



## Roland Michener's fine arts program among the best in northwestern Alberta

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**RMSS art Teacher Helen Gall, band teacher Ellen Criss and drama Teacher Donna Ringrose.**

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*SLAVE LAKE, AB* – Roland Michener Secondary School's fine arts program is showing no signs of fading in terms of its extreme popularity among students. In fact it's the exact opposite, thanks in large part to the hard work and dedication of three teachers who are continuing to inspire and motivate students to give their very best, no matter what they do in life.

Leading the way is veteran art Teacher Helen Gall, who is well-respected and admired by the estimated 270 fortunate students who make up her Art 10/20/30 classes each year.

One step inside her classroom and you're instantly immersed in a brilliant world of colourful art displays covering a myriad of topics and interests. Gall – who's taught more than 5,000 students over the course of the past 22 years – says there's a story behind every piece of art work in her classroom in addition to a genuine sense of appreciation for the hard work that went into each project.

"I encourage each student to bring his/her own skill, talent and self-expression to the program. That's what makes it so special, not only as a teacher but also from the perspective of a student," she says.

Ellen Criss, Band Teacher at RMSS, says what's remarkable about Gall as a teacher is her amazing ability to bring out the best in her students through personal creativity.

"They (students) really get a tremendous feeling of pride, accomplishment and confidence through Helen's class."

Gall, meanwhile, says much of that is attributed to the fact that when you create art, anything goes.

"There's never a right or wrong way in terms of creative expression through art... and that's what we try to teach students in this class," says Gall, who firmly believes in the concept of leading by example. "I think that when you're really passionate about your work as a teacher it brings out the best in your students."

That in itself is something which goes above and beyond academic excellence by teaching students about the value of respect, self-esteem, confidence, information sharing and constructive criticism.

“The students feed off and learn from each other’s work,” Gall explains, adding that the most rewarding aspect of being an art teacher is witnessing their passion, energy and personal growth.

### *Drama*

Much like art, drama is another interesting and challenging class which RMSS students just can’t seem to get enough of.

“I’m approached on a daily basis in the school hallways by students who tell me they can’t wait until their next drama class,” says drama Teacher Donna Ringrose. “They’re also quick to point out how much they miss drama on the days when they don’t have it.”

The program currently consists of six classes, including two Grade 7 and 8 classes, one Grade 9 class and a high school split class with Drama 10/20/30 students.

The Drama 7 class was involved with two performances this year at C.J. Schurter School while the Drama Club hosted a successful Haunted House project involving more than a dozen students. The event was attended by approximately 200 junior high students.

The Drama 8 class – scheduled to perform two 45-minute one-act plays for parents in March of this year – went to see Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas at Victoria School of Performing Arts. “We were scheduled for a backstage tour there as well, but unfortunately ran out of time,” says Ringrose. “They did, however, get the opportunity to see the beginning of filming process for television advertising shots.”

The Drama 9 class worked on Unarmed Stage Combat for a month and “loved it” according to Ringrose. The class went to see “Black Comedy” at the University of Alberta Timm’s Center and had a one-hour backstage tour of the prop rooms, costume rooms and design rooms which they absolutely loved.

Ringrose, who has been teaching drama at RMSS for the past eight years, says students perform upwards of a half dozen plays each year at RMSS and other schools within the community where they gain confidence, a sense of appreciation and understanding about personal development skills and social networking by performing in front of staff, parents and peers.

“It’s their (the students) high level of energy, enthusiasm and commitment to team work and student respect which sets our program apart from other schools,” Ringrose explains. “I don’t ask them to do plays, they demand it.”

Past accomplishments within the program include 2007 MAD Night and a drama trip to London, England (that same year), the production of a two-act play called “Village of Idiots in the spring of 2008, a fine arts trip to New York in the spring of 2009 and a high school performance to HPSD’s Board of Trustees in June of 2009.

Ringrose says many past students have since taken their love for drama to new heights later in life as a result of their personal involvement in the school’s drama program. Mike Borchert received a grant for a directing project, Sebastien Allan is taking prop construction at the University of Alberta, Kalsey Lulyk is singing in New York and has an agent, Kristy Gramiak is

taking Drama lessons at the U of A and Victoria Adam is working for Jubilation's Dinner Theatre in Winnipeg.

### *Music*

Equally successful in terms of its positive impact and influence on student success is RMSS's band program which includes grades 7, 8, 9 bands as well as a high school band.

"We have a lot of exceptionally talented kids involved in the band program at Roland Michener," notes Ellen Criss, whose passion for band and teaching spans 15 years. She says one of the most rewarding aspects of being a band Teacher at RMSS is watching students develop their skills as musicians through continued dedication and commitment to the valuable program.

A perfect example of this is the annual spring Coffee House event – an informal evening where band students get together to showcase their talents.

"They (students) coordinate it from start to finish by taking care of everything, including ticket sales, advertising, setup, cleanup, food preparation etc. It's their show and they take ownership of it," Criss explains.

The bands are also active within the community each year and have performed at a number of events including the 2009 Remembrance Day ceremony at E.G. Wahlstrom, for example. More recently, on Feb. 20 to 22, 2010 band students at RMSS hosted Big Band Bash – an event that attracted more than 200 students from Valleyview, Whitecourt, Donnelly, Slave Lake and Jarvie.

Prior to that on Feb. 16, 30 junior high students from the school had the unique opportunity to enjoy the sights and sounds of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra and The Winspear Centre as part of a musically uplifting educational experience.

"It was an amazing opportunity for our students, many of whom had never been inside the beautiful Winspear Centre before or experienced the orchestra close up," says Criss, whose exceptional work as a band teacher inside and outside of the classroom continues to be an inspiration for others.

Put it all together and one thing becomes crystal clear when it comes to RMSS's fine arts program – students are being given the tools they need to succeed in life.

"It doesn't matter if it's art, drama or band; the same principles apply in terms of student expectations and success," Criss explains. "Our students are benefiting directly from creativity, leadership building and effective communication by setting their own personal standards of excellence. And most importantly, they're accomplishing it by having fun."

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