

New Business Taking a Leap for Drama

By [Lola Alapo](#), Knoxville News Sentinel

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As budget constraints have forced some East Tennessee schools to make deep cuts in arts education, one woman is hoping to fill the gap with a drama program that has ties to a worldwide acting organization.

Powell resident Mindy Barrett recently purchased a franchise of Drama Kids International, the first in Tennessee, and plans to offer classes beginning in August to youngsters in Anderson, Knox and Union counties. Barrett has left teaching altogether to focus on her franchise called Drama Kids of Volunteer Valley.

"I think it's going to work ... because I have witnessed firsthand how this draws out shy children and instills confidence," Barrett said. She brings 15 years of teaching, 10 in drama, to the table.

Before this latest project, Barrett is credited with revitalizing the drama program at Grainger High School (formerly Rutledge High School), and in 2008, helped students put on a production of "Aladdin," the school's first musical in nearly half a century. After three years at the school, Barrett's position was recently cut.

Drama Kids of Volunteer Valley would offer after-school classes at two elementary schools, and Barrett has begun canvassing principals for their support. She plans to begin on Aug. 24 with elementary-age students, and by the second year, hire teachers and expand to middle and high school students.

The teen program would be called DKI Acting Academy and "that's something I would direct personally myself," she said. The program will be offered at \$10 per week for an 18-week semester. "As a parent, I thought to myself, what would I be willing to pay?" Barrett said.

To purchase the franchise, she and her husband Mike took out a \$23,300 small-business loan, financed by the Knoxville Area Urban League. The couple also contributed \$11,000 of their own money.

The Tennessee franchise is one of about 1,500 nationwide and in the world including Australia, South Africa and Southeast Asia, according to the group's Web site. The organization uses a method developed by Australian television actress Helen O'Grady and gives youngsters the opportunity to build their speaking, acting and social skills.

"Not every child is an athlete or in band," Barrett said. "You can have all different personality types in drama. Someone shy can work backstage. Technical kids can work on lights.

"I have found that ... drama is the one place that some kids fit in."

Learn more about Barrett's program at www.dramakids.com/tn1 or 865-947-5427.

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