The idea of a performing arts program started small at Maryhaven Day Habilitation Program, with a small group of staff members and consumers writing short skits that they performed in various elementary and middle schools on Long Island. These skits became so popular that the organization, based in Port Jefferson Station, New York, started receiving phone calls from other schools in Suffolk County requesting performances. Since that humble beginning in 1998, Maryhaven has grown into a performing arts center fully funded by the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

Nearly 1,000 Maryhaven staff members provide day, residential, and school services for more than 2,000 consumers. Even with these larger numbers, consumers have a voice at consumer advisory board meetings. At a board meeting almost eight years ago, a few individuals expressed an interest in learning how to act, sparking a discussion about how to best fulfill this goal. After consumers outlined their interests and ideas, a troupe of consumers and staff members was formed and began performing at schools. By popular demand, the group expanded presentations to nursing homes and schools for children with special needs.

About one year into this successful endeavor, the troupe wanted to expand further by putting on a full-length play. Songs selected from popular Broadway musicals, including hits from Phantom of the Opera, Cats, The Lion King, and Les Misérables, were adapted for the performance. Consumers rehearsed this new musical medley diligently, and although it didn’t debut on an actual stage, it didn’t diminish the enjoyment of the acting group performing this first big production or the audience of happy friends, staff, family members, and other consumers.

In early 2001, Maryhaven wrote a proposal to OMRDD to downsize its day habilitation program in Terryville, New York, and open a performing arts center in Port Jefferson Station. The OMRDD expressed a great deal of interest in the program—in the planning, the leasing and redesigning of space, and all the other factors that go into establishing a new program. In April 2002, Maryhaven opened its doors to the Performing Arts Center. The rewards have been invaluable, including the degree of self-confidence, self-worth, and independence that participating consumers have been able to feel and hold on to because of their participation in the various performances and activities throughout the year. Maryhaven staff members and other stakeholders recognize a special thrill every time they see a rehearsal, dress rehearsal, or an actual performance; it’s the smiling faces, the energy, and the degree of self-control that the consumers express while performing that makes it worth all the effort.

The performing arts program currently has 10 staff members and 36 performers. A recent expansion approval will allow the center to work with up to 40 consumers and expand to 15 staff members. To continue the good work, Maryhaven is looking to expand into a larger space, one that will allow for an elevated stage, a more advanced sound and lighting system, and the ability to offer opportunities to additional aspiring thespians.