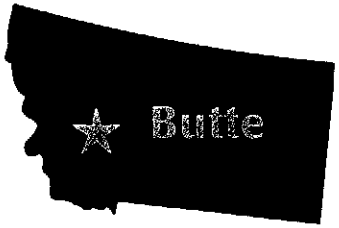

MONTANA'S CREATIVE MINDS

Butte children's theatre wins national award

The little Orphan Girl, tucked like hidden treasure in the basement of Butte's Mother Lode Theatre, took a bow at the nation's capitol Nov. 5, 2003.

The Orphan Girl Theatre and its parent organization, Butte Center for the Performing Arts, were among 18 nonprofit organizations in the United States and Mexico to receive Coming Up Taller Awards from the National Endowment for the Arts. The prestigious honor recognizes outstanding community arts and humanities programs that celebrate and foster the creativity of children.

First Lady Laura Bush presented the $10,000 awards during a special ceremony in the East Room of the White House. The Orphan Girl Theatre was one of five recipients to receive special recognition from the First Lady.

According to Helen "Gus" Miller, president of the Butte Center for the Performing Arts, this marks the Orphan Girl Theatre's third attempt at winning a Coming Up Taller Award – and the first time a Montana organization has received the award. The theatre was a semi-finalist in both previous attempts.

Left to right: Robert Poore and Micaela Newman receive Coming Up Taller Award from First Lady Laura Bush and NEA Chairman Dana Gioia.

The Orphan Girl Theatre, with an annual operating budget of approximately $100,000, every year introduces around 500 children ages 5-18 to theatre arts. "We stuck out like a sore thumb for openers because we're so small," says Miller. "And who thinks small?"

While Miller attributes the successful grant application to several factors, the main component was an innovative program that encouraged children to create original melodramas based on Butte history. The melodramas were performed for civic organizations, in the courthouse rotunda, and throughout the summer at the World Museum of Mining.

> "And who thinks small?"
> – Gus Miller, President
> Butte Center for the Performing Arts

Micaela Newman, who was chosen by her peers to attend the awards ceremony, says the experience taught her "more about Butte's history than I've learned in school."

Her favorite aspect of the Orphan Girl Theatre is its embracing nature. "It lets everyone, regardless of talent, become part of the theatre 'family,'" she says. "Even children who don't want to be on stage can run the lights and sound, stage manage, make costumes, find props or direct a production. The theatre shares its magic with anyone interested in and open to its life-altering influence."

– Kristi Niemeyer

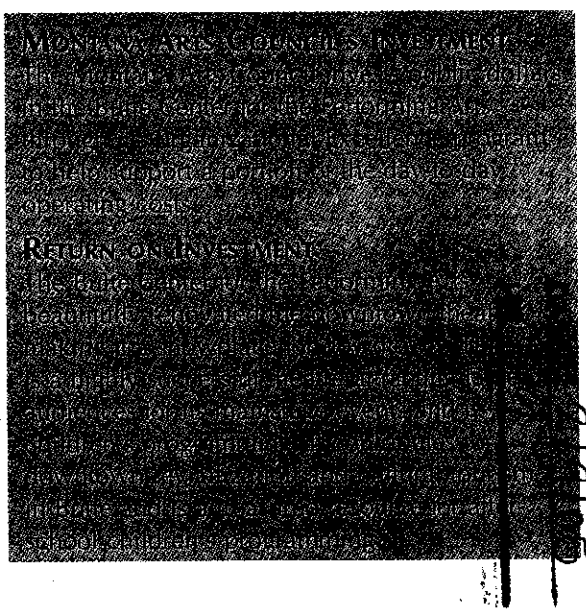

Exhibit 10

Reprinted from MONTANA – THE LAND OF CREATIVITY; THIRTY STORIES: RETURN ON INVESTMENT THE WESTERN WAY – a publication of the Montana

Reprinted from COMING UP TALLER AWARDS – a publication of The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, October 2003

Orphan Girl Theatre

Butte Center for the Performing Arts

The Butte Center for the Performing Arts is dedicated to the engagement and education of persons of all ages through the medium of live theater. Its two theaters—the Mother Lode, a 1,200-seat facility, and the Orphan Girl, a 106-seat renovated facility—not only serve the Butte community, but outlying areas as well. The Orphan Girl Theatre operates after-school programs year-round, including during the summer, that offer youth the opportunity to develop their knowledge and appreciation of local history, as well as their skills as writers and performers.

Uncovering nuggets of history in the Butte Archives, local libraries, the Mining Museum, and the former School of Mines, students work with historians and dramatists to create and perform a series of 30-minute melodramas. The genre suits the town's boom-and-bust history.

Iconic characters of the American West—scoundrels, damsels, heroes, agitators, organizers, immigrants, bartenders, and piano players—inhabit the plots of comedies and tragedies. The young actors title their melodramas with such names as *A Miner Difference of Opinion*, *Romance in Venus Alley*, and *Shades of Gold and Silver*. Through this exploration of their town, students develop a better understanding of history, enhance their ability to conduct historical research, and increase their appreciation of popular literature from the past.

Children also serve as the theater's directors, producers, stage managers, lighting and sound technicians, costume designers, and concessionaires for each performance. Working after school, on weekends, and during the summer months, they learn that even creative occupations involve discipline; teamwork; and, sometimes, repetitive tasks. They also experience the connection between the arts and community-building. By creating theater relevant to the lives of Butte's citizens, they are helping to revitalize the spirit of this town, devastated economically by the closing of the world's largest open-pit copper mining operation.

Derek Pruitt

Mark Thielmann

Far Right: Villians Landon Hansen and Mac Taylor scheme in *Romance in Venus Alley*. Below Right: Gary Warchola plays a miner and Terri Rask a waitress in *The Luck O' the Chinese* or *The Ancient Chinese Secret*.

Orphan Girl Theatre

Butte Center for the Performing Arts
1260 West Platinum Street
Butte, MT 59701
Phone: 406-782-7720
Fax: 406-782-1408
E-mail: shaggus@onewest.net
URL: buttecenter.tripod.com

Focus: Theater
Annual Number Participating: 500
Ages: 5–18
Annual Budget: $101,700

"The Orphan Girl melodramas have increased visits to [Butte's] historically important Central Business District and have enhanced the appreciation of our local history."
Ellen Crain, Director
Butte–Silver Bow Public Archives

NEA Spotlight:

Orphan Girl Theatre

In 2003, the Butte Center for the Performing Arts, located in Montana, received a Coming Up Taller Award from the NEA. This year, a new grant and a new summer camp program have been added to the Butte Center's list of awards and achievements.

Two theaters are located in the Butte Center: the Mother Lode and the Orphan Girl. It is the latter that has garnered a great deal of attention of late. The Orphan Girl Theatre operates year round with after-school and summer programs for children ages 5-18. In addition to preparing and presenting musical productions, young people write and produce melodramas set in turn-of-the-century Butte. These original, one-act historical comedies are researched at libraries, the Butte Archives, the Mining Museum, and the Montana Tech campus by the student actors who receive scholarships to participate in the program.

Through this research, the students develop a better understanding of history, enhance their ability to conduct historical research, and increase their appreciation of the popular literature from past decades. The Butte Center holds workshops, ranging from jazz and cabaret performance to the business of show business—with students handling royalties, box office duties, and concessions. They also learn stage lighting, set construction, and sound management. Recently, students have enjoyed producing a classic Greek drama—Sophocles' *Antigone*.

The latest program undertaken by the Butte Center is the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Summer Theatre Camp. Suzanne Konicek, Artistic Director of the Orphan Girl Theatre, said, "This summer we were provided with the resources to offer intensive theater workshops led by highly qualified instructors recruited from across the nation. As a result, Butte's young people enjoyed a summer theater camp experience that rivaled camp experiences offered in larger metropolitan areas. Not only was this a wonderful opportunity for the local students but an exciting chance for the Orphan Girl Theatre to push its educational program forward, reaching a greater number of students and a higher standard of excellence in theater education."

Finally, the Orphan Girl Theatre has received another grant. According to the President of the Butte Center, Helen Guthrie Miller, the Coming Up Taller Award helped persuade the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation, based in Montana, to give $75,000 over a three-year period. This represents the largest grant ever given by the Washington Foundation to an arts institution. Helen Guthrie Miller said, "The award...certainly put the exclamation point to peer recognition."

A scene from the Orphan Girl Theatre's production of Antigone.
Photo: courtesy of the Butte Center for the Performing Arts.

Conferred annually by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Coming Up Taller Awards recognize organizations that provide exemplary after-school programs in the arts and humanities. Each organization receives $10,000.

Reprinted from NEARTS, a publication of the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., October/December 2004 issue.