



Palliser Regional Schools

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Trinity Christian School production a home-grown effort ***'Canadian Carol' an original script written by staff with school's needs in mind***

CALGARY – A casual chat between colleagues while driving between meetings took Trinity Christian School into uncharted territories. The journey saw students perform, for the first time, a dramatic production with an original script that was written in-house.

With a talented staff including Leslie Hedley, it's hoped a "Canadian Carol" will be the opening act for more of the same.

"There are lots (of scripts) out there to use, but it doesn't always fit our particular needs and now that we've done one, I think we are excited to try more and more," says Trinity's Drama and Music Academy Director, Charlotte Loepky.

Hedley ended up writing the script for a "Canadian Carol" after hearing Margo Morris express her frustration over her inability to find the right play for the annual Christmas production. It was the elementary music and art teacher's turn to choose the music, and she had a bucket list of tunes by Canadian songwriters.

"I said 'why don't you just write a narrative that strings together those songs,'" recalls Hedley, of the highway conversation. "Like, no big deal."

As soon as she opened her mouth, Trinity's social studies and language arts teacher realized what was likely to follow. Although it meant juggling an already busy schedule, Hedley jumped aboard.

"We all do extracurricular (activities with the students) and this is a way I can contribute that allows me to use what I have been blessed with," she says. "I'm not saying it's Pulitzer Prize-winning or anything, but at least I can work within my skill set and help the school."

While Hedley has been teaching at Trinity Christian School for nearly a decade – and was an educational assistant there prior to that – she has an extensive writing background. She was a newspaper writer and editor, wrote a couple of published novels, and took an online playwriting course.

With a list of songs to work into the production, Hedley decided to throw every Canadian cliché imaginable into the script. The central song, "Porcupine in a Pine Tree," is a fun version of "12 Days of Christmas" and featured all things Canadian as well.

She wanted the story to revolve around something deeper, however, and she pictured in her head a photograph she'd seen of RCMP escorting refugees across the border in Eastern Canada in the snow.

"I had to fudge things a little to make it the Alberta-Montana border. The story was a refugee family – which is essentially what Mary and Joseph and the baby were – coming to Canada and being welcomed by the three founding nations of Canada," says Hedley.

*Together we will ensure learning success for all students
to develop their unique potential as caring citizens in a changing world.*

By setting the play in modern times, she was able to make it more relevant to today's students. The fact Trinity Christian School had just received a refugee student, made the story even timelier.

Loepky says the benefits of using an original, home-grown script didn't end there.

Hedley was able to look at the demographics of the school's student body and work those into the story. A Grade 6 student, Montana Law, was written into the script under her own name as a U.S. border guard in Montana. They also spoke with students about their family origins, and the fact "Canadian Carol" portrayed how everyone belongs in Canada, no matter where they come from.

"We have two characters in the story who are refugees and trying to sneak into the country, expecting a baby," says Loepky. "One boy came forward and he kind of got really wide-eyed and said, 'that's my story! My parents were refugees, and I was born here.' "

Using Hedley's original work also saved the school money. Many of the musicals schools put on come with a stock script and soundtrack and the licensing fees can run into the thousands of dollars for a Disney production.

Schools also have to sign an agreement in such cases, promising to stick precisely to the script as it is written. Loepky says Hedley was more than amenable to adapting her script to accommodate the realities of Trinity's stage setting and any casting particulars.

In all, about 250 Trinity Christian School students took part in the production. Grade 6 students filled the acting and backstage roles, with kindergarten and Grade 1 students opening the play with a couple of presentations. Those in Grades 2 to 5 formed the choir.

Loepky, who started off as a parent-volunteer at Trinity in 2004 and was then hired a decade ago, says she's grateful for the support of school administration and the contributions of staff, Hedley in particular.

"Leslie really pours creativity into her students. She is really like an artist-in-residence for us," she says. "She has that whole spectrum of visual art and creative writing and she's very inspiring all-around in that area."

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