

THE *kids* SECTION

WINGS *to* Fly

*Performing Arts
Uplift Students at*
 **Lynn Meadows
Discovery Center**
For Children

Lynn Meadows Discovery Center
246 Dolan Ave., Gulfport
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story by **Lynn Lofton** photos courtesy of **Lynn Meadows Discovery Center**

*For 20 years the **WINGS** Performing Arts program at the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center has exposed young people ages 4 to 18 to the arts in a variety of ways, including getting a taste of being a part of a theatrical production. With the leadership of founder Tonya Hays, the name represented the angel wings of the children's museum namesake, the late Lynn Meadows, and continues to do so.*



“Under Cliff's (Thompson) and Maury's (Shemper) direction, the program has truly flourished,” says LMDC Director Cindy DeFrances. “This program allows us to reach children, families and other community members that we would not ordinarily reach. WINGS creates a truly magical experience that everyone can enjoy.”

WINGS Director Thompson says the angel wings not only help the children who participate but also help the dream of the museum fly. “WINGS has gifted the young people of the Gulf Coast with invaluable learning opportunities. It has not only been a training ground to performers but provided exposure to the arts for a wider community that may not otherwise have the opportunity,” he added.

Asked about benefits to participating children, the director responded, “There are so many! The most important is collaborative cooperation. Any student of ours can tell you our number one rule – you must be kind.

“Learning to get along with a diverse group of people to achieve a common goal will serve them no matter what path they choose in life. There’s a laundry list of useful skill sets participation in the performing arts provides: empathy, confidence, self esteem, public speaking, memorization, time management, quick and decisive thinking, critical thinking and the list goes on and on. That’s not even mentioning the singing and dancing and the fun lifelong memories.”

A large percentage of WINGS students go on to college. Furthermore, Thompson says many of the alums are involved in the arts as performers at every level, teachers, directors and writers. “Social media makes it easy to keep in touch, and I regularly check in on former students,” he said.

The number of youngsters involved in the program fluctuates depending on the show that's being produced, but Thompson says there's a community of 75 to 100 young performers and technicians for each production. There's a place for everyone who's interested. “There are many ways to volunteer behind the scenes but probably the biggest way to participate or contribute is as an audience member,” he said.

During rehearsals, students may devote 10 to 12 hours a week to pre production and then 25 hours during production. Because of the pandemic, participants have had to mask up and limit the number of students and people in the audiences. “We take our cue from the local school systems and proceed with caution,” Thompson said.

Thompson joined WINGS as director last June with Maury Shemper as associate director. A Biloxi native, Thompson attended undergraduate school at the University of Southern Mississippi in Theatre Performance and graduate school at the University of New Orleans in Theatre Production. He traveled the country performing in regional theatre and after moving back home 10 years ago started Triple Threat Academy, an arts training program similar to WINGS.

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– Cliff Thompson



Upcoming WINGS Performances:

Seussical Kids

April 23-25

Mamma Mia!

May 28-30 & June 4-6

The Little Mermaid Junior

June 18-20

Annie Kids

July 9-11

Rent

August 6-8 and 13-15.

**Details and tickets are available
at LMDC.org**

