



NEW JERSEY

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QuickTakes!

Kean University Students Help Make Theater Sensory Friendly for All

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The sound level in Wilkins Theater on Kean University's Union campus was lowered, the house lights were cut in half, and a team of Kean graduate students provided sensory friendly sand play, crafts, games and a crawl-through tunnel during a recent performance of the children's show *Pinkalicious: The Musical*.

The Kean Stage performance was designed for all children, including those with autism and other special

needs, to enjoy and provided valuable experience for the graduate students who volunteered to work the event.

"This is a non-judgment zone," said Ellen Hedden, clinical development coordinator for Kean's School of Communication Disorders and Deafness (CDD). "If there is a child who is holding his ears and rocking, nobody is going to give that child a look. No one is going to say to a parent, 'What are you doing with your kid?' This is an opportunity for families that have typically developing children, and children with special needs, to participate in something fun and stimulating together."

Adrianna Sirigos and Karmen Caporaso, both second-year students, said they love working with children. None of the graduate students knew which children had special needs, but it did not matter.

"It's all about being inclusive," Ms. Sirigos said. "Sometimes if a sibling has a sensory need, the typical sibling has to miss out on an activity. This is a way to provide for sensory needs and include typical siblings too."

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Before the performance, the students set up hands-on sensory activity stations in the lobby. Children with and without disabilities played side by side, with many dressed like the character Pinkalicious – lots of pink shirts, pink leggings, frilly pink dresses, and sparkly pink shoes.

“We have a sensory-motor station, a fine motor skills station and more,” said Emily Jurcsek '18, a first-year graduate student who staffed a station with student Victoria Giannone. “If kids need a break from the show, we are here. They can come out, and we give them a break.”

Maria Artiaga of Elizabeth brought her two sons, one of whom has special needs, to the show. The family also saw another sensory-friendly performance at Kean a few months ago, *Pete the Cat*.

“This is wonderful,” Ms. Artiaga said. “We live nearby and we’re really happy to have these activities.”

The success of *Pete the Cat* prompted Kean Stage to work with the CDD program to provide another sensory-friendly performance.

“We got such great feedback after *Pete the Cat* that I knew we had to try again,” said Kean Stage Manager Steve Cochran. “For this sensory-friendly performance, the audience more than doubled, and we had twice as many people who showed up early to take advantage of pre-show activities with our student volunteers from the CDD program.”

Susan Indri of Woodbridge brought her two young daughters to the show. Indri got into the pink spirit, too, wearing a pink tutu, pink headband and a T-shirt with a pink heart design.

“My children are not on the spectrum, but I know parents whose children are. I think it’s great to make this available to all children,” she said. “We love Kean and all the programs.”

Midway through the performance, James Mortimer of Cranford brought his two-year-old son to the play stations. The sand play provided a good break for the toddler.

“Just sitting still for a while is hard,” he said. “This is great. If my wife wasn’t here to stay inside with my daughter, I’d be wrangling with him. It lets her enjoy the show while he plays.”

Kean CDD students volunteer in other community settings as well, from a “sensory story hour” at the Elizabeth Public Library, to a voice therapy program working with transgender adults in Newark. The experiences give Kean students something extra to offer when they apply for jobs.

Photo/Caption: *Graduate student volunteers from Kean University's College of Communication Disorders and Deafness provided sensory play stations during a recent Kean Stage family services performance of Pinkalicious: The Musical. Children with and without special needs enjoyed the activities. An American Sign Language interpreter, lower sound volumes and other changes helped make the theater performance inclusive for all children.*

About Kean University

Founded in 1855, Kean University is one of the largest metropolitan institutions of higher education in the region, with a richly diverse student, faculty and staff population. Kean continues to play a key role in the training of teachers and is a hub of educational, technological and cultural enrichment serving nearly 15,000 students. The University's five undergraduate colleges offer more than 50 undergraduate degrees over a full range of academic subjects. The Nathan Weiss Graduate College offers six doctoral degree programs and more than 60 options for graduate study leading to master's degrees, professional diplomas or certifications. With campuses in Union and Toms River, New Jersey, and Wenzhou, China, Kean University furthers its mission by providing an affordable and accessible world-class education. Visit www.kean.edu.