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Scarborough native s... rns as advocate for the arts

By Shel Carignan on April 3, 2014

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SCARBOROUGH — At age 2, Jeff Poulin stumbled into his first tap-dancing class in South Portland, and soon after made his dance performance debut with a spirited rendition of “How Much is that Doggie in the Window?”

Now, at 24, the Scarborough native is still on stage in Maine; not as a performer, but as an advocate for the arts.

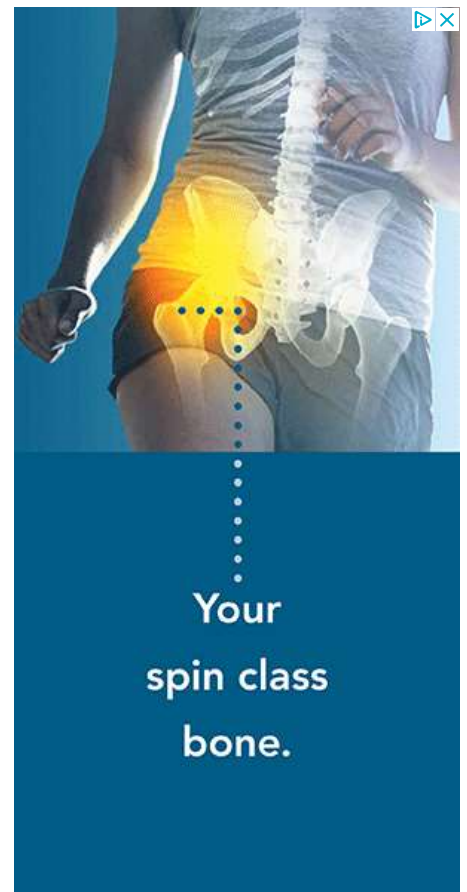
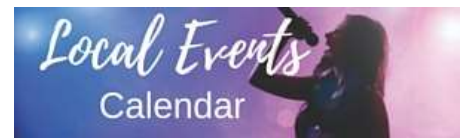
Poulin was keynote speaker Monday evening at the Dirigo Talks event “Building a Future through the Arts,” at Portland Stage Company. Along with six other speakers from local colleges and performance groups, Poulin shared ideas on the role of education and community in the arts in Maine, and his commitment to ensuring that a strong arts foundation continues to be a part of every Maine student’s education.

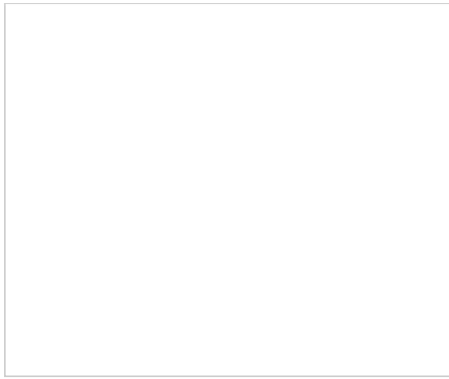
Poulin had an illustrious dance and musical theater career in his younger years that included performing with Scarborough High school’s Oak Hill Players until he graduated in 2008. He was a national title winner for competitive dance team Dancers Inc., and he once starred alongside Anna Kendrick in a production of “Footloose” at Lyric Theater in South Portland.

But after a nasty ankle injury his senior year of high school, Poulin chose to revert his passion for performance from center stage to the nonprofit world. He participated in the Maine Youth Action Network, and co-founded the Perform for a Cure organization.

Years of performance and activism laid the path for Poulin’s favorite role to date: arts education coordinator for the Washington, D.C.-based group Americans for the Arts. The organization advocates at the local, state and federal levels for “all of the arts, for all of the people” in public education.

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Since last December, Poulin has traveled across the country talking about the importance of the arts in public education. He said the event in Portland was a special stop for him, because he felt his homecoming was the perfect opportunity to give back after years of local arts activism.

“It’s cool because I’m a product of a Maine arts education,” said Poulin before the speaking event. “I am where I am because of what happened here, so it’s kind of a neat privilege. I’m a walking, talking example of what can happen when that power of a good arts education is harnessed.”

Poulin’s group advocates nationally for increased funding of the arts in the K-12 public education system by trying to incorporate the arts with national trends toward increased funding for science, technology, engineering and math – what it calls STEAM as opposed to STEM. It also advocates for required arts classes each year and arts integration into other subjects.

Budget cuts in recent years have limited arts programs that Poulin says were crucially formative for him. He specifically noted Scarborough’s cancellation four years ago of a children’s theater program, in which high school seniors would write an original play and orchestrate an entire performance with students from grades 3-5.

“It was this huge investment in the community-building of the Scarborough school system by way of the arts; it was really a capstone of everything you’d learned from language arts classes,” he said. “It’s a shame.”

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Superintendent of Schools George Entwistle III said he hopes to invest more in music and art education as part of the School Department’s “mission critical investments” for the next year.

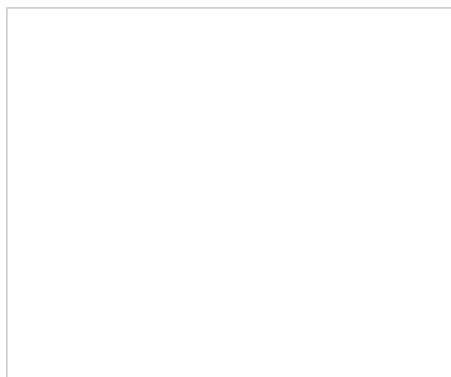
“Twenty-first century jobs, more than ever before, require creative problem-solving and innovative thinking,” Entwistle said. “The arts serve as an incredible vehicle for our students.”

Poulin also believes the future of Maine’s workforce depends on making an investment in the arts, and though Maine educators and legislators are often leading the arts conversation, not enough action is being done.

“We have an education crisis,” he warned. “We have young people who are leaving and not coming back, and in my opinion we need to start thinking very creatively on how to tackle that.”

Poulin himself is, again, an example: he earned a bachelor’s degree in entertainment business from Oklahoma City College and then his master’s in arts and cultural policy at University College Dublin in Ireland.

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“I would love to come back,” he said, “but my fear is that we’re going to continue on the path that we’ve been on, cutting and cutting and cutting, and we’re going to raise a generation of non-critical thinkers.”

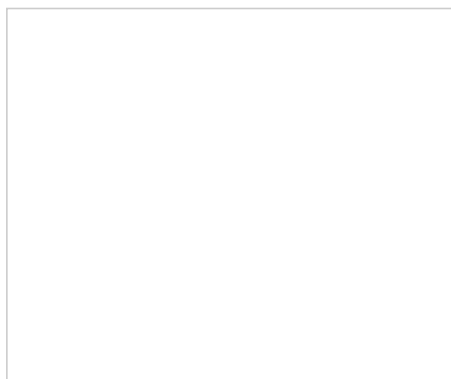
Poulin, who was one of the first high school students to serve on the Scarborough School Board, said Scarborough’s local approach to budgeting education has been “very reactive.”

“We need to look toward the long term and say, ‘Do we want people to come out of life as creative thinkers, (who) think outside the box, are more civically engaged?’” he said.

But Poulin remains hopeful for the future of the arts in his hometown, and committed to ensuring a quality arts education for students nationwide.

“Your education shouldn’t depend,” he said, “on the town or state you live in.”

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Scarborough native Jeff Poulin of Washington, D.C.-based Americans for the Arts speaks at a Dirigo Talks event Monday, March 31, in Portland. He said he wants future generations to have access to the kind of arts education he had in Scarborough.

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