Phoebe Mainster

Phoebe Mainster never thought she would be doing this again. She's currently the president of the board of directors for the Jewish Ensemble Theatre (JET), a position she held 20 years ago.

"It's rising to duty twice in one lifetime," Mainster said. "If you're needed you show up, that's the name of the game."

She said that they turned to her during this time - where theaters, much like everyone else, are having to reconfigure, well, every aspect of their work due to the coronavirus pandemic - because not only is she a recognized name in the community but they simply thought she would be a good person to take the helm.

"There'll be all kinds of new challenges that will have to be overcome because of this new normal," said Mainster, who has lived in Bloomfield Hills for nearly 40 years.

Normally, JET would be setting up for their fall fundraiser right around now, and getting ready for their upcoming season, one she said has been planned and planned and re-planned. They are currently waiting to one, be able to open, and two, figure out what type of production they should do. Should it be a full-stage production, a musical, or a one-man show?

This summer, they are considering doing something they've never done before, a children's theater program, with the possibility of an adult theater class as well.

"It would be nice to be able to put your emotions into some kind of approved outlet," she said.

Wanting to reach children through theater at JET has been a goal since their inception. Mainster would know - she's not only president, but was one of the theater's founding members.

When that original team got together over 30 years ago, one of their first goals was to become a theater that represents not only the Jewish community but also has the interests of the general community. But during Mainster's first run as president they decided more needed to be done.

"We recognized that not only were we a main stage theater but that it was important to reach out to the school communities," said Mainster, who was an English literature professor at Wayne State University for more than 35 years.

This mindset played a large role in the anti-bullying tours the theater has done for over 20 years. They've reached over 800,000 students in Michigan schools with the interactive program which includes a production and talkback with the actors.

Anti-bullying isn't the only message the theater has become well-known for throughout the decades.

"We think that the message of The Diary of Anne Frank is crucial," Mainster said.

JET has done that production annually almost as long as they've been up-and-running. Over the past 25 years, JET has produced The Diary of Anne Frank more than any other theater in the world. Each year students are brought by bus to the theater and for the last several years, they've done a two-week run at the Detroit Institute of Arts. For many students, this is often their first time seeing a theater production. Much like their anti-bullying program, this also has a talkback.

And in February, for the first time, they did a production in Phoenix.

That's only the start for where Mainster hopes to take The Diary of Anne Frank.

"We really think this is a message that needs to be everywhere. We'd like to see ourselves go to the East coast, West coast," she said.