

By Taylor Boyd, Henry County Enterprise

With nearly \$75,000 already invested in scholarships and arts opportunities between Henry County, Martinsville, and Roanoke, the For Alison Foundation is only teeing up as it begins its eighth year of commitment to young people in the communities it serves.

In April, drama students from Bassett High School will attend a performance of "Beetlejuice" at the Tanger Center in Greensboro, N.C., courtesy of the foundation.

"And there's more to come," Barbara Parker said of the plans underway for this year by the foundation that began in 2016 to honor Alison Parker's life and continue her legacy by giving children arts opportunities in southwest Virginia.

The daughter of Barbara and Andy Parker, Alison "was a graduate of James Madison University (JMU) School of Media Arts and Design and she was a journalist. She got a job before she graduated college, and went to North Carolina to work as a journalist for WCTI television," she said.

In 2014, Alison Parker was recruited by WDBJ to work on the morning show. She also relocated back to the area.

"On August 26, 2015, she was doing just a routine show at Smith Mountain Lake, and talking to one of the people who was on staff about planning events that they had there at the marina," Barbara Parker said. Alison Parker and her cameraman, Adam Ward, "were shot and killed a disgruntled former employee of WDBJ."

Because the show was live, the shootings were televised, Barbara Parker said, adding that the gunman also recorded the incident and posted it online.

After Alison's death, Barbara Parker said that she and her husband had a choice -- to either curl up or to get up and take action. They chose the latter.

"We started two things. We started fighting gun violence, we did everything we could to call attention to gun violence in this country, and try to do something about it," she said.

The two also created the foundation to honor Alison's love for the arts.

"We did not want her to be remembered only for the way that she died, but for what she was like and who she was. She was so passionate about the arts," Barbara Parker said.

Barbara Parker spent 19 years as the Director of Programs for Piedmont Arts. While there, daughter Alison visited after school multiple times a week.

Alison "was also a dancer. She danced for 13 years, most of that in Martinsville. She loved the arts. She loved to feature it in all her stories that she did with WDBJ," Barbara Parker said, and added that many children don't have those opportunities to experience the arts.

As a result, the For Alison Foundation's mission is "to give kids arts opportunities that can really be meaningful," Barbara Parker said. "There's a lot of kids with talent, they don't have the access to the things that" youngsters in larger cities have, "and they don't have opportunities to go see live theater, and things like that."

Since its formation, the foundation has maintained its commitment to the arts and to giving youngsters opportunities they otherwise may not have.

"We have some things that we support every year because they're just meaningful. One of those is the Grandin Theatre Film Lab in Roanoke," Barbara Parker said of the film lab that is an afterschool program that teaches children about filmmaking.

"They write scripts, they film scripts, they direct, they do everything it takes to produce these short films. They've won Emmy Awards for student films," she said.

Barbara Parker said knowledge learned from the program gives students the ability to work in the film industry right after high school and earn union wages.

The foundation also gives scholarships to young people at the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra and students at the Star City School of Ballet.

Pedro Szalay, owner of Star City and one of Alison's friends, named his studio the 'Alison Parker Studio.' Closer to the Parker's home in Martinsville and Henry County, "we try to give those kids opportunities they're normally not going to have because of where we live," Barbara Parker said.

For instance, the foundation took all the art students from Martinsville High School to the Taubman Museum of Arts in Roanoke to view the Ruth E. Carter exhibit.

Carter is "the costume designer who created all the costumes for 'Black Panther,' all of Spike Lee's films. She won an Academy Award for 'Black Panther.' Her costumes were on exhibit up there, so we paid for them to be able to go up and see that," Barbara Parker said.

The foundation also paid for fifth grade students attending Campbell Court Elementary School to see the "Lion King" at the Steven Tanger Center for the Performing Arts in Greensboro, N.C.

"This spring, we're sending all the drama students from Bassett High School to see 'Beetlejuice' in Greensboro at the Tanger Center," she said.

Barbara Parker said it's exciting for children to get out and see the world, especially in the arts.

"You have kids that are so talented, and they really want to do something with that. Sometimes going to see a professional show is what will just really give them that spark" and reinforce the knowledge "that there's a world out there that's not a small town," Barbara Parker said. "It's a whole new world for them."

A scholarship also was established at JMU in Alison's honor. It is currently endowed at an estimated \$375,000, Barbara Parker said.

"We give a merit scholarship to a rising senior in the School of Media Art and Design. We also give a four-year scholarship for an incoming freshman," she said.

JMU also named its television studio after Alison. "So, if you watch one of their broadcasts it says, 'live from the Alison B. Parker Studio,'" Barbara Parker said, and added that she believes Alison's legacy will continue to thrive.

"They're not going to forget her, she seemed to have touched a lot of people's lives," Barbara Parker said. "That gives us a lot of comfort: That we can do something to impact other kids' lives."

For more information go to [www.foralison.org](http://www.foralison.org), or [Facebook.com/ForAlisonFoundation](https://www.facebook.com/ForAlisonFoundation).

To donate go to the website or send a check to P.O. Box 1205 Collinsville, VA 24078.