

Queen's University

INITIATIVE CAMPAIGN

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Aubrey Dan

A parent steps into the spotlight

Aubrey Dan started his relationship with Queen's as a typical parent. By the time his daughter, Alyse, was in her third year, though, the relationship was anything but typical.

During Alyse's first two years at Queen's, Mr. Dan visited her occasionally. But when she was in her third year and began participating in theatrical productions in a management role, Mr. Dan, a celebrated theatre enthusiast and producer, made the trip from Toronto more frequently.

"At one show, I met the department head, Craig Walker," Mr. Dan recalls. "He told me that the next student production was going to be *The Drowsy Chaperone*." It was a production that Mr. Dan knew well. He was, after all, the producer who brought the Canadian-penned musical to Toronto after it won five Tony Awards on Broadway.

Dr. Walker asked Mr. Dan to speak to Drama students about *The Drowsy Chaperone*. Mr. Dan obliged, bringing the play's co-author, Bob Martin, with him. "My relationship with Queen's changed at that moment," Mr. Dan says. "It moved from being a parent to being able to provide the students with a unique experience, where they were learning about a



show and getting ready to perform it, and suddenly they were meeting the producer and the writer, who was also the star of the show. It really helped forge a bond with the university.”

A native of North Toronto, Mr. Dan grew up in his father’s business, Novopharm Limited, a multi-million-dollar generic drug manufacturer. When the company was sold in 2000, he started Dancap Private Equity, a private equity firm that invests in small and mid-size companies and helps them grow.

He also started another company, Dancap Productions, which backed the Tony-winning *Memphis* on Broadway and brought 23 touring company productions of big-name Broadway shows to Canada including *The Drowsy Chaperone*. He also produced the Canadian production of *Jersey Boys* that ran for two years at the Toronto Centre for the Arts. “I never planned to get into the theatre business,” he says. “I can’t sing and I can’t act, but I’ve been a theatregoer for many, many years and I felt that Toronto needed more choices.”

Mr. Dan’s passion for theatre is matched only by his passion for philanthropy. To date, he and his wife, Marla, have donated more than \$25 million to health and education-related causes. In 2016, two years after Alyse’s graduation, the couple donated \$5 million to Queen’s.

On April 7, 2016, the family was back in Kingston to celebrate the merging of the Department of Drama with the School of Music and the naming of the new entity as the Dan School of Drama and Music in recognition of their generosity.

The Dans’ gift will embrace a bold vision of excellence in the arts centred in innovative programming, research-creation and teaching in drama, music and music theatre. Mr. Dan considers it important that his namesake school be recognized as a leader in new approaches to educational programming and distinguished by the breadth and depth of its study of music theatre.

The inspiration for the gift, Mr. Dan says, was the glittering Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts, the School’s performance centre and extended teaching space since 2014. He hopes his gift will allow the school to mount productions worthy of that home. “Part of that is scholarships,” he says, “so we can entice the best students from across Canada. Another part is to help provide the production resources that help bring a show to life so that we can attract the best professors. When you have the resources to do that, that’s the difference between good and great.”

His vision involves growing the music theatre program to the point where it can generate commercially viable theatrical productions that can be exported around the world, and graduates who are equipped to make substantive contributions to the craft.

“Most departments and schools within the higher education sector operate in isolation, but not at Queen’s as far as I have seen” Mr. Dan says. “By bringing the two schools together, Queen’s is giving students access to courses and pathways that are career-oriented and preparing them not only for the performance side of the industry but the business and leadership side as well. It allows for a cross-fertilization and more inspiration for new ideas. And those ideas will help keep the theatre business viable for years to come.”

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