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Pivoting Rural Community-Based Fine Arts Programs for Youth Due to a Global Pandemic

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Pivoting Rural Community-Based Fine Arts Programs for Youth Due to a Global Pandemic

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Out here in our neck of the woods, resources and educational opportunities outside of the traditional school curriculum and buildings are scarce. We are all women faculty and engaged scholars at Stephen F. Austin State University, a regional comprehensive university located in Nacogdoches, Texas. Nacogdoches has a population of 33,000 people; the closest metropolitan areas are 2.5–3 hours away. Many families in our community do not have broadband internet. Public transportation is virtually nonexistent. Approximately 81% of public school children qualify for the federal school lunch program (Texas Tribune, 2020),¹ compared to 60% nationwide. Area students score well below the state average, according to state standardized testing (an admittedly problematic measuring tool). In the 11 counties that make up the Deep East Texas Council of Governments and Economic Development District (DETCOG; i.e., Angelina, Houston, Nacogdoches, Newton, Polk, Sabine, San Augustine, San Jacinto, Shelby, Trinity, and Tyler counties), economic growth lags behind the state, and unemployment is higher than the state's average (DETCOG, 2020). The per capita income in the region (\$22,429) is 31% lower than the national average (\$32,621), and the individual poverty rate is 19.5% compared to the national average of 14.1% (DETCOG,

2020). The average earner in East Texas earns \$41,540, compared to the nationwide average of \$55,994 (UT Tyler Soules College of Business Hibbs Institute for Business and Economic Research, 2018).

K–12 students and families in rural communities like ours have limited access to cultural, artistic, and educational experiences found in suburban and urban areas. Access to art and history museums is extremely limited. Some educational opportunities for K–12 students are available through our university, but they are limited to STEM-focused offerings. There are very few programs available for school-aged children that center around the arts. Because of the gap in need and available resources, we work intentionally to respond to the needs of our local community by volunteering our time and expertise to offer educational programs that focus on creative arts for K–12 students. In this piece, we share the opportunities and obstacles we experienced in using virtual platforms, during the 2020 global pandemic, to re-envision our community-engaged practices beyond our previous place-based, physical settings.

Who We Are

All five authors are White, cisgender women faculty; four of us are in the Department of Education Studies and one is in the School of Theatre. We range in age from 38 to 51. We are all mothers ourselves, so we know firsthand how our remote location makes it difficult to find quality educational programming—particularly during the summer when our college town slows down because the majority of the students go home—because we have experienced it with our own children. We

¹ A student is identified as being at risk of dropping out of school based on state-defined criteria. A student is defined as "economically disadvantaged" if

he or she is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or other public assistance.

are personal friends and professional colleagues—some of us for as many as 10 years and others for as few as three. The Education Studies professors collaborate regularly on research projects, teaching responsibilities, and service commitments; all five work together on university service (e.g., Faculty Senate and a newly-formed professional organization for women employees). We enjoy working with each other and hope that some of our shared and divergent experiences working with youth arts programs during a global pandemic will be useful to others engaged in similar work.

Community Arts Programs in our Rural Area: Barrio Writers and Junior Jacks

Barrio Writers, a week-long creative writing program founded by author Sarah Rafael García in 2009, provides free college-level writing workshops to youth ages 13–21 in underserved communities. We started our local chapter of Barrio Writers in 2015 and have held it annually each summer since then. Four of the authors volunteer as writing advisors to ensure that underrepresented youth have a local space dedicated to celebrating their voices. Typically, youth attend a one-week intensive writing workshop that focuses on reading and responding to creative writing by authors of color and using writing as a tool to advocate for change in local communities, the nation, and the world. Writing advisors work quickly yet with intention to build the community trust needed to prompt youth to write about topics relevant to their lives. We usually have approximately 25 youth who attend the workshop, which we held on our university campus from 2016–2019. Because the majority of the teachers in our area schools are White, and because the traditional curriculum centers Whiteness, most of our youth participants have had little exposure to writers and artists of color. The

writing workshop includes significant dialogue in a whole group and small groups about the creative writing pieces we read and one-on-one conversations with writing advisors about the writing the youth produce (Olson Beal et al., 2019). The workshop week also includes local field trips and local guest artists to nurture the notion of the youth being part of a local community of artists and writers. The week culminates in a live reading, open to the community, in which the youth read something they wrote during the workshop.

In 2009, CC Conn (one of the authors) established Junior Jacks Theatre Camp, a summer theatre program for youth ages 8–14. Junior Jacks, originally independent of our university setting, was held at a local nondenominational church, which provided the venue and some funding for the camp for the first few years. In the early years, theatre education students earned independent study credit for participating in the workshop and directing the children. By 2015, Junior Jacks was officially enfolded into the Directing Theatre for Youth and the Theatre Education courses at our university, meaning that it became a requirement in the theatre teaching certification degree plan.

Junior Jacks has two tracks—one for grades 3–6 and one for grades 7–9. Typically, one group meets in the morning for several hours and the other group meets in the afternoon for several hours. The camp runs Monday through Friday for two weeks, with final performances held on the Saturday after the last camp day. Junior Jacks participants engage in a wide range of activities and exercises designed to give them experience doing improvisation, reading and memorizing scripts, blocking, projecting their voices, and costumes and make-up. Junior Jacks plays a unique role in our rural area because it provides theatre opportunities for students from small rural schools that do not have theatre programs, as

well as for students who participate in homeschooling. Junior Jacks is one of the only community youth programs in which students from bigger and smaller schools and homeschooled students interact with one another.

Contemplating Cancelling our Summer Arts Programs due to COVID-19

In early March 2020, we were all gearing up for year 5 of Barrio Writers and year 11 of Junior Jacks. And then, as we all now know so well, COVID-19 hit and everything shut down. Life, as we knew it, ceased. Our university and K–12 schools closed and then, eventually, re-opened with exclusively virtual instruction. Area businesses closed as we hunkered down and waited for the pandemic to pass. However, as the spring semester continued with no escape from COVID on the horizon, we started to wonder: What are we going to do about Barrio Writers? What are we going to do about Junior Jacks? We waited until late April, hoping that the forecast would change. When it became clear that we would not be able to hold either an in-person intensive writing or theatre workshop with dozens of youth, we had a choice: cancel the 2020 summer workshops or adapt. We were sorely tempted to cancel. We were all scrambling to teach via Zoom, many of us with our children underfoot, attempting to do online pandemic schooling. We were scared and overwhelmed, worrying about protecting ourselves and our loved ones from a deadly virus while trying to keep up with our professional obligations. However, because we are acutely aware of the lack of creative arts opportunities available for youth in our community, we decided that we needed to adapt the programming. As mothers ourselves, we watched as pretty much every extracurricular activity young people participated in was cancelled due to

COVID-19: proms, debate tournaments, track meets, basketball games, spring break trips, school field trips, even high school graduations. Everything in young people's lives was cancelled or put on hold; we wanted our summer arts programs to remain constant.

We chose to not allow the COVID-19 pandemic to cancel our summer 2020 creative arts workshops. Everything else was on the table, including what platforms to use (i.e., Zoom, Google Classroom, Google Meets), how many youth to open the workshops to (i.e., more than usual? the same? fewer than usual?), the length of the workshops (e.g., the typical 1 week? 2 weeks? once a week? 1 week, then a break of several weeks, then a second week?), the duration of the workshops (i.e., the usual 4 hours a day, 1 hour? 2 hours?), the time of the meetings (i.e., morning, lunch time, afternoons, evenings), and the ways in which we would work to establish community in a remote space. While we knew that holding the workshops virtually might limit access to some potential participants who might not have access to sufficient internet access or to a personal computer or phone, we also recognized that this eliminated the problem we always faced of youth not having access to transportation to get them to or from campus for the daily workshop. It was a mixed bag.

Re-envisioning our Summers Arts Programs due to COVID-19

Virtual Barrio Writers

For Barrio Writers, the result of all of our brainstorming and planning was a dramatic change from a one-week intensive workshop to a more spread out two-week virtual workshop (see Figure 1). We set up a Barrio Writers Google Classroom as a place where we could share readings and the

youth participants could upload their writing for us to review and provide feedback in anticipation of each meeting. We ultimately decided to meet three days a week for two weeks, for one hour each meeting, because that was a schedule we all felt we could manage while also teaching full-time, working full-time, and caring for our children, who were out of school for the summer. One hour was also the maximum amount of time we wanted for us or the youth to be on Zoom.

Figure 1

Flyer Front and Back for Virtual Barrio Writers Workshop

Barrio Writers
Imagined. Written. Shared. Connected. Kept.

FREE Virtual Writing Workshop

**Do you want to publish your own writings?
Do you want to go to college?**

If you answered yes (or maybe you have nothing else to do this summer & want to try something new for FREE), please join us! You must:

- ✓ Be between 13-21 years old
- ✓ Have a device and internet able to use ZOOM and Google Classroom
- ✓ Attend virtual workshops 12:00-1:00 pm, MWF June 1, 3, 5 and June 8, 10, 12, 2020
- ✓ Write 2 pieces in ANY style: poetry, short stories, essays, hip-hop, spoken word
- ✓ Present your work at a Live Reading on Zoom
Friday, June 12, 2020 @ 6:30 pm

COMPLETE THIS ONLINE APPLICATION BY MAY 25:
<https://forms.gle/kWU8wIn3C9qWJRA>

Applicants will be notified of their acceptance or their wait-list status by May 26 and must RSVP by May 28 in order to qualify to attend.

For more info:

- email SFABarriowriters@gmail.com
- follow the Barrio Writers Facebook page for updates

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Sarah Rafael Garcia was born in Brownsville Texas, raised in Orange County, California, and graduated from Texas State University. Her writings, workshops and lifestyle promote community empowerment, cultural awareness and global sharing. Visit: www.sarahrafaelgarcia.com.

We are so excited to host our SIXTH ANNUAL SFA/Nac Barrio Writers!

Local SFA faculty and staff who will be writing advisors for the SFA/Nac Barrio Writers include:

Dr. Heather Olson Beal taught high school and college-level Spanish before becoming an education professor at SFA in 2008. Heather has three kids who keep her busy and in touch with public school life.

Dr. Chrissy Cross has over 10 years of experience teaching grade 6-12 students and has 4 school-aged children. She is excited about Barrio Writers because it can help youth realize the value of their voice in the world.

Dr. Lauren E. Burrow is an education professor at SFA who supervises student teachers in NISD elementary schools and is mother to three young children.

Dr. Amber E. Wagon taught high school English, theatre arts, and history for seven years and now teaches at the university level. Amber is also a mom and an activist for Texas public schools.

Our daily meeting consisted of informal chat and community-building activities (e.g.,

collaborative sketching on the digital whiteboard) to welcome everyone, an opening writing prompt connected to the day's theme, a collective reading of a short essay/poem (priority was intentionally given to texts by authors with marginalized identities, including previous Barrio Writers youth), and dedicated writing time for the youth to respond to the readings and discussions. The transition to a digital space allowed us to invite three guest artists from around the country to share their writings and discuss their craft with the youth. The writing workshop ended, as per usual, with a live reading—but this time hosted on Zoom. We wrapped up the workshop by having all the youth, together, as tradition dictates, collectively say, "We are Barrio Writers!"

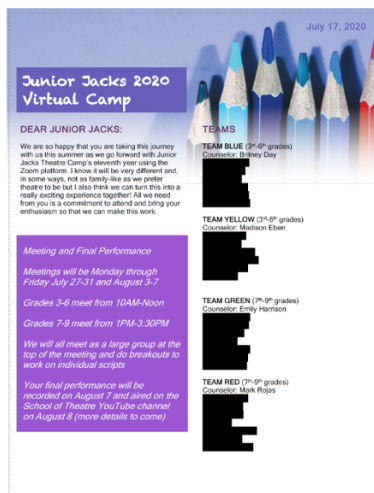
Virtual Junior Jacks

In 2020, we were also faced with the decision of how to push forward Junior Jacks given the limitations of the pandemic. Through some informal crowdsourcing on social media, there seemed to be a desire to have some type of creative outreach for children and a willingness to go forward with a virtual option. Thus, we organized the 2-week camp as an online offering using Zoom as our platform (see Figure 2). Many script publishers were offering discounted livestreaming opportunities to perform scripts. We were able to secure royalties for the scripts and to register participants. The children met via Zoom for a reduced number of hours (i.e., 2 hours instead of the typical 3 for the younger group and 2.5 hours instead of the usual 4 for the older group) but did many of the same warm ups and activities that would have been done in person. We created a box of supplies that was mailed to the youth participants' homes so that they would have the supplies they needed at home to do hands-on activities, including shoe box scenic design, sewing skills, and

playwriting activities. Their final performances were recorded using Zoom, and links were provided for family and friends to enjoy the performances. The cast were in a Zoom call together and kept their cameras off until they “entered the stage” and back off when they “exited the stage.” This gave viewers a full-screen picture of everyone who was on “stage” when their cameras were on. So, the performance was still done in unison as it would be live. The university students were able to adapt their directing skills to the online format and still realize digital performance of the shows that were streamed to the families.

Figure 2

Flyer Front and Back for Virtual Junior Jacks Camp



Retroactive Assessment of the Virtual Format

Possibilities

Though we embarked on the virtual environment with some trepidation, we were surprised to discover that it afforded us several opportunities that we had not had in the face-to-face setting. For example, in a typical Barrio Writers summer workshop, we take the students on field trips to local arts spaces and invite local guest artists to campus to present their work to the youth and talk about the creative process. In 2020, the virtual workshop format enabled us, instead, to connect our local youth writers with three fabulous guest artists from far away. Naomi Shihab Nye, the 2019–2021 Young People’s Poet Laureate, shared pandemic-prompted poetry she had written and invited the youth to do likewise. Terry Blas, a queer Latinx *Cartoon Network* comic illustrator and writer, described his creative process to the youth, even sharing some helpful sheets he uses to draft graphic novels. Lastly, Kalani Tonga, a Pacific Islander visual artist and musician from Utah, shared humorous writing prompts based on her everyday life of raising five children. We would never have been able to interact with those guest artists in the face-to-face format due to the limitations of time, space, and financial resources.

Second, the virtual format eliminated a need for transportation that has been a barrier for some participants in prior years. Our local community has extremely limited public transportation; some youth have not been able to participate in the past because they could not get to campus and we were unable to arrange for transportation across our large rural area. Third, it was less expensive to run the virtual workshops. The virtual format eliminated or reduced printing costs, as well as the need to provide snacks

and drinks for the youth during the workshop. Fourth, the shorter time periods of the virtual format (approximately 2 hours instead of 3–4) were easier on the adults implementing the workshop. Additionally, the virtual format eliminated the need for those who are mothers to arrange for child care during the workshop or manage our children on site with us during the workshop. Therefore, it was ultimately less demanding and fatiguing for us to implement the workshop. Lastly, the virtual format enabled relatives from across the country to join the final performances of both programs, which the youth and far-away guests all enjoyed and appreciated.

Limitations of Virtual Implementation

Despite the possibilities and opportunities of the virtual format, there were also several limitations and drawbacks. First, adults and youth participants alike experienced technological problems, including having old devices that struggled to handle Zoom, inability to participate when devices were not sufficiently charged and/or lost power, and lack of broadband internet access. Quite possibly, there were youth who could not participate at all because they did not have a device and/or internet access. Second, and perhaps most significantly, the youth and adult facilitators, but perhaps especially the youth, missed the kind of immersive social interactions that are the hallmark of the summer workshops. They missed getting to hang out with each other during break time. They missed side conversations and jokes that take place during face-to-face workshops. They missed connecting face to face with friends, some of whom they only see during the summer workshops as they attend different schools. Third, the Google classroom platform that we used to distribute materials and provide feedback on student writing for Barrio

Writers made it seem like school to the youth, which they did not enjoy. One participant stayed after the workshop one day to tell us, “This isn’t fun. We don’t like this. It feels like school to us. It feels like you’re giving us homework.” Lastly, the virtual platform participants did not get to experience the benefits of spending time on a college campus. One goal of the summer experiences is to provide an opportunity for youth to be on a college campus and to get a feel for what college is like. The virtual platform did not afford them this opportunity.

Conclusion

The global COVID-19 pandemic presented our summer community-based youth arts programs with both new opportunities and new obstacles. While the virtual format reduced some human and financial costs and enabled us to build new offerings, expand the community reach, and invite faraway guest artists to join us, it also diminished important face-to-face social interactions and took away the benefit of having the youth participants engage in the workshop on a college campus. Technology was both a burden and a blessing. Although we look forward to the day when we can re-engage with local youth in face-to-face settings, we also acknowledge that the virtual format removed some previous barriers we had faced and opened up new opportunities. COVID-19, which initially seemed like an insurmountable barrier, enabled us to capitalize on virtual platforms to continue and even expand our civic engagement.

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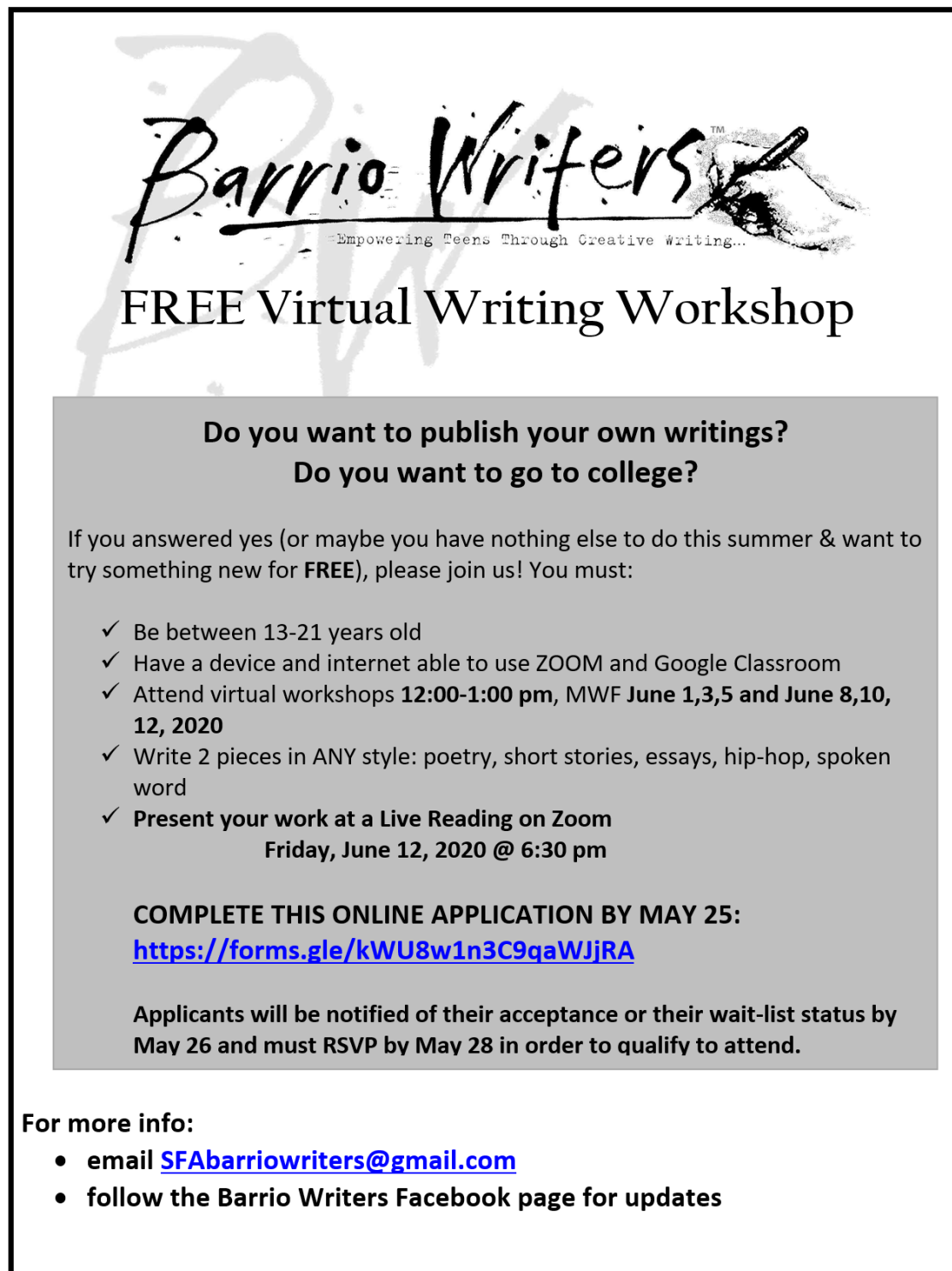
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Appendix A

Figure 1

Flyer Front and Back for Virtual Barrio Writers Workshop



The flyer features the 'Barrio Writers' logo in a stylized, handwritten font with a pen nib illustration. Below the logo is the tagline 'Empowering Teens Through Creative Writing...'. The main title 'FREE Virtual Writing Workshop' is prominently displayed. A central grey box contains the application details, including two key questions, a list of requirements, a deadline, and contact information.

Barrio Writers™
Empowering Teens Through Creative Writing...

FREE Virtual Writing Workshop

**Do you want to publish your own writings?
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If you answered yes (or maybe you have nothing else to do this summer & want to try something new for **FREE**), please join us! You must:

- ✓ Be between 13-21 years old
- ✓ Have a device and internet able to use ZOOM and Google Classroom
- ✓ Attend virtual workshops **12:00-1:00 pm, MWF June 1,3,5 and June 8,10, 12, 2020**
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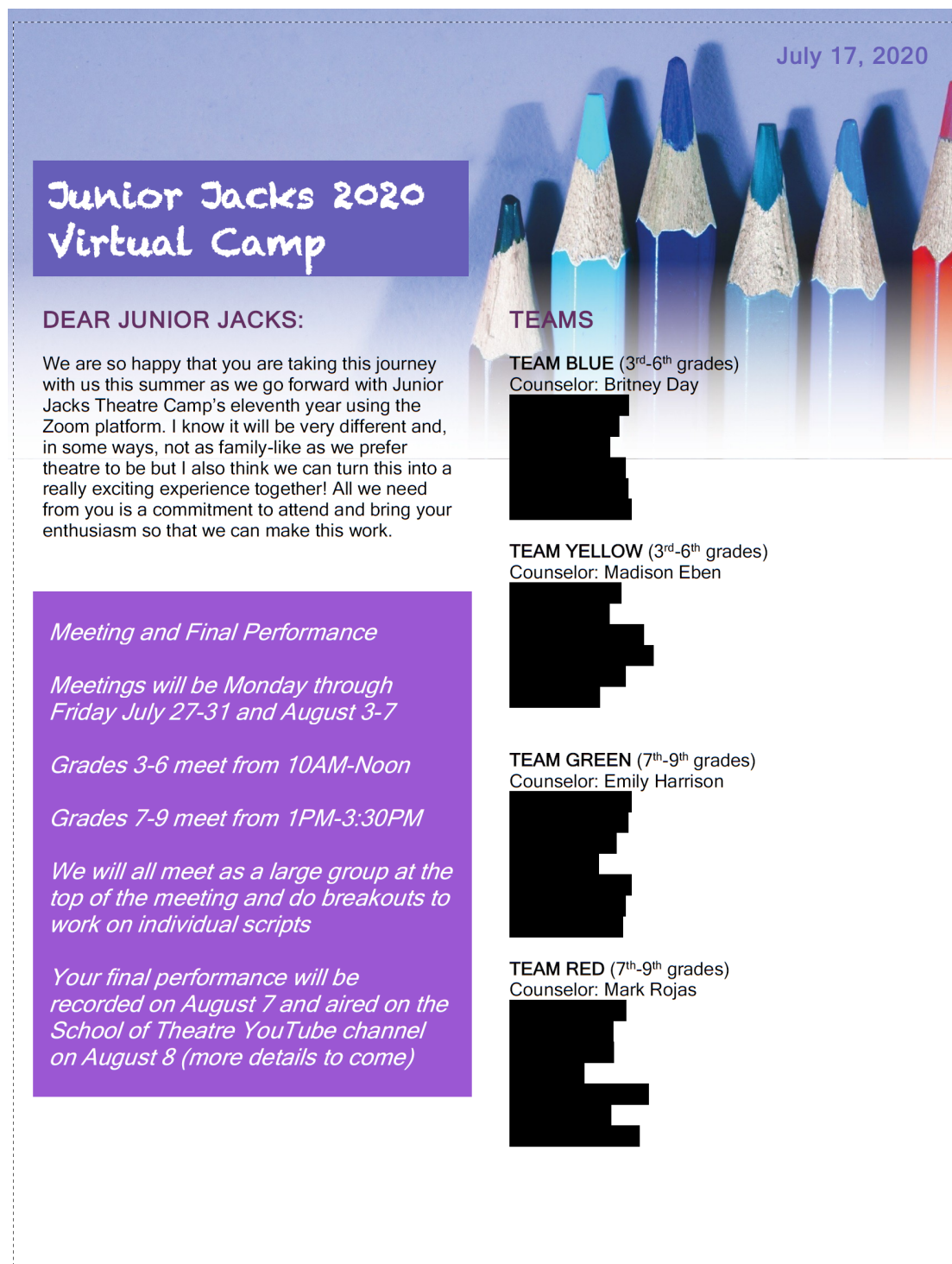
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Appendix B

Figure 2

Flyer Front and Back for Virtual Junior Jacks Camp



July 17, 2020

Junior Jacks 2020 Virtual Camp

DEAR JUNIOR JACKS:

We are so happy that you are taking this journey with us this summer as we go forward with Junior Jacks Theatre Camp's eleventh year using the Zoom platform. I know it will be very different and, in some ways, not as family-like as we prefer theatre to be but I also think we can turn this into a really exciting experience together! All we need from you is a commitment to attend and bring your enthusiasm so that we can make this work.

Meeting and Final Performance

Meetings will be Monday through Friday July 27-31 and August 3-7

Grades 3-6 meet from 10AM-Noon

Grades 7-9 meet from 1PM-3:30PM

We will all meet as a large group at the top of the meeting and do breakouts to work on individual scripts

Your final performance will be recorded on August 7 and aired on the School of Theatre YouTube channel on August 8 (more details to come)

TEAMS

TEAM BLUE (3rd-6th grades)
Counselor: Britney Day

TEAM YELLOW (3rd-6th grades)
Counselor: Madison Eben

TEAM GREEN (7th-9th grades)
Counselor: Emily Harrison

TEAM RED (7th-9th grades)
Counselor: Mark Rojas

July 17, 2020

OTHER INFORMATION

ZOOM "RULES"

The internet is a complicated place and we want to keep all of you safe and happy. Your parents will need to provide a safe and quiet place for you to be able to have access to the internet and to Zoom. You will only need the free Zoom service that can be found at www.zoom.us.

You will be receiving a link to the room in an email a few days before meeting begin at the email on your registration. The link will remain the same throughout the camp.

We expect good behavior from all of you during these meeting which includes courteous treatment of your teachers and fellow students. The chat will not be active and if bad behavior or language is seen/heard the session moderator will remove you from the Zoom space and notify a parent. (We do not expect this to occur but want you to know what to expect.)



Junior Jacks
2020

MATERIALS

I hope you love your box of goodies. Much of these are supplies for workshops while some are just for fun. Here is what you should find enclosed:

General tools:

- Highlighter for your script
- Pen
- Pencil
- Folder with script and workshop handouts

Workshop supplies:

- (10) sheets of construction paper
- (2) sheets of foam
- (1) bottle of glue
- (1) pair of scissors
- (10) popsicle sticks
- (2) skeins of embroidery floss
- (1) plastic needle

Just for fun:

- (1) SFA School of Theatre keychain
- (1) bracelet
- Some fun theatre pins
- (1) Junior Jacks 2020 mask!!!

SNACKS! (However, your parent(s) have control over when and IF these can be consumed by you so please confer with them.)

NOTE:

If your mask does not fit please notify CC Conn ASAP for a replacement. 3-6 grades were given a small, 7-9th grades were given a medium but we also have some large and extras of the small and medium so let us know.