

Though not always lucrative, arts career offers chance to live a dream

An artful



By **FRELIN JONES**
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MORGANTON — Not everyone strives for a 9-to-5 job, five days a week with good benefits and a high salary.

A select few choose careers that challenge them with long hours and little pay but offer something more than financial security — a chance to live a dream.

"Yes, I'm preparing for a life of poverty," Zach Lail said.

Lail recently graduated from East Burke High School where he took a theater class and was part of the Drama Club and now is enrolled at Western Piedmont Community College to study acting.

Lail is fully committed to trying for a career in acting, leaving behind all thoughts of working in computers which could bring in a great deal of money for the young man.

The acting bug bit Lail long before he stepped foot in the East Burke theater class. During his sophomore year, some of Lail's friends at East Burke were joining the Drama Club and asked him to join with them. He did and his life seemed to change.

"I didn't know I could act until then," Lail said. "I couldn't even stand up in front of a class and now twice a week I stand before 60 to 70 people a night."

In his junior year in high school, Lail began acting in his first show. He slowly made more friends who introduced him to the Old Colony Players in Valdese during his senior year.

Over the past summer, Lail was hired as the combat choreographer and also had two parts, the first as a French soldier who

See **ARTS** / Page 8A



Staff photo by Bridgett Baker

Zach Lail, Thomas McCombs and Stephanie Albertact, from left, act out a scene from a play they are taking part in at Western Piedmont Community College.

Editor's note: Today's story is the final installment in a four-part series examining the value of arts programs in Burke County schools.

Arts

Continued from Page One

fights the Waldensians and the second as John Long, the first mayor of Valdese, in the summer show, "From This Day Forward."

The combat choreographer is the one who maps out the fight scenes so that the scenes look realistic but the actors remain safe.

In fact, Lail got the job after working with his mentor, Scott Woodard, on his senior project at East Burke last year.

"Scott taught me everything I needed to know," Lail said. "He trained me and got me the job at 'From This Day Forward.'"

Woodard taught Lail how to use stage weapons, the history of the weapons, basic moves for stage combat, and the safety aspects of fight scenes.

"The most important thing in stage combat is actor safety," Lail said, "then does it fit in with the show and finally does it look good."

There are many hats someone can wear in theater and Lail has tried on each of them.

"I've tried directing and hated it, but acting I love," he said.

Lail said he does not think one teacher inspired him, but he said the theater teacher at East Burke, Heather Conwell, is a "really good drama teacher."

Now Lail has moved on to college and is continuing to study theater at Western Piedmont. After two years at WPCC,

Lail plans to transfer to Appalachian State University where he will double major in education and drama.

After school, Lail said he hopes to teach theater in the public schools.

While he continues his theater study at Western Piedmont, Lail is under the tutelage of another Burke County student who followed a career path in the arts.

Cheryl Oxford is the head of the performing arts program at WPCC and was a graduate of Glen Alpine High School, where her exposure to the theater was the senior play.

After Oxford graduated from high school, she attended the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill where she studied English and speech education and then earned her masters degree and Ph.D. in performance studies from Northwestern University.

Western Piedmont offered Oxford a part-time teaching position in 1982 and the next year she was offered a full-time teaching position and so she came home to teach the performing arts.

"Our open door philosophy (at Western Piedmont) encourages the attitude that anyone with any amount of theater experience can be part of the wonderful experience of putting on a play," Oxford said.