



## Join us!

**February 28 – March 1, 7 PM;**  
**March 2, 3 PM:** High School  
Musical, *Big Fish*, EMS Auditorium  
[easternmennonite.org/tickets](http://easternmennonite.org/tickets)

**March 28, 8:15 AM:** Family Visit Days  
for Middle and High School Students  
[easternmennonite.org/visit](http://easternmennonite.org/visit)

**April – May:** Touring Choir and  
Chamber Choir performances at various  
locations; full schedule available at  
[easternmennonite.org/tour](http://easternmennonite.org/tour)

**April 1, 4:30 PM:** Alumni Fan Night for  
Varsity Boys Baseball, EMS Baseball  
Field [easternmennonite.org/visit](http://easternmennonite.org/visit)

**April 4, 9 AM:** EMES Admissions  
Open House

**April 16, 6 AM - 8 PM:** Great Community  
Give, [easternmennonite.org/gcg](http://easternmennonite.org/gcg)

**April 22, 4:30 PM:** Alumni Night for V  
and MS Girls Soccer, EMS Soccer Field

**April 24, 6:30 PM:** EMES Spring Music  
Concert, EMS Auditorium

**April 28, 4:00 PM:** Alumni Night for  
Varsity Boys Tennis, EMU Tennis Courts

**May 2, 8 AM:** Fore the Flames Golf  
Tournament, Heritage Oaks  
[easternmennonite.org/golf](http://easternmennonite.org/golf)

Ms. Gascho and high school sculpture students  
with their work of art. Photo by Joaquin Sosa

## Art, Math, and Environmental Awareness

In Malea Gascho's high school sculpture class, students are collaborating to create a large-scale Timber Rattlesnake out of cardboard. This project not only hones their artistic skills but also raises environmental awareness.

Each day, the class develops a strategy and divides tasks among its members. While some focus on crafting the snake's head, others measure and construct the scales. Additional students work on building the spine or ribs, and a few experiment with prototypes for the rattle's mechanism.

In Ms. Gascho's classes, every student finds their niche, contributing their unique math and art skills to realize a shared vision. She emphasizes the importance of every voice being heard during the decision-making process.

Ms. Gascho is committed to teaching her students art skills that extend beyond the classroom, fostering creativity that will benefit them throughout their lives. Students explore their "why" – the reason behind their creations. Through research,

*(continued on page 5 sidebar)*



*Celebrating*

**20** YEARS

*of*

**FINE ARTS**

*at EMS*



This school year we celebrate 20 years in the fine arts addition at Eastern Mennonite School, built to house the auditorium, art studio, and the band and choir rooms. Students, families, and the broader community have enjoyed years of performances, arts, and celebrations in this space. We again express gratitude to the original board and donors who made this space possible. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to keeping the arts vibrant and alive at EMS!

## Collaborative Art that Builds Community

“Finding your own voice as an artist is to express your ideas and experiences by selecting the materials and techniques to bring these narratives to life,” says Erin Williams, cherished EMES art teacher. “Collaborative art introduces an additional dimension to the process—not only do you represent your own creative thoughts, but you also learn to make space for someone else’s vision.”

Ms. Williams often references a concept by EMES principal Maria Archer. Ms. Archer highlights that hospitality means not just making space for others but embracing the notion that the space will evolve and be co-created by someone else’s presence. Ms. Williams reflects, “Through collaborative art, students discover how to lend their unique voice and vision to the process, all while valuing each classmate’s ideas equally. They come to realize that the artwork wouldn’t exist in the same way without every individual’s contribution.” Each fall, K-5th grade art classes at EMES embark on the journey of crafting a masterpiece together, acquiring essential skills that extend beyond the canvas. Effective communication, active listening, negotiation, and conflict resolution are some of the skills students

employ. Collaborative art done in this way embodies the spirit of EMES—imperfect, at times messy, yet full of growth and understanding.

This year’s collaborative experience transcended mere art creation. As the students admired their final creation, they recognized that they had built more than just a piece of art—through the process of creating they made something beautiful and at the same time, a stronger sense of community.



The circle above shows part of the 3rd grade artwork.

- Title: The Dragon’s Colorful Crazy Sunset
- Size: 24 ”x 18”, Medium: paper, acrylic paint

3rd grade artists each painted six squares of paper, then used a variety of tools such as spools, wooden blocks, and lids to create patterns and implied textures. Students adhered their individual pieces onto a wooden panel, intermingled with those of their classmates, arranging them into a quilt pattern.



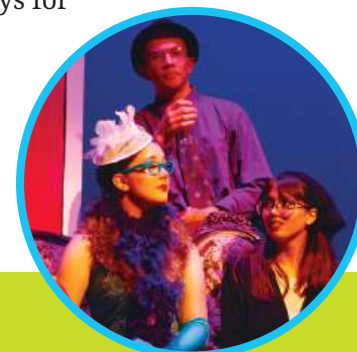
## “Try again, fail again, fail better”

Mark Gornto, English and Theater teacher, has an innovative approach to the subjects he teaches. “Theater exists on paper first,” he stresses, highlighting the need to understand scripts as literature before transitioning to performance. He believes that analyzing and interpreting a script or text is key to successfully bringing it to life on stage.

Students may initially feel hesitant to actively engage with scripts and theater. He reminds the students it’s called a “play” because they get to play! But it’s also so much more than that. He shares Samuel Beckett’s famous quote, “Try again, fail again, fail better,” which underscores the value of taking risks in his classes. He encourages his students to bring their true selves into their work, creating an environment where creativity and vulnerability are prioritized over performance and results.

Mark finds motivation in change and the adaptability it requires, drawing inspiration from watching the students learn what they are capable of. Through this unique curriculum, students not only learn about theater but also gain insights into themselves. While these classes are still new, Mark can already see the benefits.

As a member of the equity work group at EMS, Mark is dedicated to integrity and responsibility, having helped craft a statement of belonging for EMS. He believes in the school and advocates for conflict and accountability as pathways for progress toward that goal. He hopes for more opportunities for exploration and bold choices so that students can continue to grow.





# Music for All in the EMS Tradition

At EMS the music program thrives as a dynamic center of creativity and collaboration, thanks to 6-12th grade educators like Maria Lorcás, Nick Gardner, and Jared Stutzman. Their commitment to developing skilled musicians AND responsible citizens fosters a unique environment where students can flourish. The music teachers agree that students who can both sing and play an instrument gain a richer understanding of music as a whole.

Maria Lorcás, strings teacher, is influenced by her upbringing in Venezuela and the principles of El Sistema—a music education initiative aimed at fostering social change. Maria believes music education should go beyond technical skills: it should also build character and citizenship. “It’s not just teaching the content; it’s about being a good citizen, a good person,” she emphasizes.

Nick Gardner reinforces this idea, highlighting the program’s inclusivity. “For me, EMS is really surprising in that our music program offers so much to our students,” he notes. Unlike many local schools, EMS guarantees that every middle school student receives daily music instruction, fostering a love for music from a young age. Nick enjoys witnessing his students’ growth.



The music program at EMS is known for its excellence defined by its “music for all” philosophy, as articulated by Jared Stutzman. This approach values broad participation enabling students of various skill levels to engage with music. Jared’s background in teaching strings before becoming the choir director provides him with a unique perspective on the connection between vocal and instrumental music.

Beyond the classroom, communal singing during chapels fosters a sense of belonging among students. Music here is not merely an individual pursuit but a shared journey. Each person possesses a unique voice, and when we unite our vocal talents, our individual and collective experiences create a stronger, more beautiful, and truthful community. We hope you remember how music in the EMS tradition has enriched your life.



# The Magic of Dessert Theater

Every fall, fourth and fifth grade students, led by the passionate Joy Anderson, embark on a journey that involves painting sets, crafting costumes, memorizing lines, and mastering technical aspects. All this work culminates in a Dessert Theater performance for their families, teachers, and peers.

This beloved tradition is more than just an elementary play; it is an integral part of the EMS

curriculum that fosters the holistic development of its students. “It’s important to me that kids start right away seeing theater as an integrated art,” says Joy, who serves as both director and music teacher. Her dedication to nurturing young talent shines through every aspect of the production.

What makes this event truly remarkable is the level of professionalism and creativity displayed by the students. First-year parents often leave the performances with a look of astonishment on their faces, seeing their children take leadership on stage far beyond their expectations. Under Joy’s expert guidance, along with the support of classroom teachers and EMES staff, these students create a memorable performance that leaves a lasting impression.

Mark Gornto, Middle School English and Theater teacher, assists the students with theater lighting, sound, and the technical aspects of the show. He has a personal connection to this work as an actor who worked on sets as well. Tech students learn that they are creating the world that supports the show, giving creative input without being in the spotlight. Plus, who doesn’t love to push buttons?

# Advancement Team Update

## WE'VE SURPASSED OUR FLAMES FUND GOAL!

This milestone gives us space to dream of other possibilities that we've put on hold.

### FLAMES FUND

2024-25 Goal: \$575,000 Contributions: \$630,912

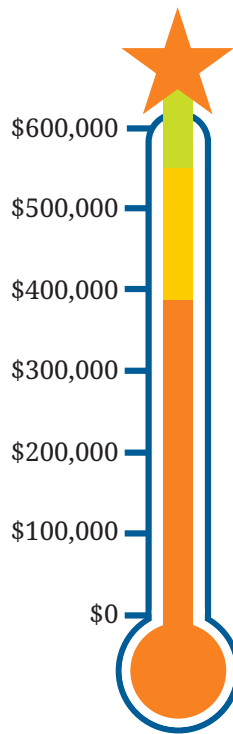
- Other Contributions\* \$82,126
- Christmas Fund Drive \$163,663
- Virginia Tax Credit Gifts \$385,123

### CHRISTMAS FUND DRIVE

451 supporters came together to give \$163,663 for the Christmas Fund Drive this year – that's 108% of our goal! Thank you for inspiring our students and teachers with your generous care.

### VIRGINIA EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP TAX CREDITS

Over 50 contributors gave \$385,123, dedicated to financial aid for eligible students. Thank you to our Virginia supporters for exceeding the \$350,000 goal! [easternmennonite.org/virginia-tax-credits](http://easternmennonite.org/virginia-tax-credits)



\*thanks to a surprise gift of \$40,000

## Art, Math, and Environmental Awareness

(continued from page 1)

students discovered people often harm endangered Timber rattlesnakes out of fear, despite their harmless nature when not provoked.

Her dedication to her students and their artistic journey is clear. Playful yet serious, organized yet fun, Ms. Gascho embodies the ideal art teacher and her own artistic spirit shines through. She regularly showcases her own artwork at local exhibitions. From grades 6 to 12, she nurtures not only artistic skills but also a love for creativity, risk-taking, playfulness, and collaboration. Entering her classroom feels like stepping into a welcoming haven, filled with an open invitation: Let's create something together!



### WELCOME DIEGO TORRES TO ADMISSIONS

We're delighted to introduce Diego Torres as our new admissions counselor. He brings a passion for community-building and educating the whole person—mind, body, and spirit. A recent graduate of Goshen College, Torres

earned degrees in secondary and physical education, along with a minor in health. If you know family or friends interested in EMS, please contact Diego! [easternmennonite.org/facultystaff/diego-torres](http://easternmennonite.org/facultystaff/diego-torres)

### 1917 CIRCLE PLANNED GIVING

Donors who plan to give gifts through wills, or include EMS as a beneficiary on accounts, are part of our 1917 circle. These contributions have a transformational impact on our learning community for years to come. Our development office also welcomes gifts of stocks, real estate or other assets. Learn more at [easternmennonite.org/planned-giving](http://easternmennonite.org/planned-giving)

### GREAT COMMUNITY GIVE April 16

Join the Great Community Give on Wednesday, April 16, 2025. This celebration of philanthropy by our local Community Foundation supports nonprofits that make our community strong. Help us meet our goal! [easternmennonite.org/gcg](http://easternmennonite.org/gcg)

### GOLF TOURNAMENT May 2

Mark your calendars! Friday, May 2, 2025 at Heritage Oaks Golf Course in Harrisonburg. Sponsorships are now open and player registration opens March 4. [easternmennonite.org/golf](http://easternmennonite.org/golf)

### HOMECOMING 2025 Oct. 17-18

Nominate an alumnus from a class ending in 5 and 0 to recognize during Homecoming Weekend. Submit the application online at [easternmennonite.org/alumni](http://easternmennonite.org/alumni) to help us celebrate alumni.

Join Us!

Today is written by Abigail Cook, communication specialist, and designed by Lindsey Kolb. All photos by EMS staff. Editorial support from Trisha Blosser, director of advancement, and Paul Leaman, head of school.

Send feedback to [today@easternmennonite.org](mailto:today@easternmennonite.org)

Find past issues at [easternmennonite.org/today](http://easternmennonite.org/today)

*In admissions processes, Eastern Mennonite School does not discriminate on the basis of any race, color, handicap, national or ethnic origin, or religion, and admits students to all rights, privileges, programs and activities generally accorded or made available to students at the school.*

*The following person has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the school's non-discrimination policies, including its Title IX policy: Debbie Katz, high school counselor, 540-236-6022. For assistance related to Title IX or other civil rights laws, please contact OCR at [OCR@ed.gov](mailto:OCR@ed.gov) or 800-421-3481, TDD 800-877-8339.*

## VISION

Eastern Mennonite School aspires to embody the love of Jesus as a learning community where every student belongs, thrives, and joins God's work in the world.

## MISSION

Eastern Mennonite School, with home and church, invites students to faith in Jesus Christ, academic excellence, personal integrity, and compassionate service.

## FOLLOW US:



## Join us for our musical production of *Big Fish*

The Eastern Mennonite School theater community is preparing for a “big splash” with the musical *Big Fish* coming on February 28-March 2. The production draws together over 40 students in grades 2-12 for a meaningful, wholly satisfying presentation that involves dancing, stilts, and hundreds of paper daffodils!

*Big Fish* is the story of the fracture and repair of a father/son relationship played by juniors Zach Halteman '26 and Jackson Comfort '26. Director Joy Anderson is anticipating a moving performance and is so grateful for all the support of the community to bring *Big Fish* to the stage. “We couldn’t get everything done without all the family help and support out there.”

Performances are Friday, February 28 and Saturday, March 1 at 7 PM, as well as Sunday, March 2 at 3 PM in the school’s auditorium. Purchase tickets online at [easternmennonite.org/tickets](https://easternmennonite.org/tickets), stop by the office between 8 AM and 4 PM, or pay at the door.



—Julianne Ross