

For Dr. Carlo Spataro, the stage has been part of his life for as long as he can remember. Growing up in Union City, New Jersey, just four miles from Times Square and Broadway, young Carlo was surrounded by music and performance. His mother, father, sister and brother all shared a passion for the arts, while Carlo participated in Saturday morning radio programs and developed an early fascination with performing.

“My first stage appearance came in the fourth grade, when I beat out the older kids and landed the lead role of Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*,” Spataro recalled. “By sixth grade, I was performing in radio dramas, including *Life with Luigi*, where I played Uncle Luigi. That’s when the theater bug bit me, and as they say, the rest is history.”

From Student to Educator

Spataro attended the State University College at Cortland in New York, where he majored in Elementary Education while pursuing a second major in Theatre and Speech. He immersed himself in every theatre course available, performing in productions that included Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.

After graduation, he pursued graduate theatre teaching assistantships and ultimately chose Purdue University, drawn by its new graduate theatre program and outstanding facilities. Beginning in 1960, he specialized in directing while also teaching public speaking.

“Teaching public speaking was one of the best experiences I had at Purdue,” Spataro said. “It taught me how important it is to help students find their voice and communicate with confidence.”

While earning his master’s degree, Spataro also taught sixth grade in West Lafayette, Indiana, and directed productions including *Much Ado About Nothing* and Anton Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*. He earned his master’s degree in 1963 and later became Drama Director at Monroe High School in Michigan.

Then came the opportunity that would define his career.

44 Years at MCC

In 1965, Spataro joined Muskegon County Community College, beginning a 44-year career that lasted until his retirement in 2010.

“When I arrived, the college was still being built,” he recalled. “I remember walking around campus with buildings under construction. My office was in the VanderLaan building.”

Spataro was hired to develop MCC's theatre and speech programs into rigorous academic programs. He later helped establish the college's General Humanities program and served as a faculty advisor to one of MCC's fraternities.

But it was on the stage where his influence became most visible.

As Director of Theatre, Spataro built MCC's program into one of the region's strongest community college theatre programs. Productions included *Of Mice and Men*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Sam Shepard's *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

"Every production was an opportunity to teach," Spataro said. "You weren't just putting on a play. You were helping young people discover what they could do."

One of his proudest accomplishments was *Of Mice and Men*, which MCC's company toured to Hope College. His passion for ambitious productions also led him to bring *Camino Real* to MCC after seeing the play himself.

Beyond the classroom and stage, Spataro became a major force in West Michigan's arts community. He helped establish the White Lake Theatre Company in 1973, directed *You Can't Take It with You* at the Howmet Playhouse and served as Director of Theatre at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp, where he founded its theatre program. He also directed *Michigan Dream*, the first opera presented at Blue Lake.

A Teacher Who Never Stopped Teaching

Perhaps Spataro's greatest legacy, however, can be found in the students he inspired.

Generations of his former students went on to careers in theatre and education. Among them were Don Bogema, who later joined the MCC faculty; Tom Harryman; and Dave Doring, who began working with Spataro while still in high school before becoming a professional actor in Minneapolis.

Years after graduating, Doring unexpectedly encountered his former teacher at the Spring Lake Aquatic Center.

"Hey, Dr. Spataro," Doring called out.

For Spataro, moments like that represented something far more meaningful than any production or award.

Another former student, Robbie Williams, went on to build a successful theatre career in California. When Williams eventually returned to Muskegon as MCC's commencement

speaker at the Frauenthal Center, he credited Spataro's teaching and acting methodology as profoundly influential in his professional life.

"Those are the moments you remember," Spataro said. "When a former student comes back and tells you that something you taught them made a difference."

Spataro also served two years as chair of MCC's Creative and Performing Arts Department, now the Arts & Humanities Department. Later, Rich Oman became Director of Theatre while Spataro continued as Artistic Director.

A Legacy That Lives On

Family remained central to Spataro throughout his life. His brother, Vincent, became a school superintendent and later worked for the State of New York while pursuing acting as a member of the Screen Actors Guild.

Spataro also endured the devastating loss of his son, Lawrence "Larry" A. Spataro, a Muskegon city commissioner, who died in 2023 at age 56.

Larry was remembered as a servant leader who dedicated his life to advocating for people who could not advocate for themselves.

After 44 years at MCC, Spataro often described his career at the college as the happiest time of his life.

"I served under eight presidents and had the privilege of teaching and directing thousands of students," he said. "Even after I retired, I missed teaching every day."

Wanting to give back to the institution that had given him so much, Spataro established an endowed scholarship to ensure his family's legacy would continue supporting future theatre students.

In 2021, he began contributions to establish the Vincent J. Spataro Endowed Scholarship in Theatre. In August 2024, the scholarship was renamed the Lawrence O. Spataro Endowed Scholarship in Theatre in honor of his son.

Today, that scholarship represents more than financial assistance. It carries forward a family's love of the arts, a teacher's belief in the power of education and a lifetime spent helping young people find their voices.

For Dr. Carlo Spataro, the curtain may have closed on his career, but the work continues every time an MCC student steps onto a stage, discovers a talent or finds the confidence to take a bow.

He says his greatest production was never a single play. It was the generations of lives he helped shape.