

WINTER 2001 NEWSLETTER

Unusual Times

Broadway Stars Turn Out in NY to Benefit US

Who are The Unusual Suspects? To learn more, turn to back cover

EVENING RAISES FUNDS AS IT HONORS US AS RECIPIENT OF NATIONAL AWARD

The brightest stars from Broadway shone for the benefit of The Unusual Suspects at an evening of theatre in New York recently. **Mandy Patankin, Betty Buckley, Claudia Shear, B.D. Wong, the *Music Man's* Craig Bierko, Mark Linn-Baker,** Tony award-winning actress **Heather Headley** of *Aida* and Tony award winning playwright **David Henry Hwang** were among the theatre luminaries participating in the event on November 20.

A private literary club served as the venue for the elegant evening which included a celebrity salon, dramatic readings of the Unusual Suspects' writings and a silent auction of celebrity-donated memorabilia. Board members Sarah Key and David Henry Hwang chaired the event, which honored US as a recipient of the **National Juvenile Justice**

Award 2000 (see story on page 4). The highlight of the evening was the reading of some of The Unusual



Some of the stars enjoying the evening. Left to right: Craig Bierko, B.D. Wong, Sally Fairman (behind B.D. Wong), David Henry Hwang, Sarah Key, Betty Buckley, Lisa Lindstrom, Mark Linn-Baker, Laura Ford, Laura Leigh Hughes and John Carraja

Claudia Shear and Mark Linn-Baker read a scene from "Simple Pictures" by Group Home youth



Photo by Katherine Rupppe

Suspect's works. Anyone who has seen an Unusual Suspects production can attest to the emotional power of the stories the kids have written. Imagine the impact of those words voiced by these acclaimed actors and others. The readings really captured the heart and soul of the program.

The evening's benefit successfully raised money for the program through donations, ticket sales, and sales generated by the silent auction. These items included: **Ethel Merman's** pearls, a baseball autographed by superstar player **Alex Rodriguez**; two tickets to *The*

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Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes

Unusual Suspect Duc is congratulated by former Volunteer Leslie Bibb

A Look Inside Unusual Suspect's Life in Prison DUC TRIED AS ADULT UNDER RECENT PASSAGE OF PROPOSITION 21

By LESLIE NEALE

In the process of making a documentary on juvenile offenders who are being tried as adults, the writer became the friend, guide and mentor to Duc, an Unusual Suspect at Central Juvenile Hall. Duc was recently sentenced to 35 years to life for his part in a crime where no one was injured. He is awaiting transfer from County Jail to State Prison.

7:23pm. Saturday. A collect call comes in from L.A. County Jail. I accept the charges. Duc is on the other end of the line, but his voice is raspy, "What's going on?" I asked. "I'm back, it's over," I hear him mumble "It's the Koreans and the Vietnamese, just a one-on-one deal," he told me. In County Jail, the Asians are all housed on the same tier to protect them from the Mexicans and the Blacks. But the different ethnicities don't mingle: the Chinese have it in for the Koreans who go for the Vietnamese who jump the Philipinos who hate the Cambodians and so on and so on.

We've been through this before. We both know the drill: Stay low. Keep focused. Float on the outside. When he first was transferred to County Jail from Central

Juvenile Hall one week before his eighteenth birthday, he called me one night scared, shaken, unsure what to do. He explained a riot was going to pop off and he was expected to fight even though it had nothing to do with him. Should he fight and risk getting seriously hurt and perhaps sent to solitary confinement? Or does he stay in the cell and get beaten up by his cellies later for not fighting and lose any future protection from them?

But tonight a fist met his right eye and a broomstick got jammed into his stomach. While I set to calming him down, counting out breaths for him, he throws up three times.

He was arrested when he was 16 years old for driving a car from which the front seat passenger fired four

shots at rival gang members in another car. One bullet hit the car; no one was injured. On January 5, 2001 he was convicted of two attempts of first degree murder and sentenced to 35 years to life. Although not a gang member himself, Duc was in the car with two known gang members. Tried under the Gang Conspiracy laws, he is being punished not for what he did, but for what he could be considered to do in the future.

Like many of the kids I meet in Juvenile Hall, he has greatly benefited from his time spent at juvi. His only wish is that he could have the chance to prove to his loved ones and to society he has changed.

LESLIE What was it like when you first came to Juvenile Hall, what were you thinking?

(continued on page 4)



The actors prepare for the reading of the kids' work: Left to right: Craig Bierko, Claudia Shear, Mandy Patankin, Kathryn Grody, Mark Linn Baker, John Carrafa, John Freeland Jr. and Laura Ford.

Broadway Stars Benefit US (continued from page 1)

Music Man including a backstage visit with *Music* star Craig Bierko; a **Jon Bon Jovi** autographed guitar; a football autographed by Heisman trophy winners **Bo Jackson** and **Herschel Walker**; and books autographed by photographers **Annie Leibovitz** and **Richard Avedon**.

Thank yous: Special thanks to Sarah Key and Jim Comis for their generosity in underwriting the event. **Thanks to John Carrafa**, choreographer to the stars, for directing the evening. **Thanks to the Los Angeles-based Volunteers** Sally Fairman, Laura Ford, John Freeland Jr., Lisa Lindstrom and Susie Spear who participated in the event. **Thanks to readers** Craig Bierko, Betty Buckley, John Freeland, Jr., Kathryn Grody, Dick Hughes, Mark Linn-Baker, Mandy Patankin, Anthony Ruivivar, Claudia Shear and B.D. Wong. **Thanks to Benefit Committee members** Matt Bahr, Craig Bierko, Betty Buckley, Laura Ford, Kathryn Grody, Mariska Hargitay, Heather Headley, Dana Jackson, Mark Linn-Baker, Roma Maffia, Adam

Pascal, Anthony Ruivivar, Marcia Santoni, Sheri Rene Scott, Claudia Shear, Susie Spear, Matt Ullian, Brad Winters and B.D. Wong.

Additional thanks to to SueLyn Bogdanoff for her generous donation of printing services for the benefit. **And thanks to everyone else** who helped make this special evening a huge and memorable success: Jake Boritt, Castle Rock Entertainment, The Gap, Ellen Huang, Bob Levitt, Anthony Luciano, Tommy Mandel, Jason Mayland, Linda McAskill, Carol Miller, the producers of *The Music Man*, Sherry Polistina, Katherine Ruppe, Liz Ryan at the Juvenile Court Centennial Initiative and Leslie Ward.



Law & Order-SVU star Mariska Hargitay (left, with Laura Leigh Hughes) stopped by the reception after finishing the day's shooting to offer her support.

Photo by Katherine Ruppe

New York's Rikers Island Welcomes Unusual Suspects

LA Volunteers Invited to Workshop Theatre Program with High-Risk Offenders in NY County Jail

Immediately following the success of the previous night's benefit, the Unusual Suspects held a theatre workshop at New York's Rikers Island prison for 27 young men awaiting trial. Captain Elena Patterson of the Rikers Island Adolescent Unit invited the Unusual Suspects to work with the 16 to 18 year-old offenders. Rikers Island is a short term prison facility where detainees are held until being transferred to other facilities.

Volunteers Laura Leigh Hughes, Lisa Lindstrom, John Freeland Jr., Sally Fairman, Sarah Key, Dick Hughes, Ginny Ann Hughes and Susanna Styron participated in the two hour crash course in improvisation and theatre games. Most of the young men were shy at the beginning of the workshop, but once they saw others performing they warmed up to the process. The Adolescent Unit staff members, who had selected the kids individually for the workshop, helped by encouraging them to participate. According to US Volunteer John Freeland Jr., compared to their counterparts in LA's Central Juvenile Hall, "These kids seemed more grown up and street smart than the kids in LA. But the overall response and participation was good."

Volunteer Dick Hughes described the workshop as "an event that was both uplifting and heartbreaking, life-affirming and devastating." He said, "One of the most revealing moments was when the session was over and folks just milled around, talking, waiting for the guards to escort everyone to their respective locations. If one had just walked in then, they would never know these 'kids' were inmates. But, as with similarly tragic circumstances again and again I thought: **'What a waste. What a waste! What is wrong with us as a society that we cannot make room in our lives for these very caring, talented youngsters? And what is the final price we are all going to have to someday pay?'**"

The positive response to the workshop among the inmates and the staff at Rikers Island has opened the possibility for New York based theatre professionals to establish an Unusual Suspects program in that city. Thank you to Captain Patterson, the Adolescent Unit staff and the kids who participated in the workshop.

Come see the latest Unusual Suspects Production

The Eggs Weren't Mentioned 'Til the End

A Murder Mystery set in the Jungles of Africa

Saturday, February 24

1:30 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.

Sunday, February 25

4:00 p.m.

Central Juvenile Hall

1605 Eastlake Ave. L. A. (near USC Medical Center)

RSVP required (323) 634-0383

AWARDS

Unusual Suspects Honored in Nation's Capitol

■ The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company has been nationally recognized by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention for **"displaying exemplary models, innovative approaches and new and enhanced community collaborations serving children and youth."**

Laura Leigh Hughes accepted the **National Juvenile Justice Award 2000** on Capitol Hill June 6 in an awards ceremony held during the National Juvenile Justice Summit in Washington D.C.

"How Shall We Respond to the Dreams of Youth?" was the theme of this year's summit. The Unusual Suspects was one of two arts programs recognized, among the overall six recipients of the award.

■ The **Golden Mike Award**, the broadcasting award for television journalism has been awarded to KMEX/Univision, the #1 Spanish television channel, for their story on our program. Norma Roque and Art Quezada from KMEX interviewed young men, their mothers and volunteers at the

Central Juvenile Hall during rehearsals of the Unusual Suspect production *Far Away From Home*.

The Golden Mike, the most prestigious award for television journalism, was presented to KMEX at an awards ceremony on January 20th. Laura Leigh Hughes attended the ceremony with Volunteer Gisele Sanchez-Rochet and Unusual Suspect Rey, recently released from Central Juvenile Hall (see Rey's story on page 4). Congratulations KMEX!

■ The **Agape Season of Non-Violence Hero of the Week Award** was awarded to Laura Leigh Hughes for **"being a place of peace and standing for the principal of non-violence in our community"** on February 13, 2000.



Laura Leigh Hughes, pictured here on Capitol Hill with her parents Joseph Hughes and Barbara Umbrey, accepts the National Juvenile Justice Award 2000.

Photo by Ginny Ann Hughes

DONATIONS

■ **CLOTHES CALL** The Unusual Suspects has set up a program to collect clothing for the kids at Central Juvenile Hall. Eric Zucker in the Public Defender's office at Central Juvenile Hall, is coordinating the collection of clothes.

Most of the kids awaiting trial do not own suits—the appropriate attire for their court appearances before a judge. Additionally, since some of the kids move directly from the facility to foster homes and have insufficient clothes, they need donated clothing. The clothes are being sent to the placement offices so that when the kids who are wards of the court, especially those with no families, are placed in foster care or group homes, they have clothes to take with them.

US Volunteer Denise Martinez has contacted costumers and wardrobe supervisors in the film and television industry for their support. If you would like to donate clothing for boys and girls ages 9-17 please call Eric Zucker at (323) 226-8988 or e-mail:

ezucker@co.la.co.us for more information.

Please send only appropriate clothing (no provocative or revealing clothes for girls; no offensive slogans or emblems on boys clothing). The clothes should be cleaned, in good condition and ready to wear.

■ Thanks to actor/director Paul Michael Glaser for generously donating a collection of plays for the Unusual Suspect.

■ **HOT STOCK TIP!** Your charitable donation to the Unusual Suspects can now be made in the form of stocks. Our stock portfolio, handled by Merrill Lynch, continues to grow thanks to donations by Matt and Maresa Bahr and Rodrick Spencer. Please call the Unusual Suspects office for more information.

HELP WANTED

Help US out with Office Support

Please call the office at (323) 634-0383 to volunteer your services.

■ **Administrative Assistant:** Basic computer skills; knowledge of Microsoft Word on the MAC; data entry, letter writing, etc. 2 days per week.

■ **Accountant:** Once a month, on going basis to crunch our numbers

■ **Grant Writer:** Experienced writer of government and/or foundation grant proposals for non-profit organizations

■ **Publicist:** Help get the word out about US! Any media contacts welcomed.

■ **Board Development:** Coordinate efforts to recruit and interface with prospective Board members

■ **Website Developer:** Experienced website designer to build and maintain website

■ **Letter Writers/Court Attendance Support:** Unusual Suspect Devine is facing a prison sentence of 25 years to life if he is convicted. To support Devine in seeking a fair sentence, you can help by writing letters and showing up in court. Information on Devine's case will soon be posted on our website www.theunusalsuspects.org under "How You Can Help" or e-mail US at Unusuallh@aol.com.

WISH LIST

■ We're looking for a donation of a new **MAC compatible scanner** for use in the office, **video camera, film and processing.** Anyone?

CONGRATULATIONS

■ Congratulations to Board member David Henry Hwang and his wife Kathryn Lang on the birth of their baby girl, Eva Veanne Hwang.

■ Congratulations to Eric Zucker, Public Defender in Central Juvenile Hall and family on the birth of their twins!

KIDS updates

OPPORTUNITIES

Unusual Suspect Auditions for Film Role

One of our own Unusual Suspects from the Group Home/Foster Care branch of the program recently had the opportunity few professional actors get—to audition for the lead role in Wesley Snipes' new film *Zig Zag*. Veteran Casting Director **Ronnie Yeskel** had heard about the talented kids in our program, and decided to look to US to recruit a new face to play Snipes' son in the film. Yeskel recognized the talent of **Daniel**, an actor most recently seen performing and rapping in how *Cold Voices*, *Sweet Sorrows* at Art Share Los Angeles.

Daniel prepared for his first professional audition with the coaching help of Unusual Suspect volunteers Lisa Ehrenberg and John Freeland, Jr. He obviously impressed the director and producers of *Zig Zag* with his work—Daniel was called back *twice* to read for the role. However, the part ultimately went to another young actor.

Thanks to Ronnie Yeskel for offering Daniel the opportunity, and to Pam Risinger and Hai Lu of the Department of Children and Family Services for helping facilitate the logistics of the audition: getting Daniel the script and providing transportation to and from the audition and callbacks. Congratulations, Daniel, for making the Unusual Suspects proud!

FUN

Kids Enjoy Blues Concert at Hollywood Bowl

"Freedom's a good thing," said Rey as he looked up at the starry summer night from inside the Hollywood Bowl. He was enjoying his freedom, listening to the sounds of blues music, at a concert staged by blues guitarist Bonnie Raitt. His freedom came after a two year incarceration at Central Juvenile Hall while awaiting trial for a crime he did not commit. You may remember the 18-year-old from the show *Far Away From Home* (see story on page 7) produced last spring at Central Juvenile Hall. Rey played an angel who had to find someone on earth with a pure heart to give his wings to.

Laura Leigh, who spoke to him recently, said "Rey is one of the lucky ones. He is now living in Alabama with his uncle, going to school there, working at his uncle's bakery and hanging out with his girlfriend. He is one of the sweetest kids I've met." Over the holidays Rey visited his good friends and fellow Unusual Suspects, Devine and Duc, at the L.A. County Jail to lend comfort and support. While in Los Angeles, Rey represented the Unusual Suspects with Volunteer Gisele Sanchez-Rochet and Laura Leigh at the Golden Mike Awards (see story on page 3) before returning to Alabama.

The special outing to the Hollywood Bowl was at the invitation of **The Quincy Jones Foundation**. They generously invited the Unusual Suspects to a dinner and blues concert at the Hollywood Bowl. The Unusual Suspects enjoyed listening to and meeting Bonnie Raitt backstage. Rey, Golda and Crystal joined other kids from Los Angeles inner city schools. Thanks to Bonnie Raitt, The Quincy Jones Foundation, Michelle Romero and all those that made it a special night for US.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

■ **CRYSTAL** is about to join the Air Force. As soon as she graduates from high school, she'll be off to Texas to begin her training. Crystal performed with the Unusual Suspects through the Group Home/Foster Care branch of the program. Congratulations Crystal and good luck with your high-flying future.

■ **KAI** became an Unusual Suspect in the early days of the program. Now 20 years old, Kai is involved with the Urban League job training program. He has got his resume ready, Kai is looking for an entry level position, preferably in the music or entertainment industry. Kai's great passion is rap music. Anyone who might have any job leads for Kai, please call the Unusual Suspects office.

POETRY By DUC

I got caught up at the age of 16
Now beginning to serve 35 to life

All I was doing was just kickin it
Then all of a sudden I heard boom, boom

Everything happened s fast
That I could barely remember in a quick flash

There I was sitting in Juvenile Hall
Being tried as an adult, knowing nothing at all

Hit 18, then rolled me up and bounced me out
Dressed up in a blue suit and living like hell

Lost my trial and was found guilty
For something that was done when just a kid

Now I sit, waiting for that chain
That chain to a place full of pain

State Prison that is, my new home forever
All for what you ask?

Just being 16 and trying to be a bad ass...
I'm sorry everybody.

A Look Inside

(continued from page 1)

DUC: The first thought was when am I going home? And that I didn't know a place like this even existed. When I first came in, I didn't think I was gonna spend this much time in jail.

How long have you been in jail? Close to two years.

What was it like seeing all those kids locked up? Different. Just a lot different from seeing teenage kids from the high schools I went to, seeing how kids used to laugh and have fun. When I saw these kids, everybody just looked angry and sad.

What was your experience like at juvenile hall? The living was Disneyland compared to where I'm at now. There was outdoors, recs, the barbecues, the games, the dayroom time, the T.V., the eating, the food, the volunteers, the programs.

What programs did you get involved with? Catholic volunteers, Inside Out writing class with Mark Salzman, a camera class and an acting class with Unusual Suspects.

What was Unusual Suspects like for you? I remember I had been there for two weeks and I had a roommate, a guy named Hoyt. He saw that I just kept to myself. All I did was read and I was quiet. I guess he tried to cheer me up by asking me to join him with Unusual Suspects. He told me that it would be a good thing to go out and just act out my feelings and kick back and express myself. The first week I said no. It just wasn't my thing. But the following week he convinced me. So we both went.

Did you stick with it for a while? Yeah, right from the day I started. I stayed with the program 'til I left Juvenile Hall.

Why did you decide to stay? I found it to be fun. It's just a good way to relieve stress. It gave me hope.

How so? It opened up talents that I thought were never there. And meeting people, different people beside myself. There were all types of different races. We got to know each other as friends. And not by color or not by where we were from. Everybody seemed to get along regardless of what, who we are. It just gave us so much confidence and hope that we can be somebody—regardless of if it's an actor or businessman, or schoolteacher, whatever. It showed us that we had the capability of being something if we wanted to be, put our heart into it.

You were moved to county jail when you turned 18? A week before I turned 18.

What's county jail like compared to juvenile hall? Hell.

How many men are in your cell? 13 now.

There are 13 in a cell made for how many? Six.

Do you get any education? Are there any programs offered? No, only church services on Sunday.

Are you allowed to watch T.V., listen to the radio or anything? No.

Do you think you deserve to be convicted? Honestly, I feel that I deserve to do some time, but not what they're giving me.

How did it feel when you found out you were getting 35 to life? When you find out that you're getting 35 to life and find out that you got convicted of all these charges that are totally nonsense, part of you just gives up and part of you just doesn't care. But another part of you just cries, you know. It's like you can't do nothing but break down and cry and not understand why you're getting so much time for being so young. You see other kids murdering kids out there and get 10 to 11 or nine years. And this is something that's

(continued on page 5)

interview

Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes



Unusual Suspects Volunteer Lisa Ehrenberg

Suspect's Name: Lisa Ehrenberg

Suspect Profile: Volunteer with the Unusual Suspects

How long have you been volunteering with Unusual Suspects? It's been 3 years.

Why did you want to become a volunteer for the Unusual Suspects? It was a couple of things that led me to it. Disney has a Free Art for Abused Children program and I had been volunteering for it. I wanted to volunteer more on a weekly basis and I had a background in theatre. I always thought I'd want to volunteer with little kids but did not know what to say to them. Cheryl Silver, the Program Director at Disney suggested the Unusual Suspects.

I really appreciate working with teens. At first I was scared, but I feel there's a real need in our society to get closer to teens. They are treated like a whole tribe of criminals. I can't buy into that. The Unusual Suspects is a really positive way to get more familiar with teenagers. It is excit-

ing to give them the opportunity to show off what they've got. They are like butterflies ready to break out of their cocoons.

What would you say to someone who was thinking of joining Unusual Suspects? I brought in a new volunteer a couple of weeks ago. I tell them what I've seen in Juvenile Hall. The biggest part of what I tell people is that it gives you the ability to see a very positive side of a part of society that the media is so negative about. Also,

"They are treated like a whole tribe of criminals.

I can't buy into that."

the only acting I do is for the Unusual Suspects. It's a good workout for us as volunteers.

What effect has the Unusual Suspects had on the kids? I've seen many kids grow and become stronger and more sure of themselves. There was a great kid who had a difficult time reading in front of people. But I

What kind of changes have you seen in yourself?

I'm not scared of teenagers anymore. Eight or nine years ago, women were accosted on the street, pins struck in their backs. There were a few weeks there where there was fear of teens. It turned out to be 4 or 5 girls doing it for kicks. They are people and we can see them. They are fresh little people.

How would you describe the process of your working with the kids? A lot of it comes out of games and

improv in the beginning. One of the things that I like is watching the kids who are coming back to the group. We are getting better at allowing them to bring out their art. Richard, a choreographer, always wants to dance—so we leave space for that. A couple of kids love to rap so we leave room for that. There is a formula and a pattern but

Volunteer Finds Connection with Teens

"It is exciting to give them the opportunity to show off what they've got. They are like butterflies ready to break out of their cocoons."

watched him tough it out. One of the volunteers was sitting next to him. He didn't back down. I was so proud of him. My heart burst. Typical teens ridiculed him. The volunteers let him know it's OK—no one is to be ridiculed. Every opportunity for an individual to grow is an opportunity for growth for all.

its open. It's good to get them to think of a storyline early on and then improv working out the characters. The last two weeks are total pandemonium. We've never done a show where the paint isn't wet. They learn that they can pull it out and it comes together. I love watching that process.

—Valerie Scoon

A Look Inside (cont'd from page 4)

not even close to that and you're getting 35 to life. It's like they've taken everything away that you loved, and they've taken away your life now. And you're just trying to hold on to that last string. It's hard

How are you hanging on to it? Just by knowing people out there love me and support me. Without them, I don't think I can make it. Without them, I think I would have given up a long time ago.

Do you believe you would be different out on the streets now? Most definitely I would be different. I would go to school and I would work. I would volunteer and do things that keep me busy. You know, being locked up for almost two years, wasting all this time and then having the chance to be able to go back home, you realize your freedom, and how precious life is.

Are you on your way to state prison? Any day now.

What's going through your head now? I can't go

there. I don't want to go yet. Not now.

Why? What are you afraid of? Leaving your loved ones behind. I'm sure gonna get a lot of problems for me being Asian. And I might get hassled up there 'cause the Mexican mafia doesn't like Asians walking the mainline in state prison.

What does that mean? You can get killed, you can get stabbed. God knows what can happen to you when you're in state prison, especially if you're walking in the mainline.

Where will you be housed? 180, level four yard. 180 means the gangs, especially if your case was convicted with a gang charge. That's where they house all the gang members. That's a place that nobody needs to go. It's totally different from a regular level four.

What happens there? Riots. Rapes. Murders, you know.

How do you think you're going to survive there? Take the three Is with me, look, listen, and learn. Don't open your mouth. Mind your own business. Always look, listen, and learn. Without those three, you're dying. 'Cause

there's no games up there, they don't care. You got gang members who are stuck with life. I'm damn scared of going 'cause I have so much to lose. I'm only 18. I don't want to die in state prison. Over... over a look, over taking somebody's seat.

Do you think there's any way out of this insanity in our society? Stop hating.

Just stop hating, huh? Maybe if you stop hating then the cycle can be broken.

Duc's appeal will come up in one to two years. Only 2% of convictions are reversed in appeal.

If you'd like to write on Michael Duc Ta's behalf asking the D.A. for a recall or reduction in his sentence, please send a letter each to:

*Janet Moore and May Chung
210 West Temple
Los Angeles, CA 90012*

THANK YOU THANK YOU

The Unusual Suspects are establishing a core of benefactors who will make contributions of \$5000 or more in order to sustain the program. We invite any individual or corporate benefactors to join the **#1 Suspects** roster to help us continue this valuable program. Thanks to this quarter's benefactors:

SUPER SUSPECTS

Grants and Endowments

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#1 SUSPECTS

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Bob Levitt*	Herschel Walker*
Jim Livie, Eastern Costume Co.	Work Hard Play Hard

* Indicates donation of memorabilia for the silent auction to benefit US.

Space doesn't permit US to acknowledge every donation, but thank you so much to everyone who has made donations to support The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company.

Angels Abound at Central Juvenile Hall

Unusual Suspects Production *Far Away From Home* Saves a Lost Soul

Set in Heaven, Hell and the streets of gang culture, the latest original play from the K-L unit of Central Juvenile Hall explored the themes of good vs. evil, forgiveness and redemption. Audiences at the Juvenile Hall facility were impressed by the dramatic structure of the play, where the story moved smoothly between events on Earth and the conversations between angels in Heaven and demons in Hell.

The story centers around Grace, an angel who chooses to leave heaven and go back to earth. In order to live on earth he has to literally be reborn. The Devil is excited to have his challenge to conquer God by tempting Grace with disasters to hopefully bring him to hell. The Devil starts with making sure that Grace's mother dies while giving birth to him. Next, he helps to make the conditions of Grace's home life disastrous. Grace's single father turns to drinking and has no money. As Grace grows up he finds himself surrounded by the same difficulties facing the at-risk youth in our program: a single-parent family, violence in the schoolyard and streets, drugs and an early introduction to the gang life. The Devil is winning when Grace's involvement with his gang puts him face to face with committing murder.

While all of this is happening on earth, the angels in Heaven are busy fighting for their friend's soul. One of the other angels slips down to earth to help Grace learn about forgiveness—both giving forgiveness and asking for it from others that he has hurt. Grace eventually tries to convince other gang members of the value of forgiveness but he quickly becomes a victim of their hatred as he is murdered. The Devil loses in the final scene when Grace returns to Heaven because he was redeemed by his own change of heart.

Like the other plays created by the Unusual Suspects, *Far Away From Home* powerfully reflects the lives of the guys who created it. It gives us a glimpse into the experiences, fears, humor and regrets that exist in their own lives. As always, their voices are heard and continue to touch all that hear their stories.



Volunteers on the set of "Far Away from Home" Left to right: John Freeland, Jr., Joe Warson, Laura Ford, Susie Spear, Tony Okungbowa, Michael Bortman and Roma Maffia

"Cold Voices, Sweet Sorrows" Heard at Art Share

Unusual Suspects Explore A Teenager's Troubled Life at School and Home

The latest show created and performed by the Unusual Suspects at Art Share reflects many of the problems these kids face in their own lives in group homes and foster care. The story is told in flashback, as the main character, Cat, remembers the events leading to the funeral she is attending when the show opens.



Sha and Richard perform during "Cold Voices, Sweet Sorrows" at Art Share Los Angeles

Her home life is rocked by both her mother's abusive relationship with her stepfather as well as her brother's volatile relationship with the family. At school, Cat faces the fact that her boyfriend has been cheating on her with several of her friends. Three of her teenage friends are pregnant by him.

The tension in her life mounts as Cat struggles to repair the many difficult relationships in her damaged family. To deal with her problems, Cat seeks counseling from a priest while her friends ask advice from the school counselor. In an imaginative scene set in Cat's bedroom, she finds comfort in her stuffed animals who act out some of her fears. Ultimately, the family conflicts escalate into a family fight which ends in the violent death of Cat's mother.

After her mother's funeral, the show ends on a hopeful note as Cat prepares to make a new beginning with a trip to Ireland.

FOUNDER'S Journal

In the eight years since she founded the Unusual Suspects Program, Executive Director Laura Leigh Hughes has witnessed the stories of the kids off the stage. Here are some of her impressions of those kids.

October 4, 1998 Tonight one of the volunteers, Varina said, "Let's take a moment to look at that moon." We leaned forward to look out the glass doors to see the full yellow moon resting just above the Juvenile Hall building across the yard. It was such a beautiful sight of nature, contrasted with the lifeless institution we sat in. I thought some of these kids will never be able to sit out under the night sky and gaze at the moon. They will be laying in their small cells looking up at the blank ceilings. Seeing no future.

October 11, 1998 I tried not to cry during the One Good, One Bad exercise tonight. Their honesty and pain make me sad. Darnell said that his father was dying and he couldn't be with him because he's locked up. It was Joshua's parents' 20th wedding anniversary and he couldn't be there. One of the kids just saw his daughter for the first time—she's four months old. Nick's cousin just got the death penalty and he'd never see him again. One kid's good thing for the week was "I'm alive."

June 20, 2000 Robert came up to me with a big hug, excited to see me. I hugged his tall lanky body and clasped his soft hands. I don't know how he will survive in prison. He is too gentle...

November 5, 2000 Devine calls every week from jail. Tells me stories. We laugh. I have the best image of a story he told around Halloween. He said they unscrewed the light bulb in the cell and stayed up all night telling scary stories and laughing. The blacks and the Mexicans just sitting there in the dark together; telling scary stories and laughing. The image of that night of peace and laughter was one I like to hold onto and wish there were more nights like that in there.

“Devine wept when he saw Rey. It took him a little time before he could speak. After a while he picked up the phone and spoke to Rey through the Plexiglas. I held a note over Rey's head that said 'This is your Christmas present' with an arrow pointing to Rey. He smiled. They talked, laughed, reminisced, and gave words of love and encouragement.”

Tuesday, December 26, 2000, 1:16 PM
Gisele, a volunteer with US and I brought Rey to County Jail to visit Devine. Devine

wept when he saw Rey. It took him a little time before he could speak. After a while he picked up the phone and spoke to Rey through the Plexiglas. I held a note over Rey's head that said "This is your Christmas present" with an arrow pointing to Rey. He smiled. They talked, laughed, reminisced, and gave words of love and encouragement. Devine is learning sign language in there. He spelled 'I love you' to us. Many times they said they loved each other. It was sincere and very touching to see these two young men in such a rough world saying such gentle words. Two young men who would have been enemies on the outside, expressing themselves so simply, so beautifully. An inmate or two would walk by and do a double take to see a black man and Latino man talking across the glass.

He said how difficult it was saying good bye to everyone at Juvenile hall. The last thing he said was he asked to tell the Unusual Suspects that you will always be in his heart. That he misses you guys.

David is facing life without parole. Such a waste of our children...all these lives.

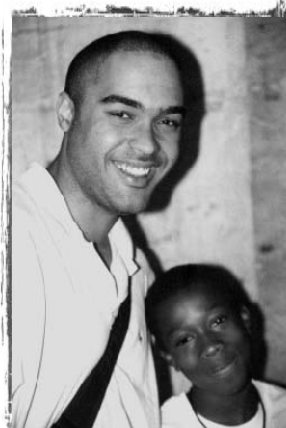
January 6, 2001 Tonight I sat next to Maurice. He looks like he's 12 years old. Small, dark black kid with a great white smile. We were talking about how many kids were in his family. "Three brothers and two sisters. No, two brothers. My one brother died." I am amazed at how many of these kids have siblings who have been shot and killed. How these families deal with these tragedies is unfathomable.

January 13, 2001 At one point there were a few kids doing an improvisation and I looked at them and felt a surge of pride inside me. I was so happy to be doing what I was doing. I was exactly where I wanted to be.

MENTOR PROGRAM

Universal Exec Finds Perspective as an Unusual Suspects Mentor

Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes



Mentor Matt Jackson with young friend Deshaun

Four years ago, Matt Jackson moved to Los Angeles from New York with a desire to work in the entertainment field. Today he has succeeded in meeting that goal as an executive with Universal Pictures. What Matt didn't envision was the need for balance in his life—a diversion from the fast-paced, often stressful world of the film industry.

Through the Unusual Suspects, Matt has fulfilled his goal of creating balance by becoming a mentor to a boy whose brother was involved with US at Central Juvenile Hall. Deshaun is the 12 year year old brother of Derrick, an Unusual Suspect who reached out to the program and asked if someone could 'keep an eye on Deshaun' as the older boy began a life sentence in prison.

After seeing an Unusual Suspects performance at Juvenile Hall, Matt volunteered to meet with Deshaun. Matt says, "I didn't want to be a missionary type. My first goal was to bond with Deshaun—for us to just like each other" They talk once a week and get together once a month for the day. A typical out-

ing is going out to eat and a trip to a movie, museum or bookstore. Matt recently introduced Deshaun to the *Harry Potter* books.

At first Deshaun was cautious and shy, but over the months he has gradually opened up to Matt's friendship and guidance. Matt finds himself navigating the tricky business of communicating with a young boy—being honest, open and emotionally expressive while maintaining discipline. The experience seems to be a 'Dad 101' for Matt, who appreciates the preparation for becoming a father himself one day. Matt, whose own father has passed away, values the guidance, discipline and unconditional support that his mother showed him while he was growing up. He wants to offer this kind of support to Deshaun.

Matt hopes to broaden Deshaun's awareness of the world's possibilities by doing things like taking the boy to his office. "I always tell him, the world in which you live doesn't determine who you are," Matt says. Deshaun is gentle, sensitive and hasn't been hardened by his environment yet. Matt's hope is that Deshaun will conclude on his own that he doesn't want the life that his brother Derrick chose.

"I love this kid, I want to be involved with him until he's a man. I want to see him do well in school, get his education, go to college," says Matt. He continues, "Mentoring Deshaun has opened up my life in different directions My relationship with Deshaun has given me perspective on what's really important in life."

To learn more about the Unusual Suspects Mentor Program, please call our office at (323) 634-0383.

OUR mission

The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company exists to bring theatre arts to at-risk teens. Through improvisation and writing exercises, professionals in the arts work to help young people create original theatre and to foster pride, self confidence and racial tolerance.

When people ask what the Unusual Suspects do, the essential definition of the program lies in our mission statement (see above.) It describes what we do in our three month theatre program. But the expanded definition of the program lies in the kids participating in it and in their stories. These are the stories taken from their own lives and imaginations, that get told on stage—and the stories they create offstage, between one another.

The program was created in 1993 after the Los Angeles riots to empower young people by giving them a voice, and to ease racial tensions. The Unusual Suspects gives the kids an effective tool for communication by helping them to create original theatre drawn from their lives.

The volunteers, professional actors, directors, writers and others began working with at-risk youth, ages 14-18, in foster homes and placement facilities with the help of the Department of Children and Family Services. After six successful years, the program branched out to work in Central Juvenile Hall with kids who are awaiting trial for murder and attempted murder. Approximately 200 kids go through the Unusual Suspects program each year.

US Advisory Council member Edward Asner commented in a recent article published in the *Daily News*, "These kids develop hilarious, stirring, heartbreaking plays about growing up in the ghetto, the tug-of-war between good and evil, the pain of poverty and the alluring glitter of the street economy. As **adversaries work together toward a common goal, animosity dissolves into trust, collaboration and lasting friendship.**"

In addition to nurturing their communication skills and creativity, the program builds individual self-respect. For some, this confidence motivates them to overcome difficult, and even tragic backgrounds and set previously unimaginable goals, such as going to college. For others this confidence may give them something to sustain their spirit when facing a life in prison. The kids that come through the Unusual Suspects program experience the success of creating a thing to call their own. This program offers these kids that experience as a step towards creating a positive future for themselves.

The theatre workshop is ongoing at Central Juvenile Hall. However, because of the administrative effort required to coordinate the foster care/placement facility branch of the program, that workshop is temporarily on hold. Once the infrastructure of the Unusual Suspects is strengthened with administrative and financial support, the program at Art Share will resume. This critical need for administrative support was determined in a recent "needs assessment" by consultant Laura Ferretti of Impact Philanthropy. Her report has given US a roadmap for the for the growth of the program. Thank you to Sarah Key and Jim Comis for providing the financial support to complete the needs assessment. *For more information on our needs, please see the "Help Wanted" notices on page 3.*

"These kids develop hilarious, stirring, heartbreaking plays about growing up in the ghetto, the tug-of-war between good and evil, the pain of poverty and the alluring glitter of the street economy."



FOUNDER/EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Laura Leigh Hughes

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We want to hear from you!

Please share your thoughts about any US performances you've seen, ideas about the program or comments about the newsletter to:

The Unusual Suspects

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website

The Unusual Suspects have joined the digital revolution!

We are in the process of building a website which provides information about the program and ways to get involved with US.

Check in to see when it's up. Log on!

www.theunusualsuspects.org