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Please note: To save paper, I have altered this essay's line spacing. Also, I numbered paragraphs to facilitate class discussion. --PClauss

Troupe 4127: A Catalyst for Change

(1) In early October of my freshman year, I accidentally joined the drama department of St. Petersburg Catholic High School: one morning during my chorus class, a junior named Alanna led me to a list labeled “Large Group Musical” hanging on the wall and begged me to add my name. I complied to win her favor, although I had no idea what exactly I was signing up for. About two months passed with no follow-up on rehearsal times or performance dates, and amidst the stress of the first semester of high school I forgot I even signed that sheet of paper. Nevertheless, on Monday December 5th, 2011, Alanna informed me that the large group musical number I agreed to be a part of was taking place that upcoming Saturday at the District 4 Thespian Festival. Since the performance would be judged, I needed to attend five-hour rehearsals every day that week to master the choreography and harmonies. The expectation that I would put my life on hold for some competition I knew nothing about stunned me. I contemplated dropping out of the large group number; however, Alanna’s persistence watered a tiny seed of curiosity within me and I agreed to attend the rehearsals. I’m very thankful I made this decision, because it marked the start of my membership in St. Petersburg Catholic High School’s theatre group, Thespian Troupe 4127 – an organization that dramatically changed my life over the course of four years.

(2) One particularly evident transformation Troupe 4127 catalyzed within me was a substantial growth in confidence. At the beginning of high school, I was a shy and overly self-conscious teenager who was terrified of judgments from others. I often walked through the hallways of SPC with my eyes cast downward, avoiding interactions with the “cooler” upperclassmen. My lack of self-assurance carried onto the stage, too, where I refused to sing solo or fully engage in dance moves. One specific instance of such reservations occurred during rehearsals for *Godspell* – the musical done by Troupe 4127 in the spring of my freshman year. The song “Turn Back, O Man” opens Act II of this show, and our choreographer, Kimmy, wanted all eight girls to cross the stage in a seductive stride while singing the final refrain. I could not pull this off; I was too worried about looking “silly” to the audience, even though I was

portraying a character onstage. My lack of confidence detracted from that performance, since I was not fully committed to my role. However, after two years of practice and proper coaching from the directors of Troupe 4127, I had an opportunity to showcase my improvements. In the spring of my junior year, St. Petersburg Catholic put on the 1950's musical *The Pajama Game*. There was a seven minute long sequence in Act II affectionately referred to as the "dream scene," in which my character – Gladys Hotchkiss – was onstage in nothing but a black slip, carrying on affairs with three different men. Acting seductively onstage while being so exposed was still a bit out of my comfort zone, but my confidence had grown by leaps and bounds since "Turn Back, O Man." I was able to employ the acting methods I had learned (such as creating a specific voice for the character and using *purposeful* physical actions to convey emotions and desires) to commit to Gladys' character and successfully perform the dream scene for an audience three nights in a row. This significant improvement in confidence undoubtedly stemmed from the training I received and the challenges I faced as a performer in Troupe 4127.

(3) In addition to the development of my confidence, Troupe 4127 tremendously improved my empathetic abilities. Committing to and successfully portraying a character sometimes required a broader emotional spectrum than I, as a teenager, had access to. For example, at the District 4 Festival last December, my best friend, Carissa, and I performed the duet "I Still Believe" from the musical *Miss Saigon*. Ellen, the character I portrayed, deeply yearns to understand her husband's tremendous pain following his return from the Vietnam War. She longs to connect with him, even though – unbeknownst to Ellen – he loves another woman. Since I have never experienced anguish or a longing for love as intense as this role required, I had to stretch my understanding of such emotions to portray the character effectively. To prepare, I researched post-traumatic stress disorder and read accounts of how PTSD affected Vietnam War veterans and their families. I then listened to the entire soundtrack of *Miss Saigon* to further comprehend the progression of Ellen's despair. For this performance, Carissa and I received straight "superiors" (which means that all three judges gave us the highest possible rating) and critics' choice honorable mention – a special recognition at the Closing Ceremonies. These scores were a vast improvement over the judges' marks for our sophomore year duet, *Little Women's* "Some Things Are Meant to Be." That song required a similar emotional commitment, but I was too inexperienced at the time to deliver a believable performance. There

is no doubt in my mind that the growth in empathy I experienced over the past four years is directly attributed to Troupe 4127.

(4) While increased empathy is beneficial in many ways, an unrelated yet valuable life-lesson Troupe 4127 taught me is the importance of tradition. The Troupe has several rituals that make members feel as though they are a part of something bigger than just a school club. For example, every year on the closing night of the school musical, Troupe 4127's graduating seniors perform a "Senior Song" as a farewell tribute. The seniors usually select a number from the musical done their freshman year to represent the passage of time; in May, as co-presidents, Carissa and I decided that the six seniors would perform "Light of the World" from *Godspell*. The Senior Song is always an emotional performance – I didn't even make it through the first verse without crying. Following the Senior Song, all of the Troupe 4127 alumni seated in the audience are invited to join the cast and crew onstage to sing "Seasons of Love" from the musical *Rent*. This tradition is in place to honor the late Joseph Stawski, the director who gave his heart and soul to build Troupe 4127 from the ground up. Even now, I become very overwhelmed with emotion when I hear "Seasons of Love" on my Spotify playlist. It evokes countless memories that remind me of the strong camaraderie present in this organization – a direct result of Troupe 4127's powerful traditions. Of course, there are some rituals that are much less serious. One example of this is the "show circle," where the cast of a show shakes out their limbs to relieve nerves before a performance. We begin with the right arm and count down from seven to one, then do the same for the left arm, right leg, and left leg. This pattern is repeated, counting from six to one, five to one, four to one and so on, with the speed continually increasing. By the time we reach the final rotation, everyone is laughing and the nerves are dispelled. This ritual is certainly less serious than those previously mentioned – it leaves every face lit up with a smile, rather than glistening with tears. However, each one of these actions was valuable because it taught me the importance of tradition in a different context.

(5) Troupe 4127 also deepened my passion for theatre through exposure to various musicals. For example, in preparation for the District Festival in 2013, Carissa discovered a solo called "I'm Still Hurting" from Jason Robert Brown's musical *The Last Five Years*. This song is rife with heartache, and its emotion is amplified by gorgeous instrumentation and powerful lyrics. I was so moved by this ballad that I immediately looked up the musical; it is now my favorite show, without a doubt. Had Carissa chosen to perform a different piece, however, I may

not be familiar with this brilliantly composed work. Additionally, Troupe 4127's participation in the Florida State Thespian Festival allowed me to attend several full-length musical productions put on by high school students from around the state. My favorite of these shows was *In The Heights*, which was performed in the David A. Straz Jr. Center for the Performing Arts in March of my sophomore year. This show, which centers around a group of struggling Latinos in New York City's Washington Heights, is another powerful musical with an ingenious storyline and an avant-garde soundtrack. I had no concept of how diverse theatre could be until I attended this performance; the songs from *In The Heights* incorporate elements of hip-hop and salsa to spice up the typical sound of Broadway show tunes. Introductions to shows like these – combined with my own experiences performing as a member of Troupe 4127 – opened my eyes to the depth of theatrical works and the influence they can have on the lives of individuals. This realization and understanding of the power of theatre immensely heightened my passion for the art.

(6) Before I joined St. Petersburg Catholic High School's Drama Department during my freshman year, I didn't realize how much of an impact one school club could have on my life. Because of our strong camaraderie and tradition, I will be a member of the Troupe 4127 family forever. It will undoubtedly serve as a powerful support system when I'm in need. However, the influence of Troupe 4127 reaches far beyond the friends I made or my passion for theatre. The increases in empathy and confidence I experienced over the past four years are the most important gifts the program gave me. My strengthened self-assurance has manifested itself in my life offstage, too; I now walk around with my head held high, undisturbed by what others think of me. Theatre impacts everyone a little differently, and I am fortunate that my performing experiences helped me come out of my shell and grow into a more well-rounded individual. I whole-heartedly believe that I would not have been accepted to Notre Dame if I had not accidentally joined Troupe 4127 on that one mundane high school morning – four years in this program helped me improve my communication, collaboration skills, and ability to work under pressure. Additionally, becoming vice president and then president of the Troupe allowed me to exercise and hone my leadership abilities. The presence of these qualities was certainly a major factor in my admission to this university. In all, I am beyond grateful for the growth I experienced and the time I spent as a member of this wonderful and life-changing organization. I hope to find a group that impacts me equally as much here at Notre Dame.