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San Francisco Shakespeare Festival Launches Campaign to Raise Funds for Shakespeare's Heartbeat Program

Program serves students on the autism spectrum in four SF Public Middle Schools

San Francisco Shakespeare Festival's '[Shakespeare's Heartbeat](#)' program uses the heartbeat rhythm (iambic pentameter) of Shakespeare's words and the physicality of his characters to engage with students on the autism spectrum.

The program is in residence at San Francisco's Everett Middle School, Francisco Middle School, Marina Middle School, and Aptos Middle School. There, students with special needs participate in interactive and imaginative games that improve social skills and help release communication blocks. By identifying emotions in a safe space participants begin to connect and express themselves.

Funds are being raised quickly to replace the \$28,500 previously granted by the California Arts Council; sadly, these funds are no longer available and are necessary to pay teaching artists. Donations are gratefully accepted at sfshakes.org/donate

"I grew up with an older autistic brother," says Education Program Manager Evan Held. "While every person's experience of the autism spectrum is vastly different, I can tell you personally how the Heartbeat program can improve not only that student's life, but the lives of everyone around them. How it can impact their siblings, their parents, the teachers they work with, their fellow students, and even the strangers passing by at the grocery store."

Teacher Ann Caimi at Everett Middle School reports, "Shakespeare's Heartbeat has been such a gift to my class. At first, I thought it would be a cool way to spend an hour a week. What it turned into was so much more! After Shakespeare's Heartbeat, my students can compare anime villains to Próspero in ELA class, and can throw their angry faces away in favor of their focused faces during math tests. My students love this chance to try new things and as a teacher I relish the chance for them to thrive in new and different ways. But the best part is how they connect their Heartbeat work back into all our other subjects and to their own lives."

San Francisco Shakespeare Festival's (known colloquially as "SF Shakes")' Shakespeare's Heartbeat program is based on the work of [Kelly Hunter's *Hunter Heartbeat Method*](#). Kelly began working with autistic children in 2002 during her time with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Her research developed techniques that use Shakespeare to encourage communication and create a sense of safety and belonging.

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Note to Editor: To schedule an interview with the teaching artists of Shakespeare's Heartbeat please email sfshakes@sflashakes.org or call 415-865-4422.

The mission of the San Francisco Shakespeare Festival is to make the words and themes of Shakespeare accessible to everyone, regardless of age, ethnicity, financial status, or level of education.



Teaching Artist Evan Held with a Shakespeare's Heartbeat student.

[Click for large image](#) / Photo: Evan Held



Students "throwing energy" to instructor Joseph Schmitz.

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The foundation of 'Shakespeare's Heartbeat' is the sound of a beating heart – the rhythm of iambic pentameter in Shakespeare's plays.

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