



Music: Terry's Serendipity Café nurtures art



Montclair High School students meet every Wednesday to plan monthly shows. COURTESY SAM SCHUMAN

Serendipity performance:
Saturday, Feb. 9, 7 p.m.
[Bnai Keshet](#)
99 South Fullerton Ave.

By SAM SCHUMAN
For Montclair Local

Montclair High School students begin to trickle into the Edgemont Park House at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 9, just as they do every week for Terry's Serendipity Café staff meetings. Once the group of nearly a dozen staff members has assembled, they begin to plan the next installment of the monthly concert series that provides young artists in Montclair with a safe and supportive performance environment.

Over its 24-year history, the organization — popularly known as simply “Serendipity” — has given students an avenue to chase their passions, leading many to attend top-ranked colleges and for some pursue music professionally.

Gold Carson, one of two MHS seniors on staff, will attend Williams College this fall. Carson is a student representative on the National Steering Committee of the Student/Farmworker Alliance, an organization that they became involved with through Serendipity, which frequently uses its concerts to raise money for nonprofit organizations like SOFIA and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. For the senior, music and activism are two sides of the same coin.

“It’s really just about respecting people,” Carson said. “That’s the baseline of what Serendipity is and what political action is.”

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Aidan Champeau, the other senior staff member, has committed to Wesleyan University.

“I feel like I can find a lot of different communities [there] that I wasn’t able to really find at Montclair High besides Serendipity,” Champeau said.

Champeau and Carson, who each write and perform their own music, said that their experience with Serendipity led them to pick colleges that combined academic rigor with strong arts communities.

While Serendipity hosts spoken-word art and music of all genres, it maintains a certain punk-inspired do-it-yourself ethic. The group is entirely self-supported, offsetting the cost of booking performance spaces through

ticket and snack sales, and the renting out of its audio equipment. Concerts are student-run, from sound and lighting to working the door, and run on the motto “no alcohol, no drugs, no ‘phobes,” the latter highlighting the group’s inclusivity.

Officially a project of the town’s Department of Recreation and Cultural Affairs, Serendipity was founded in 1995 when Montclair student Terry Bynum-Copeland requested that students be given a safe space to perform live music as a way to build community after a shooting at the Watchung post office that left four dead.

When Bynum-Copeland died of complications from epilepsy several months after Serendipity Café’s founding, the organization was renamed in his memory.

“It’s really satisfying to watch the kids actually put on the show themselves. Find the bands, run the shows, carry the equipment, everything,” said Ed Carine, who is one of two adult staff members and the only volunteer who has remained involved with Serendipity since its first year. “It’s great to watch them gain confidence and skills.”

Mike Berlin, an adult volunteer, provides crucial logistical support to Serendipity. Berlin, a former schoolteacher, became involved with Serendipity about ten years ago after his two daughters volunteered with the group.

“I was really inspired by what Ed was doing. I watched the effect it had on my kids and the effect on other kids ... I felt that what he was doing was a good contribution to society,” said Berlin. Berlin helps Carine and the Serendipity staff transport light and sound equipment from Carine’s house to Serendipity’s performance venue every month—“about a ton and a half of equipment,” he estimated.

Serendipity volunteers must set up the equipment before the concert starts, and are responsible for breaking down the equipment and transporting it back to Carine’s house at the end of the night.

“We have the whole thing down to a pretty smooth-working system,” Berlin said.

Like other volunteers, Berlin values Serendipity for what it provides its student volunteers and performers.

“A lot of your career in music is luck, but you need a chance to express yourself. You need a place to get started. You need a place where people will support you and make you feel important and valued, and Serendipity does that,” he said. “They [students] are the stars of this organization, and I think that’s what makes it so unique.”



Dan Harris, left, performs with Shallow Alcove at the December show at Terry's Serendipity Café. COURTESY SAM SCHULMAN

SERENDIPITOUS FUTURE

Serendipity has inspired several recent MHS graduates to study music in college.

Claire Parcels played their first show at Serendipity with the band Tula Vera as a freshman in high school in 2014. Since then, Tula Vera has released an EP and full-length album, and played shows at Asbury Park's Stone Pony, Montclair Center Stage, and New York City's ABC No Rio.

Parcels is currently a first-year student at SUNY Purchase's Conservatory of Music, where they are majoring in studio composition. They credit Serendipity, along with lessons at Montclair's School of Rock, with preparing them to study music professionally. "A lot of people I meet now talk about how it was really hard starting out with a band because there was nowhere to play... Serendipity set me up to be a DIY musician," they said.

Daniel Harris, a 2017 MHS graduate, knew by his junior year of high school that he wanted a career in music. He played at Serendipity at least 20 times, by his own estimation, in addition to other venues in and around Montclair including The Bitter End in Greenwich Village. "It gives you something to be excited about. It gives you a reason to try really hard," said Harris.

As a result of his live music experience, Harris was admitted to the Bandier Program, a music industry program at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications, where he continues to play music as a member of the band Shallow Alcove.

Greg Pason, one of two adults on Serendipity's staff, and the founder of Montclair Makes Music Day, isn't surprised to see Serendipity alumni make such impressive accomplishments.

"You see kids come in when they're freshmen, very shy and not confident, and by the time they're seniors they're leading," he said. "It serves such an incredible purpose."

Serendipity has already helped launch more than a few bona fide indie rock stars. Pinegrove, a Montclair band with several Serendipity alumni, recently released its second album, and has already sold out dates in Cleveland, Chicago and Nashville for an upcoming tour in February. Forth Wanderers, another band formed by MHS alums, released its self-titled debut on famed indie label Sub Pop last year. Other artists who have performed at Serendipity include Alex G, Adult Mom, Screaming Females and Vampire Weekend founder Ezra Koenig.

Aidan Feliciano graduated from MHS in 2010, and has since toured the US and Europe with Pinegrove and electronic pop group Half Waif. Feliciano was born into a family of musicians, but it wasn't until eighth grade that he was introduced to indie rock at a Serendipity concert. "I remember thinking 'this is so crazy. I've never done this,'" he said.

Feliciano moved back to Montclair, and has attended several Serendipity concerts since returning. At the event's Open Mic in December, he performed two new songs he had written. "The reason I stopped touring was that I started having crazy anxiety. It [Serendipity] has been a really cool way for me to heal in a lot of ways, and be somewhere where I'm not being judged," he said. "When you leave Montclair, you learn that people do not have anything like that where they're from, and how rare something like Serendipity is."

At the Jan. 9 staff meeting, there is little talk of college applications or music stardom — the staff are focused on their upcoming show, planned for 7 p.m. on Feb. 9 at Bnai Keshet. One student has already booked a full bill of artists to perform and designed a promotional flyer for the show earlier that day during history class.

Morgan Godsil, a 10th-grade staff member, shared what makes Serendipity special to her:

"The most important part of Serendipity is that there's an art and creative community that I've become more involved in. It's the first time I've had access to other artists."