

## Comeback Kids

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How a teacher turned a music room into a Hollywood set. A look inside the new film and production program at DePaul Cristo Rey High School.

While most students at DePaul Cristo Rey High School hustle through the sun-lit halls to make their way to their mid-morning classes, a select few make their way downstairs to a hidden-away classroom that lacks the wide windows and sunlight students are familiar with. Instead, glaring albums and posters scattered across the classroom walls create an inviting welcomeness while the students' creativity and imagination provide a different form of light in the school's "creative hub." Down here in Romaine Jones' classroom, the "basement" offers a sneak peak into the minds of our future.

Ultimately, for a future to really shine, a spark must be ignited. Coincidentally, creative opportunities often go undiscovered without a little push in the right direction. In the early '90s, Hollywood star Matt Damon was an English student at Harvard when he turned a class assignment into a 40-page script the world now knows as *Good Will Hunting*. The critically acclaimed film earned Damon his first Oscar win and catapulted his career into immediate stardom. Just like Damon, students at DePaul Cristo Rey (DPCR) might have found their hidden calling.

Within the confines of DPCR, the school has an enrollment of about 300 students in thirteen years. Surrounded by schools with focuses on similar curriculums, DPCR creates a space that allows students to access their interests without being confined to a syllabus. "We're not just focused on college readiness," says the school's President and CEO Siobhan Taylor. "We're also

focused on making sure our students have access to work environments that allow them to figure out what they want to be professionally before they take the next step.” When a teaching opportunity opened in 2022 for a fine arts class, DPCR hired a teacher that would later help expand the school from more than just instruments and melodies.

“Most people came to my class thinking we were going to make music,” says Jones, the recently hired teacher at DPCR. Instead, students were introduced to the world of film and production. Jones, who has a background in theater and fine arts, wasn’t sure how students would respond to her. “They thought I was crazy,” she says. While Jones became accustomed to plays and theater production in prior years of teaching at other schools, she stumbled across a unique opportunity. “I said you know what, we’re going to make a movie.” Adjusting to her new, smaller class sizes, Jones quickly created tight knit relationships with students. “I was ready to play the piano,” says Natalie Ramsey, a senior at DPCR. In previous years, DPCR students became accustomed to basic music courses, fine arts and production was a whole other world. “I didn’t have much interest or knowledge about film.” “Ms. Jones instilled a lot of belief in us early on to take on big roles.”

The goal of Jones’ film production-focused curriculum wasn’t to make just any small drama or comedy. Jones and her class looked to create a project that had an impact. As restrictions and precautions slowly came to end, Jones’ students opened up about the mental and physical challenges the 2020 pandemic presented to them. “It started with trust,” Jones says. “Overtime, they’d come during lunch time and in between breaks to share their ideas.” Eventually, the class landed on “The Comeback,” a limited series documentary about vulnerability and the students’ experiences with handling pressure and new realities in a post-pandemic world.

As in-class discussions led to Tuesday after-school meetings, students focused on more than just their test scores. Suddenly, Jones' classroom was filled with writers and producers who had only touched the surface of their capabilities. "I had a student learn her passion for animation," Jones says. "Her animation and work is now in and on the cover of our film's poster and, it's a talent she had no prior experience in." Included in the poster are warm yellow and orange colors slightly covered by a DPCR student at the forefront.

Coordinating everyone's talents and roles took months. Jones coached them hard and ran a tight production schedule to ensure the class stayed focused and ahead of schedule. "If I told them to grab a pencil, they knew to grab one immediately," Jones says. "It might sound silly, but that's the expectation we set to work in a timely manner." Whether it was a four minute rough cut or a scheduled interview, the students delivered on time. With funding and help from Jason Young, CEO of a local cinematic production company called JYS Productions, "The Comeback" began to gain legit attention outside of the classroom. "You know all of a sudden we were on channel 9's [WCPO] Cincy Lifestyle segment and later we had Fox 19 featuring our filmmakers in class," Jones says.

There was so much attention in fact, Jones and DPCR hosted the program's first premiere in spring of 2023. Included was a red carpet in which all the students and attendees dressed up in their best attire. Jones estimated more than 200 students, faculty, parents, and local film goers showed up to view their docu-series on the big screen. "It was very fun, but it was also very nerve racking," recalls Ramsey. Guests were greeted at the door by student-led hosts who led them towards the school's cafeteria and common area. The audience watched as the large screen projector displayed the program's work for the first time. Soon after, there was a second screening. This time, it was held at the Garfield Theatre, Cincinnati's only downtown

movie theater. “Someone from Xavier University's film program came up to me after the screening and was asking to talk to various students,” the school’s President, Taylor, says. “I kept hearing that the kids were making a documentary, but I had no idea about the power of the actual content until it was displayed.”

In 2023, several students tied to the project entered their name into the Northern Kentucky University’s OINK Film Festival. One DPCR student earned first place while another took home an honorable mention in their respective category. Today, Jones and DPCR are working toward entering the film in an upcoming film festival. “This is one of the only [high school] programs around Cincinnati doing anything like this,” Jones says. “I had one kid in my class that used to get in trouble all the time.” “He didn’t do his work but he can make a movie and now he’s discovered not only who he is, but who he can be,” Jones says. Regardless of awards or accolades though, the students have found interests outside of standardized tests.

Now two years into the program, DPCR currently has at least nine students pursuing film interests post graduation. Thanks to the success and funding from the previous year, Jones and 21 of her students are taking a spring trip to the Florida Film Festival. The trip includes a visit to Disney’s Universal Studios, where they’ll explore the art of animation before heading over to Florida’s Full Sail University, which specializes in entertainment media. “I just want them to find and pick schools that match their interests and majors,” Jones says.

While the pandemic forced students into isolation, some picked up some hobbies that would later prove beneficial to Jones’ program. “I watched a lot of YouTube and comedy skits,” says junior Daniel Powell. “When I joined the program I started getting into creating skits which coincided with my interests.” For others, joining the program meant stepping foot into unfamiliar territory. “It really helped me step out of my comfort zone and take the initiative to really just be

creative,” says senior and OINK honorable mention winner Kassidy Beatty. “Getting to actually be a director of a project was nerve-racking at first because I usually prefer to be in the background.”

Having such high expectations hasn’t lowered the program's ceiling. “If you’re having to think about survival on a daily basis, you’re not going to have the option to think creatively and express yourself,” Taylor says. “I think our program opens the mindsets of our students to explore scholarships and opportunities that help fund and encourage their endeavors.” Looking ahead, Taylor says she hopes DPCR can expand on their “creativity hub” which would provide students with larger spaces to explore.

For now, DPCR will look to continue pursuing more film projects with Jones and their partnership with Jason Young. “Right now I have students using a software called Unreal Engine,” Young says. “These graphics have been used in productions such as Star Wars and the Avengers and it allows our students to virtually insert themselves into any scene or scenario they see fit.” Young’s resources and experience now provide students with the opportunity to understand high-level technology, and help them make connections in the industry.

This past February, Young took two of the program's top students, one of whom is Ramsey, to help assist on a commercial that aired locally during the Super Bowl. “I just join him [Young] when he gives me the chance,” says Ramsey. As longtime friends, Jones and Young have a collaboration that goes way back. “Back when I used to do shows and plays, Jason would step in as my cinematographer,” Jones says. “Our connection and our formula just makes sense here.” With Jones at the forefront, it’s been a team effort to ensure students at DPCR get the full experience of learning film production A to Z.

As Jones continues to grow the program, the students' opportunities will widen. "I think leveraging the film program will only help tackle the assumptions that get put on kids and families in urban communities," Taylor says. Between Jones' belief and her students' trust, the comeback is just the beginning.

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