

Unusual Times

The G.I.F.T. Program: Off to a Great Start

A COLLABORATION WITH ARTSHARE REACHES OUT TO A NEW GROUP OF KIDS

BY MICHAEL SPILLERS

It's a sunny afternoon in East Los Angeles, and a shuttle van rolls up to the front gates of the Maravilla housing project. A group of teenagers file out and head for the main building's community center, where an excited handful of Unusual Suspects are preparing a fun-filled workshop of ice-breakers and theatre games. The kids "circle up" - some are quiet and shy, others are already starting to giggle and getting to know each other. Now it's time for the adult volunteers to breathe a quick sigh of relief and plunge into new territory...After months of planning and last-minute negotiations, The Unusual Suspects' new Gang Intervention For Teens (G.I.F.T.) program is now underway!

ART SHARE LOS ANGELES IS A COMMUNITY organization that provides classes in the arts to inner-city youth in Los Angeles. The Unusual Suspects have collaborated with Art Share in the past, working with kids in foster care to create a show called "Cold Voices, Sweet Sorrows" in the spring of 2000. When the Los Angeles County Probation Department recently granted funds from the Schiff/Cardenas Crime Prevention Act to Art Share to create Gang Intervention programs, Art Share contacted The Unusual Suspects again to see if we'd be interested in being a part of the process.

"We were thrilled because it has been a

priority for us to bring our work back outside the walls of Juvenile Hall," says workshop coordinator Jason Mayland. "In many ways, our partnership with Art Share has had to start from square one because this Gang Intervention program is brand new. Everyone, including the Probation Department, is feeling their way through this. From our side, it's the first time we're being funded by, and reporting to, a government agency. So it's been a learning process for everybody."

The learning process began in February for many of The Unusual Suspects, and took a month longer than expected to finally get off

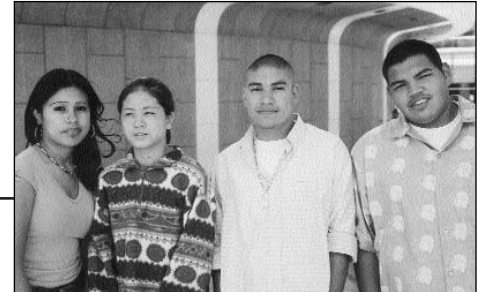


PHOTO BY LISA LINDSTROM

Alicia (14), Sophia (13), Luis (16) and Charles (15) are amongst the many teens participating in the new Unusual Suspects G.I.F.T. Program

the ground. Lots of tiny details had to be worked out that hadn't come into play at Central Juvenile Hall. Art Share would be combining two different target groups of kids on probation: Half from the Maravilla housing project, and half to be bussed in from different LA Unified high schools around town. Not only did a third organization need to be contracted to ensure that kids outside the projects had a ride to the workshops (a gang violence prevention group called "No Guns" got the job), but concerns also arose when it was discovered that the neighborhood gang that claims Maravilla as its territory has made serious enemies out of almost every other Latino gang in the surrounding area. Would the visiting kids be safe? The probation officers who refer

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"The Hard Way Out"

BY VARINA BLEIL

MANY MONTHS BEFORE THE EVENTS OF September 11th, a group of teenagers aged 14-18 chose a topic and began writing a drama for The Unusual Suspects theatre program with at-risk youths. Through many long hours of work with volunteers, their story unfolded about the lives of young men serving life sentences who chose to fight in heavy combat for the government in exchange for their freedom. The young men from the K/L unit of Central Juvenile Hall rehearsed their work in the cramped quarters where many of them face prison sentences like those of their characters. When it came time for the performance on November 10th and 11th, 2001, as the daily news covered the events of American men and women going

into battle in Afghanistan, the audience was ill-prepared for the relevance the story would have on their own lives.

The show explored the concepts of patriotism, trust and perseverance in the face of adversity as the characters learned to trust themselves and work together. Jason Mayland, a volunteer with the Unusual Suspects, remarked, "Obviously, the theme of self-reliance is a crucial one for a kid in Juvenile Hall, but I think this play surprised the audience, because it resonated so much." The resonance was not only due to the subject matter, however. As Daniel O. (age 17) who played the role of "Butterfly" puts it, "What we presented in the show was about

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PHOTO BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES

Johnny, playing the "Marine Sergeant", awaits his turn to go onstage during "The Hard Way Out" performance.

conversation with
unusual suspects

Gilbert and Max

How long have you been in the Suspects?

MAX: This is my second show.

GILBERT: This is my second show.

Why did you guys join the group?

M: It was something new to get into. Something interesting. Something I've never done before, and I thought I'd give it a try.

G: I wanted to build up my courage to get onstage and act. My roommmate told me it was interesting and I saw you guys having all kinds of fun and I asked him to put me on the list, so I joined the last play and thought it was exciting, fun, and funny.

M: It was very exhilarating. It was my first time acting.

G: It was my first time, too, and I'll never forget this. I'll remember this everywhere I go. No matter what stage in life I'm at, wherever I go.

M: Laughing about it and thinking of our memories. Gilbert especially has something to remember about the last show we did.

G: (laughing) I got frustrated with my partner not knowing his lines.

M: You said, "I'm not being in the play no more" right when your scene came up.

G: But then I realized that we were going to be the only ones looking stupid, not anybody else.

"you've got to roll with it and work for the benefit of the group."

M: I didn't think it was going to come together.

G: Especially at the end, when everyone started dropping out or getting sentenced to County. It was hard when guys at the last minute had to play a part they knew nothing about.

M: Some of us, when we were writing the play, we really, when it came down to it, we just put lines in that we thought would sound great. We improvised it once and it sounded right, so we remembered it and kept it in the whole time. Me and Irving would change our lines, and it would get funnier and we just kept rolling with it. And then by the last show, when our family came and all the people came, it just flowed. And we'd all look out and say, "Is my momma there? Is my family there?" And then once we realized we could do it, we could just float through it. It was easy and fun – it wasn't even acting, it was just fun.

G: All the times we were practicing and going to the chapel to practice, it was like a whole different place, having fun, forgetting stress, acting. It felt free for a minute. I had my own shirt, pants, and shoes. It felt good.

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KIDS updates

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

SHERIEE was in our group home/foster care program. She participated in the show "Cold Voices Sweet Sorrows" three years ago. She's 19 now, and currently studying at Cal State Dominguez Hills (Liberal Studies). Sheriee lives in the dorm and works for a childrens' center as a teacher's aide for 2-5 year olds. She also plans to be a teacher after she transfers to Cal State LA. We asked her what her experience with the shows was like: "Fun! It was the first time I was in a play, and I got nervous at first because I didn't know anybody. But I learned how not to be afraid and how to talk to others."

TWILAH was also in our group home/foster care program. She has participated in several shows with The Unusual Suspects, including "Stories from Our Side" and "Rude Awakenings". She is 22 now, and is preparing to go to nursing school through a program at the Red Cross starting in May. Her memories of US were "meeting new people and brushing up on writing skills; working with Laura Leigh, Lisa Lindstrom and [all the volunteers at] the HBO workshops." Twilah's working at Arby's now, but she hates the uniforms. "I told my friends don't go there because I don't want to be seen in that outfit."

JASPER was in the "The Eggs Weren't Mentioned 'Til the End" show last February. He's 19, and is currently serving time in Avenal State Prison about an hour away from Fresno. Jasper started out in the foster care system, and was moved around from group home to group home from the time he was 13-16 years old. We spoke with him over the phone from Avenal, where he says, "Never give up. Whatever you're doing in your life, when you feel like quitting, never give up. Working with The Unusual Suspects taught me how to stay focused and strong. You can't let anybody break your hope." When Jasper gets out in 32 months, he hopes he can start achieving again and enjoying life.

ONE THING

BY RODNEY B. (18)

One thing to be thankful for
In this day in age
Is to be alive
Nothing Less Nothing More
For this trial is but a page
In a Book of Many Chapters
This is only the beginning
I believe in a life hereafter
To me it is inevitable that I am winning.

• kids poetry

I'M FREE

BY ERIC (17)

My feet are shackled
My hands are tied but
This is just a physical punishment
I contemplate to myself and
Ask God, does this make
Any sense? But I have
No answer. Still I wake up
And cold I ask God, should
I beat the walls? He
Say don't be upset
But I know He loves me
Because instantly He
Wipes away the sweat
He says love and generosity
Is the key. You can imprison
My body but mentally I am
Free.

THE DEVIL'S PULL

BY ANDREW (18)

The Devil has a plan for my life
God does too.
The Devil's plan is never right
But God's is and it's for me and you.
The Devil has the power here
God's power you can't see.
Our time on Earth is drawing near
So I stay on bended knee.
Turn not to what is visible
Which will perish over time.
The Devil pulls to corrupt principles
And he almost got away with mine.
It is difficult to have morals in a place
with none
The world at its best.
The Devil's temptations are the gun
My bible, the bullet proof vest.
In this world of enticement and sorrow
I will run toward God like a bull.
So don't trip over tomorrow
Just break free from the Devil's pull.

POEM

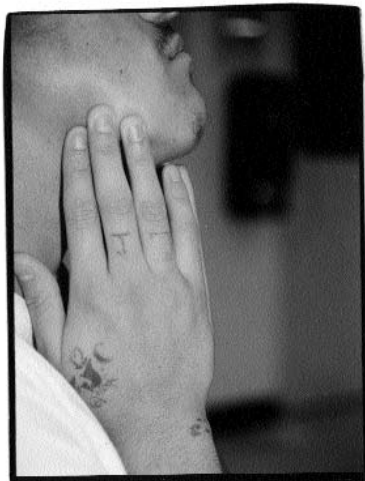
BY JOSHUA (18)

I loved my friend.
He went away from me.
There's nothing more to say.
The poem ends.
Soft as it began.
I loved my friend.

LETTERS FROM THE KIDS

The following excerpts are from some of the letters we've received from former Unusual Suspects from Central Juvenile Hall after they were sentenced and sent to prison.

PHOTOS BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES



"You know I went to court with a kid who was 15 years old. He ain't never been to high school. It reminded me of this Prop. 21 B.S. he was talking big and bad, but I seen right through that. He is just a kid!! The sad part was that he will never get to know the feeling of what being one is like cause he grew up so fast he didn't ever stop to think that he has a choice and that's the choice of being a kid."

- LILO

"I would just like to thank you all so much. I would like to let you know how kind hearted, wonderful, and loving all of you are. You guys made me feel so good. I can't express myself in words but you really touched my heart. All of you played as big of roles as we did. We couldn't have done it without you. You are very, very highly appreciated, all of you."

- JAVANIE P.

"I got my G.E.D. last month and I'm pretty excited of some changes I've done in my life. I've been staying out of trouble, I'm writing more poetry, I'm writing my own songs I'm thinking about singing - which are in Spanish. Good luck on the Art Share Program. I hope those kids reflect before it's too late. I'm pretty sure that Jason is going to do a great job."

- CARLOS C.

"Because of the program, I've become more open minded, which was one of the focal points of the play "Inside Out." I always believed that I could accomplish anything, but nevertheless, you (I mean all of you) have still broadened my spectrum of opportunities. When I first came to the show "What Society Doesn't See" I was shy, well actually timid would be the word. But with each show, my shyness and timidness has dwindled and now after this last show I feel it has vanished."

- CARLOS B.

"I'm writing my book because my goal is to inspire young adults not to make the same mistakes I did and to make better choices in life. If I could make a change in just one person's life I would feel that my reason and purpose on earth would be done. If I can just reach one, but a lot more would be good too."

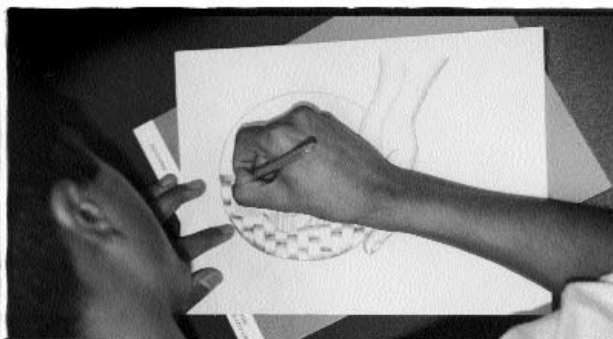
- JASPER L.

"I can still remember the conversation I had with Lilo as if it was yesterday. I had gotten off the phone with my family. And something happened to one of my relatives. Lilo was a messenger and was still cut. He saw that I was sad. Pulled me to side to talk and introduced himself. We sat at the last table next to the library and talked for a while. It was deep and real for a stranger to offer his company to another stranger. That to me was something beyond special. Till today I have never forgotten that night with Lilo. He showed me the love that can bring 2 people together. A simple offer to be a friend changed my life. Give him my love when you write him."

- DUC T.

"Well I'm trying to rehabilitate myself because the system can't do it just by giving you time, you have to be the one to make that change."

- DEREK W.



DON'T MISS OUR LATEST SHOW!

Saturday, May 18
1:30p.m. & 4:00 p.m.
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4:00p.m.

THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS PROUDLY PRESENT
"Today is Tomorrow"
A SCIENCE PROJECT GONE AWRY

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1605 Eastlake Ave. Los Angeles
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UNUSUALnews

CONGRATULATIONS



• We're excited to announce that long-time US volunteers **Gail Lerner and Colin Campbell** just had a new baby! **Ruby Arden Campbell** was born on March 29 and weighed 7 pounds and 7 ounces. We welcome our new suspect into the family!

THANK YOU



PHOTO BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES

• I'd like to share a story of an incredible volunteer, **Mary Ann Hagan**. She has been the graphic designer of our newsletter who, for the past 5 years, has generously given her talent and creativity to our look. Her touch and feel are seen throughout our newsletters, programs and invites. When her eye wasn't enough to finish the newsletter, she would reach into her pocket, and buy paper and supplies to meet our deadlines. She's been an avid supporter and has attended all Unusual Suspects' performances at Juvenile Hall. She is relocating to a new home in the south and we wish her the best of luck. We will miss her gentle nature and incredible eye and are deeply grateful for her dedication and contribution. Thank you so much, Mary Ann! From all of us at Unusual Suspects.

As one door closes, the other opens with the help of **Lydia Chung** who will be our new graphic designer for the spring newsletter. Welcome, Lydia, and thank you!

IN THE MEDIA

• Check it out! April's edition, **Ladies' Home Journal**, page 22. The Unusual Suspects was featured in the article, "The Giving Spirit."

Suspects Shine Onscreen!

ROBERT GREENWALD PRODUCTIONS GENEROUSLY FUNDS AND PRODUCES US VIDEOS AND A MINI-DOCUMENTARY

BY MICHAEL SPILLERS

IT'S ONE THING FOR AN ENTHUSIASTIC VOLUNTEER TO TELL YOU how great The Unusual Suspects' theatre projects are. But when it comes to raising awareness (and funds!), there's nothing like seeing and hearing those positive stories directly from the young people involved in the program. That's why we'd like to give our warmest thanks to Robert Greenwald Productions for financing and producing two "advocacy videos" that will focus on the kids served by US, and their memorable experiences in the program.

Robert Greenwald is a filmmaker and producer whose work has garnered 23 Emmy nominations, two Golden Globe nominations and a prestigious DGA award for contribution to diversity. He met Unusual Suspects Founder/Executive Director Laura Leigh Hughes at a fundraiser, and was immediately impressed. "I was taken by Laura Leigh's passion and intelligence, and the way in which she was tackling this enormous job without very many resources," said Robert. He was looking for a practical way to be helpful, and knew that he'd be able to contribute by financing and producing video spots that would concisely convey the issues and accomplishments of The Unusual Suspects. His production company has recently completed a 60-second spot and is now working on a 5-10 minute "mini-

documentary" to be completed soon.

Robert brought Brian Joneson on board to edit the project. "I was working on the original piece using news footage etc," said Brian, "and I realized that there were a few gaps. It became apparent right away that we needed some kind of first-hand subjective response from the kids involved in the program so that people watching could really relate." So the team went out to interview kids from the program, and among the results was a compelling exchange with a young US participant named Max. "I was surprised by how much Max had thought out everything he'd been through," says Brian. "He really spoke to me. The Unusual Suspects are all about giving these young people a chance to prove themselves, and Max did exactly that."

Robert Greenwald agrees. "Working on this project reminded me about how extraordinary these young men are," he says. "They have abilities and intelligence. They can be reached. There are so many things in this universe that we cannot change; it's so rewarding to find something that we can actually do something about." ■



"WORKING ON THIS PROJECT REMINDED ME ABOUT HOW EXTRAORDINARY THESE YOUNG MEN ARE."

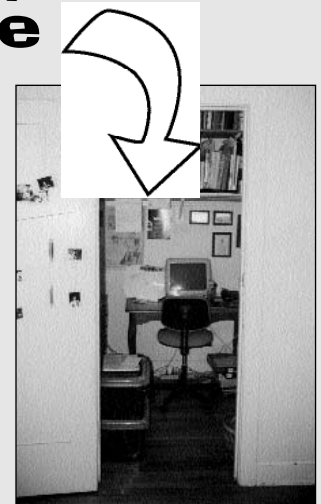
– Robert Greenwald

help get the unusual suspects out of the closet!

IT'S UNBELIEVABLY TRUE!

The Unusual Suspects has been operating out of this cramped closet space for the past **TEN YEARS!**

If you are able to donate or offer an office space at a discounted rate in the Los Angeles area, please contact us at **323.634.0383**.



• Much thanks go out to **USC Professor David Samuelson** and his students for generously volunteering their time at The Unusual Suspects office. Also, much gratitude to **USC Professor Lucy Lee** and her Business Communications class for taking such an avid interest in US!

HELP WANTED

• We're looking for a **Public Relations person** for the board and need to raise the profile of The Unusual Suspects. Got ideas or contacts? Call us!

"THE HARD WAY OUT" (continued from pg 1)



The hard-working "The Hard Way Out" volunteers. **FRONT [L to R]:** Eliraz Malka, Ester, Colin Campbell, Tony Okungbowa, Gisele Sanchez-Rochet, Susie Spear, Gail Campbell, Denise Martinez, Diana Edgmon **BACK [L to R]:** Matthew Clawson, Marc Gomes, Matt Dawn, Lisa Lindstrom, Noel McCarthy, Jason Mayland

how the system works...about us going to war, doing stuff for the country, but what was [the point of working with Unusual Suspects] really about to us? It was about [the kids in K/L] coming together, us getting along, working for a goal, towards something, you know — giving us other things to do, ways to expand our minds." Susie Spear, another volunteer, said the show's significance for her was seeing "the guys really deal with the art of war and see that good can come out of it. I saw them work together just like the script revealed about the characters."

Sitting in the audience for the performances in the Chapel at the heavily guarded facilities, it could have been disconcerting to see these young men wielding weapons, even if just plastic props, but the story of the show revealed these young men had a wizened respect for violence. Susie commented, "I was very hesitant about the subject matter and tried to steer us away from it, but we went forward because that was their idea and they completely brought it around and taught me a lesson." Jason said, "Every time we do a show at Juvenile Hall the kids find a way to challenge us and surprise us with their choice of topic. We were initially skeptical when they said they wanted to do a war story because it's so easy for a story like that to fall back on clichés of violence."

The process of pulling a story like this together is at the heart of The Unusual Suspects. Carlos D. (age 17), one of the writers for the show, explained how they did it: "First we'd have to act it out and then we'd have to write from there. So it was fun because...we didn't really know what it was going to be and when you're there you don't worry about your case and stuff like that...because you're just having so much fun. That's kind of cool, you know, because a lot of us here get stressed out." Daniel

(Butterfly) said, "The practice, it was hard work. I mean it was work, you know, but it all came together and it was so much fun. It gave me confidence, you know, that I could do something; that I could do things for myself...and I had to help the next man because we had lines together, couple roles that had to be tight. And that made us a friendship and you don't have too many friendships in this place."

However, not every kid is as enthusiastic during the making of the shows, but very few remain unaffected by the work with the volunteers. Jason describes one teenager they worked with on "The Hard Way Out" in K/L who summed up The Unusual Suspects experience: "He quit about five times. We almost kicked him out about ten times. He didn't believe in the program or in himself when we started out, but somehow he just stuck with it. And we stuck with him. And when he finally got up onstage...and the audience laughed...his face just lit up. He'd made a connection. And I believe it really did change his life." Susie was also moved by her work with the same teen, explaining, "He had been in Unusual Suspects for several shows and it was amazing to see the end result...it took a long time, but he got touched. He ended up seeing what potential he has."

A long-standing tradition of The Unusual Suspects is to have a pizza party after the final performance with the kids. Daniel tells how this time "pretty much everyone gave a little presentation; like the guys peeped up about how it made us feel, you know. I thanked [The Unusual Suspects] for making me feel so good, for giving me something to look forward to, teaching me new things, keeping my mind open. I was real thankful for the people that came." And the volunteers are

just as appreciative of the experience. Jason said, "The efforts of my fellow volunteers were just astounding this time around. We lost six of our cast members [out of 18] five days before the show went up because of outside disciplinary problems. We were really learning about the 'hard way out'! But the volunteers, not to mention the remaining kids, really pulled together and formed an unstoppable team. It was incredible."

Many months after the performances, the kids in K/L at Juvenile Hall reflected on their experience. "It affected me a lot. It really did. A lot. You know, people coming and stuff, giving us their time; being a part of something," Daniel expressed. "You know, seeing if I messed up it might mess up the next man and if the next guy messes up...It was a lot of responsibility, you know, and that was something new to me...Being out there and getting the attention that I got, it was really incredible. I can't even put it into words how it made me feel because I'd never felt like that before, to be honest with you. You know I haven't really gone out, haven't done a lot of things with my life and just playing that — man, it was amazing. I wish the night had lasted."

And in the hearts of many — both audience and creators of "The Hard Way Out" — it has. ■



PHOTOS BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES & [bottom] ROMA MAFFIA

TOP: Workshop volunteers Marc Gomes and Laura Ford celebrate after the show **BOTTOM:** Laura Leigh Hughes and David Henry Hwang at the JV Hall performance of "The Hard Way Out"

"HIS FACE JUST LIT UP. HE'D MADE A CONNECTION. AND I BELIEVE IT REALLY DID CHANGE HIS LIFE."

— Jason Mayland

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 our benefactors:

SUPER SUSPECTS

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Space doesn't permit us to acknowledge every donation, but THANK YOU VERY MUCH to everyone who has made donations to support The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company.

As I'm sitting here writing, it just dawned on me how lucky I am. I could be beginning to live out a life sentence in state prison at the age of 17. It was a case of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. And things happened that turned not only my world but my family's as well upside down. My freedom snatched away, my family's heart, broken. No longer a neighbor, student or friend for I became dead in everyone's eyes but my family's and my own. I was drowning in a pool of worries and fears.

Francisco's STORY

BY FRANCISCO

THE FIRST FEW MONTHS WERE THE WORST. I was trying to keep my family's spirits high. I was also managing not to be overwhelmed by the horrible future the District Attorney was working so hard to provide for me. As time passed I was given outlets for my many emotions through writing, acting and counseling programs which offered comfort and interesting activities to break the routine of jail life. But all these programs gave only temporary relief because my problems were there all along weighing heavily on my already weakened soul. As court dates passed and months were gone I feared my hope was next.

Although I prayed while I was out, it held new meaning for me in there. I could feel God's presence in the very room as I spoke to Him every night. And I feel that He spoke to me one day through a bible study volunteer at Juvenile Hall that told me God does not want us to worry. In fact He wants us to let Him carry our burdens for us and not attempt to go at it alone. Something about hearing those words, at the time when I needed them the most, made me say to myself. "God has put me in here for a reason. If He feels at least for the time being, that this is where I should be and if He chooses that it's best for me to remain in here for the rest of my life, for whatever the reason, who am I to disagree with God?"

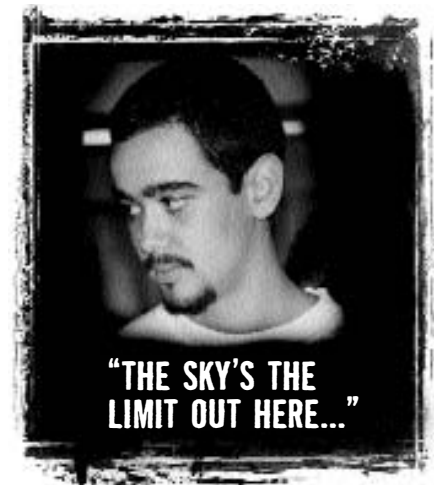
My newfound faith brought me a sense of much needed strength and hope, and it couldn't have come at a better time. With my trial ready to begin, all my friends and family were sitting on pins and needles awaiting the outcome. As the judge, District Attorney, witnesses or my attorney delivered speeches, my family and I were there hanging on their every word. Observing the jury, 12 complete strangers chosen to decide the rest of my life in a matter of days, listen as the DA found new ways to portray me as a heartless monster, I prepared myself for the worst. The actual trial lasted 3 days which seemed more

like 3 years. I was called back on a fourth day to receive the jury's verdict.

As I entered the courtroom my heart was going at about million beats a second. The judge asked the clerk to read aloud the jury's verdict. Before the verdict on the first charge was read my heart was pounding violently but it skipped a beat as I heard the words "not guilty" not only for one charge but for the first two counts, which carried life sentences. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I heard my mom breakdown in tears.

I was told to return to court in two weeks for sentencing for two lesser charges that I was found guilty of. My court date was on, of all days, "Good Friday."

My attorney began with arguments as to why I should be released that very day, on probation, but nevertheless released. And then the District Attorney requested that I fulfill the maximum sentence for the 2 charges I was convicted of, which was 3 years in state prison. Then the DA read the probation officer's report, which also recommended the maximum sentence. The judge, taking everything into consideration, reached a decision and told me that although it was a very serious case and that a probation officer and the District Attorney recommended the maximum sentence, he felt it wasn't necessary in my case. He gave me another chance at life as a free man. A chance to be with my family, a chance to accomplish my goals and dreams. The sky's the limit out here where you don't have walls restricting your every move.



Later that day I was released from Central Juvenile Hall. I got hugs and handshakes from inmates and staff all wishing me the best of luck. Walking out the door without my orange jumpsuit, which had been my uniform for the past 385 days, and without handcuffs and staff guiding me was enough to make my eyes water. I was met by my family and a group of people whom I consider my family, all volunteers whom I developed close friendships with while at Juvenile Hall. Watching everyone shed tears, no longer tears of sorrow but of happiness indeed made this day my Good Friday. ■

“Building a Sense of Community”

BY KATHY McCURDY & RODERICK SPENCER

VOLUNTEER PROFILE interview

You know where you stand with a woman like Lisa Lindstrom. She's very straightforward and has a no-nonsense air about her. Maybe this comes from her years as a producer on studio pictures where one often has to say words like “no” to people who don't understand what this word means. Lisa is very friendly. We had a delightful chat one Monday morning about her 5 year tenure with US. To the kids of US, Lisa has given her wealth of professional experience in the entertainment industry, the benefit of her top-class education in theatre at Carnegie Mellon University, her time, her attention and her heart. This is when I realized that Lisa Lindstrom is, ultimately, selfish. It's not about what she does for these kids. It is all about what these kids do for her that defines her experience with US. Lisa was introduced to US Founder/Executive Director Laura Leigh Hughes at a party by Bob Levitt, an old friend of Laura Leigh, who also happened to be Lisa's former acting teacher.

PHOTO BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES



Why did you decide to join?

Theatre is my first love and I've always been interested in helping people who don't see themselves as artists express their voice. I was looking for a place to do this kind of work when I met Laura Leigh. It was a perfect fit.

Is it a humbling experience?

Oh, yeah.

Any favourite memory?

The prom.

Lisa and Laura Leigh went to the first and only prom held at Central Juvenile Hall for kids receiving their high school diplomas. Tuxes, gowns and dinner were donated so that the teenage inmates could have one night as normal high school kids. There were more boys than girls, so Lisa and Laura Leigh escorted some of the boys in and danced with them. Lisa confesses to being “rhythmically challenged” so, for a change, her partners got a chance to teach her. The role reversal caused a lot of smiles that night.

What do you get out of this?

It wakes me up and gives me energy. I feel connected to the fabric of life. There's nothing quite like it.

Do you believe this work transforms lives?

Yes. Kids tell us that they have a different sense of themselves afterward. The ones that are released set off on a different path than they otherwise would have. I hope this experience also gives those who are incarcerated hope and faith to make it through. I really believe education is the front line in trying to do something about the incredible inequality that exists in our society. These kids are smart, imaginative [and have] incredible potential. [Their situation] is a disgrace on us and on the school system. Our work with them is a lot about building a sense of community. Theatre is collective work. Through improv and group playwriting, work happens that transcends gang and race lines. I feel like I'm still struggling to understand how this happens – how the kids end up in Juvenile Hall. Their world is so completely different from our world of privilege. I try to listen and pay attention and understand what they have to face. We all feel like we learn so much from them each week.

Recently Lisa's desire to make a positive impact on young lives took her to Africa where she was able to lead a session of theatre games in a Sudanese refugee camp in Ethiopia. Through a translator, she was able to share the same work that US does every week at Juvenile Hall in LA. At the end of the session, she played “pass the clap” with the Sudanese teenagers. It's a game where the energy of repeated physical activity goes around the circle. She describes feeling the “same vibe” as during evenings spent at Juvenile Hall. The same “pleasure of play. The same shared humanity. We have more in common than we think.”

Any memories that you'll never forget?

Sometimes it feels like it's never going to come together. One kid last time was very emotional, and very difficult as a result. We were a hair's breadth away from kicking him out. When the show came however, he pulled off his part completely. At the after party, he wept uncontrollably because it was over. He kept saying he would miss it and us so much. He was the most dramatic, but the rest of the kids made emotional speeches as well. It was hard to leave. It's always wrenching when we have to say goodbye. ■

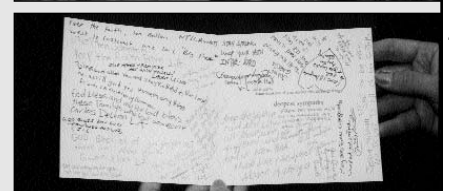
ARTISTS AFTER 9/11

BY DAVID HENRY HWANG

In the aftermath of September 11th, the enemy of the civilized world is neither Islam, nor Osama Bin Laden, nor even terrorists per se. Our enemy is fundamentalism, in all its myriad forms. Fundamentalism sees the world in black and white, posits an absolute evil in opposition to absolute good, demonizes its opponents (often literally), and feeds upon ignorance. Fundamentalism exerts a powerful pull in times of great change, for it promises easy relief from the horrors of uncertainty. Art, by its very nature, celebrates and explores ambiguity, helping others to make sense of uncertainty. Artists therefore man the front lines in the war against fundamentalism. We should examine ourselves to make certain we do not inadvertently collude with

the enemy. For fundamentalism does not exist only in the worlds of religion. More common in our circles are such doctrines as market fundamentalism (in which capitalism is regarded as the absolute good to remedy all evils), ethnic fundamentalism (cultural separatism and isolationism), and artistic fundamentalism (only professionals can create truly important work). As artists, our duty is clear: to embrace uncertainty, so that humans might continue to survive in our ever-shrinking world. ■

TOP: Laura Leigh Hughes pays respects in front of the candlelit memorial in New York City, set up on behalf of the Unusual Suspects **BOTTOM:** The card full of warm thoughts signed by the Suspects & placed as a part of the memorial



PHOTOS BY [top] KATHYRN LANNIG & [bottom] LAURA LEIGH HUGHES

GILBERT AND MAX (continued from pg 2)

M: We were free for a minute. I'm kinda sad because I won't be here for the next one. I go to trial next month, but I hope probation will let me back in to be part of the play. I want to be involved in the writing and acting. Before I started the last play, I didn't know I had the talent to write, but now I could probably be a producer. We're supposed to be criminals, but the day of the show, people didn't look at us like that. We were just regular young men, putting on a show.

G: When we did that show, it showed a lot of people we had a whole new side to us. Not just criminals, but young men, putting something together that we thought wouldn't come together at all.

M: That's the most fun part about it.

G: With the experience of the last one, I know for a fact this play we're doing now will come together for sure.

M: Last time, a lot of people didn't want to act. This group was more child-like. This time, everybody wants a special role. Everybody wants

a big role, but it can't be like that. Everyone can't be the star. You've got to roll with it and work together for the benefit of the group. We've got to humble ourselves and accept what comes to us.

G: I just want to say thank you to The Unusual Suspects for giving us this experience of acting. Where most of us are headed, I don't think we'll have this opportunity again. Even if we do go home, this will be an experience we'll never forget.

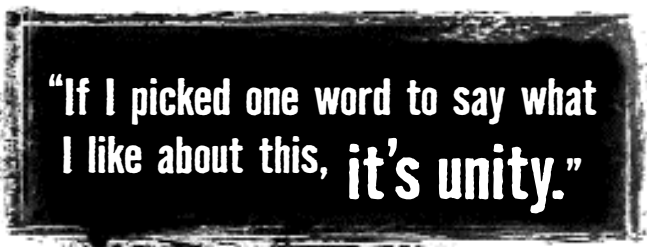
M: When I first came to the group, I thought you all were just coming here, acting like you were our friends and just doing it for money or to be kind to us but then I realized you were all truly real friends to us. Sometimes, people come here and you can tell they're putting on a show for you. Like one day, an actor came and you could tell he wasn't acting for real. He was putting on a show for us. Just wanted to seem like he was in with us, and at the end we were hugging each other, and he just looked lost. You all are yourselves. I want to say thank you, too. ■

G.I.F.T. PROGRAM (continued from pg 1)

participants to the program quickly assured us that there's absolutely nothing to worry about. And after two workshops at Maravilla's bustling and friendly community center, The Unusual Suspects have quickly realized that we're right where we need to be.

"Some of the kids we're working with now have been in Juvenile Hall, so the transition is a lot smoother than you might expect," adds Jason Mayland. "Kids really are the same everywhere. On the outside, we're able to work with girls as well as boys. That adds a different energy to the proceedings, a different point of view. It's very exciting for us." One

concern Jason had going into the workshop was whether the kids would be resistant to the work. "After all, many of them are there only because their Probation Officer told them they had to do it!" he says. "But I was shocked by how open they were to the new



experience, and to sharing their voices. I feel privileged to get a chance to hear what they have to say."

And what they have to say has been the best highlight of it all. Each participant so far is so different – from shy Sophia, who surprised us with a beautiful monologue during a recent writing exercise, to rambunctious Luis, who is already enjoying the spotlight and loves to use his imagination when creating characters. "You just gotta jump in," Luis explains after Wednesday's workshop as his buddies pal around him before heading to the No Guns shuttle. "I thought it would make me embarrassed, but after you do it who cares? It helps you open up."

Another young man shuffles past, and quickly agrees. He calls himself "Gizmo" – and although he seemed reluctant and bored at the start of the workshop, now his eyes are beaming as he trades hip-hop handshakes with his new group of friends. "Unity's what this is about," says Gizmo. "If I picked one word to say what I like about this, it's unity." ■

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.

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