

Entry 40

School: Theater, American Canyon High School

A rush of excitement filled me as I stepped from the wings into the bright, warm lights, heart pounding and sweat on my forehead. The American Canyon High School Theater, located at 3000 Newell Dr, American Canyon, CA, is more than a stage. It is a place filled with laughter, tears, and art. It's a place I call home.

I've grown up on this stage, from performing one-acts like "Order in the Court" and "Gossip" in sixth grade to returning after COVID for my freshman treble choir concert. I remember standing backstage as Mr. Butler took a quick selfie with us and gave each of us a fist bump before we walked on, excitement coursing through my veins. When the first note left my mouth, a wave of pride filled me. I realized I was really back. Even after not stepping onto it for two years, the stage welcomed me as if I had never left.

Over time, this theater shaped me into a better performer and person. Playing Margot in "Legally Blonde", I opened the show and discovered a new confidence within myself. As Emily Webb in "Our Town", I stood under the stage lights delivering my final monologue, tears streaming down my face. In that moment, the theater was completely still, and as I spoke about how people fail to appreciate life while they live it, I could hear the audience quietly crying with me. Through performing in the theater as Emily, I learned to cherish every moment and person in my life. Later, our production of "Hedestown" was nominated for Best Overall Production at the inaugural Sara Bareilles Awards, where we ultimately won. This achievement demonstrated how a high school theater in Napa County can create art that resonates far beyond our town.

Beyond performance, the theater gave me something I didn't realize I was missing: a true sense of belonging. Before high school, I often kept people at a distance, afraid to be vulnerable or seen. But through choir and theater, I found a community where emotion was not only accepted, but encouraged. In Chamber Choir, during a performance of "The Luckiest" on that stage, I held hands with my peers and squeezed. When they squeezed back, I felt it instantly—the unspoken understanding that I was not alone. For the first time, I wasn't performing for an audience; I was connected to the people beside me. I had found my home.

The American Canyon High School Theater is not just important to me; it is vital to Napa County. In a region often recognized for its vineyards and tourism, spaces like this preserve and uplift the artistic voices of local students. It's where young people discover confidence, where families and community members gather to support one another, and where stories are told that reflect who we are. Productions and concerts bring together audiences from across the county, creating a shared cultural experience that strengthens our community identity. Our success at events like the Sara Bareilles Awards proves that Napa County's students are not only participants in the arts, but also contributors to a larger creative community.

To ensure its legacy lives on, I'm committed to giving back to the space that has given me so much. As a senior and teacher's assistant in Treble Choir, I strive to create the same welcoming, vulnerable environment that helped me grow. By encouraging younger

students to open up and take risks, I'm helping preserve not just the theater itself, but the sense of belonging it fosters.

The American Canyon High School Theater is irreplaceable because it is more than a building. It is a living, breathing home. It has shaped my identity, taught me to connect with others, and given me a place where I truly belong. Through preserving it, we preserve the voices, stories, and community that define Napa County.