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PRESS RELEASE

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Upland Unified Arts Education Comes Full Circle for Former Student Turned Teacher

UPLAND – When Audrey Monfreda was an elementary student in Upland Unified School District, arts education largely meant occasional music lessons and singing songs with classmates. Today, the Upland High School graduate has returned to the District as a music teacher, helping elementary students discover their talents through a comprehensive arts program.

A 2019 Upland High graduate, Monfreda credits her experiences in the District's choir programs with inspiring her to pursue a career in music education. Now an elementary general music teacher at Magnolia, Pepper Tree, and Citrus elementary schools, she is among 11 specialized arts educators supporting Upland Unified's Harnessing Excellence through the Arts (HeARTs) program, which provides students with dedicated instruction in visual arts, media arts, music, theater, and dance beginning in kindergarten.

Monfreda said the experience has been especially meaningful. Not only has she returned to teach at Pepper Tree Elementary, where she once attended school, but she also helps with the choirs at Pioneer Junior High, where she first developed an appreciation for classical choral music under the guidance of a teacher who is now her colleague.

"I personally know and have experienced the positive impact of the UUSD arts program and being able to contribute to that impact is a wonderful, full circle experience," Monfreda said.

The District's HeARTs program represents a significant expansion of elementary arts education. Prior to 2021, the District offered only music instruction for students in grades four through six. Support from the Board of Education and District administration has since expanded those offerings to give students opportunities to explore a variety of artistic disciplines throughout their elementary school years.

"Arts education gives students opportunities to discover their interests, express themselves, and develop skills that support their growth in and beyond the classroom," Director of Curriculum, Instruction & Professional Learning Dr. Dana Dunams said. "Our Board, District, and site leadership, arts coordinators, and the teachers have made a tremendous commitment to expanding these opportunities and ensuring students have meaningful access to the arts beginning at an early age."

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Monfreda's journey illustrates the lasting impact of those opportunities. At Upland High, she performed with the Madrigals choir, served as the group's vice president, and discovered a passion for choral conducting. During her senior year, she traveled to Italy with the choir and conducted a choral piece inside the Pisa Cathedral, an experience she said was a defining moment in her musical journey.

Although she initially considered studying neuroscience, encouragement from her music teachers inspired her to pursue music. After earning a bachelor's degree in music education from Point Loma Nazarene University and completing her teaching credential at Cal Poly Pomona, she student-taught at Pioneer Junior High before joining Upland Unified as an elementary music educator.

Established in 2024, HeARTs provides a progression of arts experiences designed around students' grade levels. Kindergarten through third-grade students receive one 50-minute arts class each week, rotating between artistic disciplines during the school year. Students in grades four through six receive two 40-minute pathway classes weekly and may choose up to two offerings from general music, choir, band, visual art, media art, dance, and theater, depending on availability at their school.

Monfreda said one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching is watching students discover abilities they never knew they possessed. Recently, a group of fourth graders who were initially nervous about music class learned to sing in two-part harmony for the first time. Excited by how well they sounded together, the students begged her to record their performance so they could listen to themselves.

"I deeply believe that every voice has the ability to sing well and beautifully, and it is so fun to guide students through that journey," Monfreda said.

Students looking to further develop their skills can audition for honor band, honor choir, or the District's honors dance company, while performances and showcases throughout the year provide opportunities to share their talents with families and the community.

Access has remained central to the District's expansion of elementary arts education. Instruction is provided at no cost to families, and the District provides band instruments to students who need them, helping ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation.

Upland Unified's arts offerings continue through junior high and high school, giving students opportunities to build on the interests and skills they develop in elementary school. For students like Monfreda, those opportunities can spark a lifelong passion and even inspire a future career.

"When we talk about creating excellence for all students, we mean giving them opportunities to grow academically while also discovering their creativity, passions, and strengths," Superintendent Dr. Lynn Carmen Day said. "The expansion of our elementary arts program reflects our commitment to making those opportunities available to every student and helping them build on their many talents."



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PHOTO CAPTIONS

UUSD_ARTS1: Music teacher Audrey Monfreda teaches a new song to students at Pepper Tree Elementary.

UUSD_ARTS2: Students at Pepper Tree Elementary practice dance moves under the instruction of dance coach Marina Solis.

UUSD_ARTS3: Alyson Esbenshade, Upland Unified band teacher, provides instruction to students at Pepper Tree Elementary.

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