



Mary Ellen Dale's innovative nonprofit empowers kids through the performing arts.

# Play Time

BY CHRISTINE TOTH (MFAIA '07)

**K**ee a lookout for the name Dale House, Inc.... I have big plans," says Mary Ellen Dale.

A 2001 graduate of Goddard's Master's in Psychology Program, where she focused on teens and adolescents, Mary Ellen is poised to claim her Ph.D. from the Union Institute this fall. She is also the founder and director of Dale House, an Ohio-based nonprofit designed to lift the self-esteem of children and teens through the performing arts. While she was at Goddard, Mary Ellen interned at a mental health clinic.

"I saw that traditional talk therapy often wasn't very effective with teenagers. I didn't want to be a therapist that didn't make a difference," Dale says. "I went to my advisor at Goddard, and she suggested I find out what teens like and want."

Once Mary Ellen approached the kids, she says they had a lot of ideas. "They wanted to be in sports, to be writers, entertainers," she says. "When I was making these inquiries, one teen told me 'that's the first time anyone has asked me what I want to do.'"

Mary Ellen went back to her supervisor at the clinic and asked if they could incorporate the kids' suggestions. "The short answer was 'no,'" she says. "So I went to my daughters and my son and talked over some ideas with them. They encouraged me to start my own program."


The program is located in Northeastern Ohio, and Mary Ellen's daughter suggested she call it "Dale House." Within three months, 60 kids were enrolled and a waiting list started. Her children remained involved and eventually became instructors for the program.

"I like to think of Dale House as a 'motivational clinic,'" she says. "We focus on self-esteem. We teach you the discipline, how to motivate. It's very person-centered."

Mary Ellen says she tries to get the kids to go inside themselves. "I ask them, what is your dream when the lights go out and nobody is around? What is the thing you think will never happen?" she says. "Then I try to find a way to get them closer to that dream."

Instruction and practice at Dale House culminate with performances "anywhere we can get on stage, any kind of stage," she says. "I didn't fully understand what I was doing until the first time the kids performed, and I saw their faces when the audience applauded. I realized that for some of these kids, it was the first time they had been validated. Therapy equaled applause."

When asked if there was one thing that she wanted people to know about her, Mary Ellen says she divorced when her children were very young. She was a single mom and had to work before she was able to go to school. Now all four of her children have at least a master's degree; she just turned 60, and she's about to receive her doctorate.

"Now, statistics say that's not supposed to happen," she says. "When I talk to other parents, I tell them it's a struggle, but it's also a mindset. I did it, but it wasn't extraordinary, in the sense that everyone can do it. You have to be able to realize that you can." 

**Above, Mary Ellen Dale (PSY '01) coaches young performers at Dale House, Inc., a nonprofit she started in Northeastern Ohio to motivate local youth.**