switching everything over to virtual."

Similarly, to the rest of the members of

"It was really rewarding to see everything come to life and feel like I've been part of something."

Phoebe Berghout, TAC co-president

Pictured below Erin Brady (left) and Alisha Bernatzki (right)

TAC, co-publicity head, Rebecca Helft believes that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on what they do, but in the past year, they have bounced back and learned from it.

"We sort of lost a little bit of our audience in the past year, through no fault of anyone's, it was just a hard year and it was a hard uphill battle, but now that we're back, it's getting a lot better," Helft said.

While ways of adapting have worked for TAC and the people who attended their events, some of the virtual events lacked the engagement and overall energy they were planning for the in-person events.

"We had this large festival called Buoyancy that was supposed to be held at Mitchell Park in summer of 2020," Berghout said. "Because of the pandemic, we had to cancel the festival, which was super disappointing because months of planning...we had a virtual substitute, but it really wasn't the same."

One of their biggest priorities in the past year has been producing events that are Covid-19 safe, while still maintaining the experience of their events prior to the pandemic.

"Just staying on top of what is and is not safe and trying to be better, while still, doing what is important to us [even with the pandemic]," Helft said.

During the process of tackling the challenges they faced due to the pandemic, TAC was able to learn valuable lessons in problem solving and teamwork.

"It's a council, everybody is important," Helft said. "I think we had a lot of we had a lot more success [this year] than we thought we would, so I think that was really great."

While the pandemic has been a challenge for TAC, the members have not forgotten the importance of what they always aim to do.

"Our goal is not to necessarily make you the best, you don't have to practice and you don't have to do all these things. It's just to have fun with your friends and it's to have fun for free, which I think is really valuable."

Rebecca Helft, TAC co-publicity head

"It was really rewarding to see everything come to life and feel like I've been part of something," Berghout said. "[It's a] sense of community that you cannot probably find in a lot of other activities."

Through the hard work and effort put into every one of their events, the members of the council are always amazed by what they are able to create together.

"You're surprised by what you can accomplish in meetings with fellow members," Berghout said. "I'm always shocked with how many people come to the events...we get 50 people at our events, sometimes 90, and it's like, 'whoa!'"

For many of the people who attended these meetings, like senior Jane Gwin-Kerr, it gives them an opportunity to voice their ideas and give back to the community.

"I really like attending the events and meetings because I...have an impact in the community," Gwin-Kerr said. "It's good to have a space for teens to get together in a very positive space."

In addition to new people feeling welcomed into an environment, people who have been a part of TAC for a long time, also feel that they are a part of a community. "My favorite thing about the meetings in the events is that they're so social, and...I'm also meeting new friends and meeting people who have really similar interests in mind...so it's just a great community-building experience for me," Berghout said.

In contrast to many of the activities available to teens in Palo

Pictured above Phoebe Berghout (left) and Miles Gardner (right)

Renee Vetter (left), Ameer Ali (center) and Erin Brady (right) perform their comedy routine during a Teen Arts Council event on February 4.





Kyle Vetter dons a cowboy hat while performing on the Palo Alto Children's Theatre Castle Stage during a Teen Arts Council event.

Alto, TAC prides themselves on creating a safe and relaxing space for teens to explore their personal interests with creative freedom.

"Our goal is not to necessarily make you the best, you don't have to practice and you don't have to do all these things," Helft said. "It's just to have fun with your friends and it's to have fun for free, which I think is really valuable."

At the end of the day, TAC hopes that through the community that they have created within the council, they have been able to give back to the Palo Alto community at large.

"I would like to imagine that people go to these events, especially the more social events, and get to meet people and talk to people, all these things that helps foster a better community at large and more friendships," Helft said.

Building off their recent accomplishments, TAC has planned many engaging and entertaining events for the rest of the semester—including an Open Mic on March 12 at the Mitchell Park Teen Center, the Luminescence Short Film Festival on May 7 and a Summer Takeoff Music and Arts Festival at the beginning of June. Even though this group of teens has faced recent challenges, they have managed to overcome them and continue to do what they do best: engaging their community through memorable events.



Jack Champlin gestures expressively to the Teen Arts Council audience during the February 4 Comedy Hoedown event



Pictured below Rebecca Helft (left) and Gavon Thomas (right)