

Unusual Times

Letter from the Executive Director

"If I don't speak, who will?" were the words on a poster in my father's apartment when I was growing up. The sense of responsibility for speaking out for what is right, instilled in me by my parents, helped lead to my initiating The Unusual Suspects 11 years ago. I remember on April 29, 1992 when I caught a black ash in my hand that was falling from the sky. It was a part of our city burning to the ground during the uprising. Los Angeles had been torn apart by poverty, racism, violence and a lack of sense of how we are all connected to each other. I saved that ash to remind me of the turmoil of those days and made a decision to bring forth something good out of those ashes. It is what I am most proud of in my life.

After 11 years and 26 productions I am resigning as Executive Director and moving to serve on the Board of Directors. This was one of the hardest decisions I'd ever made yet I knew it was the right thing to do. US had grown to a point where it had become impossible for me to run and at the same time focus on my acting career. I felt the organization would benefit from new energy and that the best thing would be for me to move to the board where I could continue to serve and hold the vision. My biggest fear

was that US would not continue; that the program would not survive despite all the hard work, dedication and heart that so many people gave to build this incredible organization; that the youth who have touched our lives would no longer receive the love and mentoring that we have provided them for so long; that this family, formed out of a sense of justice, caring, and desire to make a difference in the world, would fall apart. But US remains very much alive thanks to the Board of Directors and all of you. I cannot express adequately the deep gratitude that I feel towards each one of you. You have all given so much to this organization and in so many ways; each making an enormous impact. You have helped create a family; a place where our youth can come to be loved, challenged, empowered and inspired. I am also deeply grateful to all the youth I have had the privilege to know and work with over the years. I carry each one of you in my heart always.

I am happy to announce our new Executive Director Zoot Velasco. From 1982-1994, he toured dance/theatre internationally and developed a theater curriculum in schools, juvenile halls, prisons, malls and hospitals under 16 grants and numerous

commissions. He co-created programs including the 1992 Arts Recovery Program after the riots; the first NEA and CAC grants in malls; and the 1994 Earthquake Arts Recovery Program. He received community awards from the State of California, City of Pasadena, City of Oxnard, City of LA and Ventura County. From 1994-2000, Zoot managed prison arts programs in a drug treatment prison. He produced the first inmate music CDs produced in prison, the first youth deterrent program in the form of a play and projects in museum collections at the Getty, Hammer and Library of Congress. From 2000-2002, Zoot opened 4 new art centers in the Harbor area for Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department. He has worked since as a consultant helping non-profits raise more than a million dollars in new funds. I want to warmly welcome Zoot to the US family.

Now that this transition is complete, we can all look forward to continuing to serve the Los Angeles youth to whom we share a mutual dedication.

With gratitude, 

LAURA LEIGH HUGHES

"When we volunteer...when we set aside our own priorities and vote for policies that will make ours a more compassionate society...That is how we will fashion a world more livable than the world we currently inhabit...not by responding to the world's brokenness as children might, by denying that we made the mess begging or praying for someone to come and clean it up, but by responding as adults should, each of us doing our little bit to make the world whole." - HAROLD S. KUSHNER

School of Hard Knocks

BY CINDY CHUPACK, *Writer/Executive Producer of "Sex and the City"*

As a new volunteer for The Unusual Suspects, I wasn't sure what to expect the first time I walked through the gates of Central Juvenile Hall. I knew we would be working with a group of 14-18 year old boys to create a play. When I learned that many of the sixteen cast members came from rival gangs, I had no idea how the production would ever come together.

For members of the high-risk "K/L" units,

life is extremely regimented, and their minds are occupied with court cases, sentencing, and placement.

Unusual Suspects is a welcome change.

"Pretty much [being] in here is a routine kind of thing," cast member Edward C. said. "Then you guys came in. It was a really fun experience."

Director Kaile Shilling has volunteered for several Unusual Suspects shows, but

this was her first experience in Juvenile Hall. "I was struck most by the kids' enthusiasm. Their willingness to jump in, express themselves and participate. Of course," she added, "the flip side of that energy was that they were easily distracted."

And there were plenty of distractions.

Conceiving, writing and producing a play in twelve weeks is no easy task under any circumstances. But program manager Sally Fairman said, "This was one of the more difficult productions we have done. Juvenile Hall staff beefed up security measures last summer due to a very real flight risk.

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Understandably, many kids were moved to a more secure facility. It's normal for one of the actors playing a main character in our play to be transferred or sentenced right before the play opens, but this time we lost ten guys at once, so we had to start anew right in the middle. That was tough."

The boys of K/L filled their writing with

bomb threat to unite a racially and socially divided school. The cast performed four shows, including one for a chapel-full of peers (including girls) from Juvenile Hall. "The only time I was scared," Edward C. remarked, "was when the girls were there."

Sally gave Edward's performance a rave review. "I loved the comic timing that Edward brought to the role of Diamond, a buxom cheerleader. Not many adolescent

continued. "I was really quiet... pretty much a loner. The Unusual Suspects program united the whole unit. There were fewer fights. It gave everybody something to work on, something to look forward to. The best feeling was after the play. Everybody had a real sense of accomplishment." Benny is hoping to volunteer in the future: he says the experience of the play helped him overcome his shyness and taught him to get along with the other kids despite their differences.

I witnessed this bonding process firsthand. In early sessions the African Americans and Latinos remained very separate, but by the end, as the audience applauded their effort, they put their arms around each other and proudly shared the moment.

"The kids get more out of it than we will ever know," said John Freeland, who has volunteered for most of the Unusual Suspects productions over the last nine years. "Crossing cultural lines. Learning about themselves and others as they search for humanity through art. Feeling like they belong."

"I've never seen so many smiling faces."

After the last performance, a packed chapel audience gave the boys a standing ovation. "The kids who stuck with the program felt how positively the audience responded to them," Kaile Shilling said. "They were pretty much blown away."

Cast member Jessie said, "I had my mother and my sister at the last performance, and they liked it a lot. They didn't think we were capable of all that."

At the post show pizza party, cast member Marlow thanked his scene partner Edward M. for sitting with him whenever they had time, and going over his lines. Marlow said he never would have been able to do the play without that.

"You can see the change in these kids," Kaile said, "They've had to rely on each other. Through that reliance, they build a wonderful story that people applaud. They see the possibilities that tolerance and trust can bring."

For me, the point of the experience was summed up by Manny, a quiet boy who played the part of school principal.

He said, "I've never seen so many smiling faces."

PHOTO BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES



"School of Hard Knocks" volunteers at Central Juvenile Hall. From left to right: Laura Leigh, Cindy, Kaile, Steve, Raini, Christa, Tony, Anna, Bo, Lisa, Denise, Roma, Sally, Laura.

sobering realities of their day-to-day lives: the violence, the drugs, the children they've fathered, the death of friends, the poor school conditions. They even wrote about the way friends pressure each other not to care: their character Cool Breeze has another student turn in his homework so his homies won't know he did it.

But as rehearsals progressed, we saw these kids start to care: not just about the project, but about each other. "I learned that the show doesn't just depend on one person," said Edward C., who had been in Juvenile Hall for five months when rehearsals started. "It depends on a whole gang of people."

Volunteer Laura Ford agreed: "There were times when I thought, 'Why am I doing this?' Then something cool would happen – a great improv, a fun character, someone would laugh who hadn't cracked a smile in three weeks."

Edward C. credits the Unusual Suspects for teaching him about responsibility. "Before I didn't listen to nobody, but with this – if I would have messed up and not followed directions, that would have messed it up for everybody." He added, "In the end, it all came together and I went, 'Wow, we actually can do this.'"

That feeling – "Wow, we can actually do this" – is the essence of The Unusual Suspects program. The creative process proves to the cast and the audience alike that this "troubled" group of boys can achieve almost anything.

"School of Hard Knocks" premiered December 7, 2002. Fittingly, the play reflected themes of tolerance and cooperation. It told the story of a geeky student who fakes a

guys are willing to play a girl. But Edward inspired the other guys – to see someone taking a big risk and getting huge laughs."

The volunteers, many of whom are professional actors, helped the kids through the trials of live performance. After a few forgotten lines, Roma Maffia suggested the actors could prompt their scene partner with the line "What did you say? I didn't hear you" to remind them that it's their turn to speak. That became the most frequently uttered couplet of the second performance.

Cast member Tommy played Theo, a love struck poet. Laura Ford helped him rehearse: "I remember seeing a light go off in his head when he started 'feeling it.' He started really getting into his part – playing with it. That was exciting." Tommy's work paid off: the girls in the audience smiled and sighed every time he recited one of his poems.

"My reward was seeing the guys create," said first-time volunteer Anna Phiel. "I don't expect that I am going to change their lives. I just want them to understand that they have the power to change their own. They need to know that their voices can be heard. That's why we are there: to show them that if they want to be heard, people will listen."

Attending the play was a nostalgic experience for Benny Wong, who was a member of the first two productions at Juvenile Hall in 1999. He's now taking classes at Glendale College and working at a property management company. "I can tell those guys are nervous," he said. "I think I was more nervous when I did it. I only had two lines. I saw my parents out there smiling and I forgot the first one."

"I was one of the only Asian kids," Benny

US Makes His Life More Hopeful

BY SALLY FAIRMAN



VOLUNTEER PROFILE interview

Suspect's Name:

Jason Mayland

Suspect's Profile:

Screenwriter, producer, actor, director. Currently writing an animated feature for Vanguard Entertainment, the producers of *Shrek*.

How long have you been involved with the Unusual Suspects?

Since 1998.

How did you get involved?

I had been wanting to volunteer in youth centers or high schools, and this program seemed to be exactly what I wanted. I signed up, but was surprised when Laura Leigh said, "We're really excited that you want to volunteer, but just so you know, we're starting a new program in Juvenile Hall." We were going in to the high-risk male offenders unit too, so I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into, but working with those kids was incredible.

Were the kids excited to write a play?

I think they were excited to not be in their rooms. They were very suspicious.

Was this first time in JV different from other times?

For me, the process of working on the shows is always different and yet it's always the same. You think it is never going to come together. Then, at some point, it does. It could be fifteen minutes before the first show or it could be earlier. That first time was no different.

Do you recall when it gelled?

We had a rehearsal for the first show where we actually walked out. It was a big gamble, but the kids responded to it because they realized we cared about it enough that we didn't want to let them just slide by. We were very fortunate to have leaders in the group that understood what the value of it was. That's always the challenge. You don't ever want to be trying to convince the kids to do a good show. You have to get them to believe that there's value for them in putting their hearts into what they're doing.

Are you able to define why this program gets the kids to believe in themselves?

I think it's because we never talk down to the kids. We empower them to tell their own story. I think a lot of the static comes from their own struggle with being given the chance to say something. But, that's also why when they come around, they can really commit to it on their own.

What is the best part of this work?

It's inherent to theatre that the best part is always the shows. That's what this is all about ... giving these kids a chance to tell their stories to the greater world and when they have that true chance, you get those glimpses of the kids putting their entire heart into something.

Has this work changed you?

Yes. When you have that experience of truly connecting with someone who is so different from you on the outside, it enriches your world. You can never be ignorant again. You have to keep going forward, and you have to keep connecting with people. My life became much richer and a lot more hopeful.

How so?

Half way through rehearsals of our second show at JV, a new kid named Donte came in. One of the regular kids was missing that day, so we asked him if he would mind reading a role. He started reading this part completely naturally and was adlibbing. I sat there with my mouth open. This kid was not the best actor I'd ever seen in Juvenile Hall, he was the best actor I'd ever seen. And there he was locked up and I thought, "Ok, this doesn't make sense." It just makes you say, "I thought that the world was one way, and it's not."

Is there a play that you are particularly proud of?

I'm proud of the kids in the first show we did with Art Share in the Gang Intervention for Teens Program called "Life between Love and Hate." When we were in the midst of rehearsals, one of the kids had missed the van pick up. I went and picked him up and realized the journey that this kid has to make every day to be a part of this. He had to get a ride to the bus stop to get the bus to get the van to get to the theatre, and that was about a two-hour excursion both ways. Then you multiply that times twenty, and you realize that this is a miracle that this play is even occurring because of how hard it is for these kids to be a part of this.

Any thoughts on the future of the organization?

It's absolutely crucial to keep going and for organizations like this one to keep going. I don't think that the answer is very complex. You go in, you do a show; and then you go in, and you do another one. Even though we want to continue to expand as an organization, the important thing is that we keep going back. As we say to the kids, "It's about showing up," and as an organization it's going to be about continuing to show up for these kids.

Conversation with
Unusual Suspect

FREDDY

BY OSCAR ARGUELLO



Unusual Suspects youth participant Freddy in "The Hood Story".

Suspect's name:

Freddy "X"

Age:

20.

Alias: "Freddy the Finger", "Jokester Freddy", "Freddy the Mooch", and "MC Fly Freddy".

Under suspicion for:

Comedy, Rapping, Performing, Entertaining, Acting, Dancing, Friendliness and making others laugh.

Interrogator:

Oscar "The volunteer"

Oscar: How did you join the Unusual Suspects?

Freddy: I joined through the probation department. My P.O. let me know about the acting classes and I wanted to stick around. I wanted to see how far I could get, with people that weren't in gangs. I wanted to meet new people.

O: What were your thoughts when you came to The Unusual Suspects?

F: These people aren't going to take me nowhere. What am I doing here? Who are these people? Forget them.

O: Did your thoughts change?

F: It was the opposite. They had something for me. They gave me an opportunity to show my talent.

O: What was your experience like in the program?

F: It was good. I liked it. I liked the way I was treated. The way the volunteers treated us. If we needed something, we had it. The people, the games, the performances that we did.

O: Would you do it again?

F: Yeah, I would love to do it again.

O: Do you think the program changed you at all?

F: Yeah it changed me a lot. It made me a better person, a bigger person. I'd been hangin' around with the wrong crew and started hangin' with the right one. It showed me how to love people and listen to people.

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CAA Holds Event to Raise US Awareness

BY SALLY FAIRMAN

"...To open your eyes to the unspoken truth and hopefully change how you see the so-called 'at-risk' youth."

— Unusual Suspects Youth Participants,
Inside Out, 1999

October 7, 2002 (Beverly Hills): Unusual Suspects participants, board members, volunteers and supporters filled the lobby at Creative Artist's Agency for an event that the high profile firm sponsored to help raise awareness of our organization. Amidst the celebrity crowd, Sophia, a 13-year-old youth participant, introduced her proud parents to the volunteers as they came by to congratulate her on being accepted into drama school. After her performance in our gang intervention show at the Palace Theatre, long-time volunteer John Freeland, Jr. recommended her for an audition at the East-West Players, where she received a scholarship. As the time drew near to enter the auditorium for the evening's main attraction, Sophia slipped away to be with the other kids that would be performing.



Founder Laura Leigh Hughes (center) with Roma Maffia and Elliot Gould.

Along with the past program youth participants, the evening's line up included US supporter Mathew St. Patrick, Actor, HBO's "Six Feet Under;" Shannon Rotenberg, CAA Foundation's Co-Program Director; US Executive Director/Founder Laura Leigh Hughes; Actress/Volunteer Roma Maffia; and Producer/Board Member Roderick Spencer.

The idea came out of a meeting set up by volunteer Sheilagh Polk, former assistant to Michelle Kydd Lee, CAA Foundation's Executive Director. She facilitated a meeting between Rotenberg and Hughes, and says from there it was a cinch. "Once Shannon met with Laura Leigh, she was sold. Shannon and Michelle were the key to the funding. Without them, it would never



Mathew St. Patrick, Laura Leigh Hughes and US Alumni: Ray, Richard R., Dina, Sophia, Dorrie, Richard M. at CAA.

have happened," she said. Michelynn Woodard, CAA Foundation's Co-program Director, and Judee Ann Williams, Lee's assistant, also helped pull the event together.

Rotenberg, who introduced the evening, said the idea was easy to sell because the mission of US fits well with that of the Foundation, which is to support education in Los Angeles. She likes recommending US because "it's small and funding goes directly to these kids."

This direct relationship was reflected in one of the evening's most moving segments. Lisa Price, whose son, David Devine, participated in our Juvenile Hall workshops, said US has helped them cope since David was sentenced to 25 years to life for a crime he committed when he was 16. Holding back tears, Ms. Price described how it was not only the workshops that gave her son strength, but the continued support of US through letter writing to being present at his trial to continued visits at jail. In the workshops, David inspired the other kids and brought unity. His motto was: "We don't tolerate that gang stuff in here. We're all a family."

Fittingly, unity was what this night was all about. Dina, who has performed in two Unusual Suspects shows since June 2002, felt it from both the audience and her peers. "I was honored to be there, in the presence of all those people interested in making our lives better." She says getting to know kids from other programs that night was a turning point for her. "I knew they were like me, some even had worse issues. Knowing that they turned their lives around, I did it too. I'm an angel now. I get good grades. I'm more communicative with my family. My life totally changed," she says.

In all, seven Unusual Suspects alumni took the stage at the standing room only event. "People were squished into the back of the auditorium standing four rows deep," noted Hughes. According to Lisa Lindstrom,

US Advisory Board Member who staged this portion of the evening, it was a minor miracle that it all came together. "Because the kids were coming from so many different areas, we had no rehearsal until right before the event. A few of the performers even arrived late directly from their jobs and had to go straight on stage," she says.

Nevertheless, the performers made it happen. Richard R., from our first Foster Care/Group Home program, performed "Everyday Thang," written by Tameka for "Our Silent Voices." Ray L., a participant at Juvenile Hall, read Lilo's now famous letter, which describes what US is all about. "The play went brilliant, but the play was like the diversion from what was really happenin'. Unity was takin' place and we didn't even notice it," it says. Sophia performed a comedic monologue she wrote for "Life Between Love and Hate," and Dorrie, a participant in the Foster Care/Group Home program, performed a monologue she wrote for "Our Silent Voices."

All seven alumni performed the final piece, a group poem from "Inside Out." In addition to the youth mentioned above, the performers included Richard M. ("Our Silent Voices") and Daniel ("Our Silent Voices," "Cold Voices, Sweet Sorrows," May 2000). In keeping with US's mission, the poem opens, "What do you see when your eyes gaze upon me?" And ends, "What we are merely showing you, is our last chance ... To open your eyes to the unspoken truth and hopefully change how you see the so-called 'at-risk' youth."

"That evening at CAA was an unusual bridging of two vastly different worlds which co-exist in Los Angeles," says Lindstrom. A difference that was much in evidence on the way to the event. Jason Mayland, screenwriter and US volunteer, who arranged transportation to the West Side, reported that one youth kept asking, "Where are we now?" Finally exclaiming, "Where I live sure doesn't look like this."

PHOTO BY KELSEY OLDSHAW

PHOTO BY KELSEY OLDSHAW

Day One. It's mid-October. Unseasonably cold. We're standing outside the Maravilla community center in East Los Angeles. The volunteers introduce themselves to one another. There are 8 of us. Thank god a few of them are old hands at this. The kids haven't arrived yet. Due to a bureaucratic glitch, we can't get into the community center. We set up stall in a sort of no-man's land of concrete benches where a couple of girls have scratched out a game of hopscotch. Here come the kids. 45 to be exact. All hungry. We feed them sandwiches and sodas as we set up a circle and introduce ourselves.

The Hood Story

The Gang Intervention For Teens (G.I.F.T.)

Program in Collaboration with **Art Share LA** | BY ELIZABETH LOGUN

PHOTO BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES



"Hood Story" performers take their final bows.

"We're really excited to have you all here," says Sally enthusiastically. "Do you know why you're here?" "My PO sent me," a kid says. The other kids crack up. A PO is a Probation Officer. This program is a probation requirement. Sally continues, even more cheerfully, "You're going to create a play, and then you're going to perform it when it's finished!" Dead silence. Something tells me we're in for a bumpy ride... The kids are so cool. So defiant. Hoods up, hands in pockets, won't make eye contact. One of them smiles sweetly at me and says in a soft voice, "This is stupid. I'm going to be in jail in two weeks." What do I say to him?

One of the kids steps forward. A sad-eyed, round-faced boy of 17, Freddy. "That's what I want to do," he says somewhat uncertainly, "You know, get up there in front of everyone and like, you know, make people laugh..." His voice trails off and he gives us a huge grin. Freddy turns out to be a brilliant talent.

Week after week we meet with the kids on Wednesdays and Saturdays. We have over 30 kids on our roster, but logistical issues prevent all the kids from getting there each time. I feel incredibly frustrated. John Freeland, Jr., one of the seasoned volunteers, tells me to focus on the ones that do keep showing up. I begin to see how amazing these kids are.

A few weeks have passed, and we are really working together now as a group. There are at least 10 volunteers at every

session. Everyone gets a lot of attention. We suggest the kids try a writing exercise with an eye to discovering some possible themes they might want the play to be about.

As hoped, several themes emerge. Family conflict. Drugs. Gangs. Violence. Teenage pregnancy. Love. Dreams. We break into smaller groups of twos and threes, each group with a volunteer. I work with David and Keahi. David creates the role of an abusive husband who cheats and beats on his wife. Keahi assumes the wife's downtrodden yet defiant position. In pockets around the room and in the hallway other groups of kids and volunteers work furiously. At the end of the session the kids perform their scenes for the rest of the group. After David and Keahi's scene, Freddy gets on stage. In his scene, he goes to visit his girlfriend who reprimands him for doing drugs. He swears he won't do them anymore. Then to our astonishment, Freddy incorporates what we've all just witnessed in the scene with David and Keahi. Tells his girlfriend how his parents blame him for the problems in their marriage. He cries out: "I ain't nobody at home, I ain't nobody here." The Hood Story begins to emerge... It is about a young man, Tony, whose drug addiction and gang affiliation cause huge problems for those around him. How he wants to do right by those he loves, but the choices he makes often lead to disaster.

Sometimes the volunteers fight amongst themselves about the story the kids want to tell, but we don't change anything. Our role

is to help the kids shape what they want to say, not to censor them. The kids run with the trust we've given them. They literally vote on every step of the story and all of them write it together.

As the performance dates grow closer, so too does the group. By the time we move into the Ivar Brick Box theatre in Hollywood for our tech and dress rehearsals, I realize I am looking at a whole new breed of kids. Now they aren't just kids from Southgate and Montebello – they are actors!

The last few days leading up to Opening Night are a total blur. Nothing feels ready. Will we get enough time to rehearse on the real set? Will the kids learn to work with their props? Will Dina, who sings a solo on stage, get over her nerves and let her beautiful voice fly out the way only she can? Then more serious trouble sets in. One of the kids is almost locked up. No sooner does he come back when another kid disappears. We substitute another actor and unbelievably, this kid also is locked up. What is going on?! Stage fright? Miraculously, all three of them somehow return for our final dress rehearsal... We all hold our breath.

The last two days in the theatre leading up to Opening Night become a real bonding time between the kids and volunteers. The kids talk more candidly about the problems they face at home, or in the 'hood or at school. And I am amazed to discover that by opening night, within our group, several hi-stakes romances have come and gone, hearts have been broken, friendships tested and fist fights narrowly avoided.

Opening night. The excitement in the air is fierce. The house is packed. A lot of the first show's audience are family members of the kids. Not just parents but entire families. Grandmothers, little kids, tiny babies. In all my years in the theatre, I have never been in such a charged atmosphere. It feels more like a wedding. And then the lights cut to black. When the lights come up, we are



Play Director, John Freeland, Jr. watches "The Hood Story" take shape with intern Rebecca Hoyt in the background.

in Miguel and Maria's kitchen. They fight at the breakfast table as Tony sits between them trying to eat. DeeDee who plays Maria, spontaneously throws in some Spanish (the play is all in English);

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PHOTO BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES

THANK YOU THANK YOU

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.

KIDS updates

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

I have never traveled outside California before, so this will also be my first time on a plane," she explains. She is still acting and takes classes at the East West Players, where she has a scholarship. She will be entering college in two years, but worries that she doesn't yet know what to major in. "Everyone keeps telling me that I still have plenty of time, but I feel as if I am losing time as the days go by," she says. Sophia is recipient of the award for Volunteer of the Year in the County of Los Angeles. She is also the president of the Youth Leadership Council. In her spare time, she studies photography and tutors at the Maravilla Family Learning Center.

TWILAH started with US in the Foster Care program when she was 16 and participated in two shows. She is now 23 and a member of the Direct Care Staff at Jon Beck Care serving disabled individuals. "I like taking care of people. It feels good to help. I get attached to people, and it's rewarding," she says. She plans to attend San Bernardino City College to study Theatre. She is glad to be connected to US and continues to pursue creative endeavors. She is currently looking for a writing mentor. "I've come a long way since my first show with US. I'm now independent and doing well. I'm very close to my family."

GOLDA was 17 when she joined The Unusual Suspects Foster Care/Group Home program in October 1996. She is now 24 years old and doing well at being on her own. She recently received two Golden Duckie awards given by The Village-Integrated Services Agency in Long Beach for being a 'family booster,' which entails working with her family and reconnecting with them. Golda is currently studying journalism at Long Beach City College and looking for a job on campus.

CARLOS played the Cheetah in "The Eggs Weren't Mentioned 'Til the End," a jungle safari murder mystery at Juvenile Hall in February 2001. In the three years that he has been incarcerated, Carlos has received his GED and a certificate in psychology. He has also become a certified computer technician. Carlos is currently serving time at Ironwood State Prison and attending Palo Verde College and taking courses at Fresno Pacific University from there. He does not know when he will be released, but he says, "Following my dreams will not end just because I find myself incarcerated. I believe that where there is life, there is hope. I chose to major in liberal arts at Palo Verde to keep my options open for a career when I get out." He started the program when he was 16 and will turn 20 in May. He says he misses The Unusual Suspects and sends his love and respect to us all.

★ US Enjoys Lasting Support and Welcomes New Funders

The Unusual Suspects is excited to announce the major funding that we received in 2003 in grants and endowments both from our continuing supporters and from new funders. We would like to welcome the S. Mark Taper and the Dwight Stuart Youth Foundations aboard and express our deep gratitude to them and to all of the following organizations: Art Share Los Angeles for financing our workshop and production of "The Hood Story" with their generous gift of \$60,000; The Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation for their generous donation of \$5000 toward our administrative costs; The James E. and Diane W. Burke Foundation for grants received in October and December totaling \$25,000; The Entertainment Industry Foundation for funding US for the third year by contributing \$8000 toward a new program at Camp Gonzalez, a juvenile detention facility; The S. Mark Taper Foundation for their first-time donation of \$15,000 toward the growth of our organization.

We are grateful for this support. With our new Executive Director, Zoot Velasco, and continuing Board development, we look forward to a long and substantial presence in Los Angeles and beyond!

★ US Thanks Cirque du Soleil, Media Placement and Julien Entertainment

Thanks to Gil Favreau of the Social Affairs and International Cooperation Department at Cirque du Soleil, US teens received complimentary tickets (worth \$75 each) to *Varekai!*, held under the Grand Chapiteau set up this fall at the Staples Center parking area. Workshop volunteers from the G.I.F.T. program met kids and staff from Art Share LA to attend the magical event. None of the kids had seen Cirque du Soleil before and said it was an experience they would take with them forever. US would also like to thank Britt Johnson and Steve Wise of Media Placement and Darren Julien of Julien Entertainment for increasing our profile and helping us raise funds through silent and online auctions.

UNUSUAL news

US WELCOMES NEW BOARD MEMBERS

US heartily welcomes **Thomas Reed** and **Rona Elliot** to our Board of Directors! Thomas Reed has twenty-seven years experience as an accountant and business manager with a primary concentration in the entertainment industry. He holds a BFA from San Francisco Art Institute in Film Production and a Master's degree from Long Island University in Accounting & Finance. He is currently running his own firm, Affiliated Financial Service Group, Inc. "As time passes, I seek warmth, happiness, the treasures of knowledge and the pleasures of friendship," he writes.

Rona Elliot is a specialist in Public Relations. A fanatic music fan, Rona saw Bob Dylan first "go electric" at the Newport Folk Festival. While backpacking in North Africa she received a telegram from a friend that said "Come home, festival in upstate New York!" She returned and worked at what would become the legendary Woodstock Music Festival, where she ran the festival's local public relations department. From there, she created, hosted and produced radio network programs including "Live From the Hard Rock Café." At NBC's Today Show, she created the position of Music Correspondent conducting interviews all over the world with rock n roll legends such as the Rolling Stones, Sting, and Paul McCartney. She covered the Amnesty International "Conspiracy of Hope Tours"

and was integrally involved with breaking the Band Aid and Live Aid story out of London. Rona has conducted interviews for the Shoah Visual History Foundation interviewing Holocaust Survivors and currently conducts interviews with rock and pop legends for the Grammy Living History Foundation. She also teaches at UCLA in adult education. Rona says she's interviewed everyone from the Dalai Lama to Dolly Parton and remains deeply interested in all manner of humans – mostly performers and artists and people committed to helping others. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and 3 children.

KRISTEN KIRCHNER HOLDS BENEFIT PARTY FOR US FOR SECOND YEAR IN A ROW

On September 24, 2003, **Kristen Kirchner** opened her home for a party to benefit The Unusual Suspects. To defray the cost of the special invitation gathering, Kirchner got donations from vendors such as Turi Vodka and Red Bull. Still, Kirchner underwrote much of the event herself, and we are grateful to her not only for her contribution and fundraising expertise, but also for boosting our profile among hip, young Hollywood. Last year, Kirchner raised money for US at her birthday party held at Drake's in Venice, CA, and she says she will continue to support US in the future. Asked why she does it, Kirchner said, "I have been extremely blessed in my life, but I realize that there are many that are not. The arts instill self-confidence and help people break out of negative environments." She favors the work of US because, "There are a lot of bigger organiza-

tions that serve younger kids, but teenagers need help too."

US FINALLY OUT OF THE CLOSET!

Thanks to US Advisory Board member **Robert Greenwald**, The Unusual Suspects operations moved from Founder Laura Leigh Hughes' closet into a quaint courtyard adjacent office space in Culver City last year. Hughes met Greenwald when mutual friend and US Board Member Roderick Spencer introduced the two at a party. Greenwald immediately took an interest in the work of Unusual Suspects and became an avid supporter. When he saw in the Spring 2002 Newsletter that we were looking for office space, Greenwald invited Hughes to see a suite that had opened up in the bungalows next to his production offices in Culver City. It was a great fit, and the building near the corner of Overland and Culver Boulevard (across from Sony Pictures) has been home to US ever since – just over a year. Hughes enlisted the support of US volunteers, board members and supporters and got all of the office furniture donated. The organization also enrolled in LA Shares Lottery; a resource for non-profits, to get discounted office equipment and supplies. US loves its new home and is grateful to Robert Greenwald for providing it. The only remaining goal is to transfer the US warehouse from Hughes' garage to a legit storage locker so that she can park her car. Last year's article featured a picture of the closet that served so long as US Headquarters and the plea: "Help Get US Out of the Closet."

Guy Ritchie's Visit Instills Hope

BY SALLY FAIRMAN

PHOTO BY LAURA LEIGH HUGHES



Film Director Guy Ritchie and Actor Bruce Greenwood with Unusual Suspects Volunteers outside Central Juvenile Hall. Left to right: Laura Leigh Hughes, Bruce Greenwood, Sally Fairman, Guy Ritchie, Tony Okungbowa and Steve Pacini.

Last fall, US was honored to introduce Filmmaker Guy Ritchie as a guest speaker to the guys in Unit K/L that participated in our program at Central Juvenile Hall (CJH). Ritchie learned of US through actor Bruce Greenwood,

a major donor and long-time supporter. In the midst of our fall workshop, US Volunteers accompanied Ritchie and Greenwood on a special afternoon trip to the facility, which CJH staff generously arranged on short notice. "What the whole moment was really about was 'hope,'" says US workshop volunteer Steve Pacini, whose background is similar to a lot of the guys in Unit K/L. "From my experience, a lot of the guys in there see themselves as failures. Guy's visit, because of his background, along with what they already knew about me, opened the floor for debate."

Inside Unit K/L, the guys formed a circle seated on plastic chairs under the day room's florescent lights. They waited silently and respectfully for Ritchie to take the floor. Most of them did not know of the famous director of

such movies as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and *Snatch*, which Ritchie took in stride not mentioning his affiliation with pop icon Madonna. He got right to the point; and after some suspicion toward the white guy with the funny accent, the boys began to ask one after the next how they could finally succeed in changing their lives. Terry, who created and performed in "The School of Hard Knocks," challenged Ritchie saying he had tried to change many times, but continued to fail. "Our lives are filled with too many obstacles to get past," he said. For the remainder of the precious 90 minutes that afternoon, Ritchie and Pacini talked about strategies and about hope. "We represented living proof that you could be whatever you want to be regardless of your past experiences, that we're all given another opportunity in life. And it's what we do with that opportunity that dictates your path," explained Pacini.

O: How did you feel about having all that responsibility in the play?

F: What do you mean?

O: You were the lead actor in "Hood Story."

F: I wanted to be the lead, it felt scary but it felt good. At I first I felt scared. I never thought that I could go through with it, but then it started to change at around the middle to the end. Then I said, "I have it!" and I wasn't scared no mo'.

O: Do you think "Hood Story" reflected young people's lives?

F: Yeah, it was a real story. The way we did it. Each actor had a little part of their lives in the script. I had done drugs in real life, that was in there. Another one of the actors had been a drug dealer for a while and we had it in the story. It was what we went through in our lives and on the streets. "Hood Story" showed that.

O: You incorporated some of your own talent into the show, how was that for you?

F: I watch TV, I see them rap. Where I come from I see people rap on the streets. I want to be like them. I always wanted to be a rapper. At first it was a joke, everyone laughed. But when I did it in the show, I wasn't a joke no more. People respected me and my talents. It felt good.

O: Did you enjoy the creative process or the performance process the most?

F: Well the truth is I liked both, but I have to say that I liked the first part more because we got to spend more time with people. At first we didn't like em', but then we liked em' and they made me feel good.

O: Who?

F: The volunteers. I would be at home all sad then come to the group and feel good. Bring a smile to my face. Also because I got to learn from other actors. I got to see them work sometimes.

O: Looking back on your experiences, would you do anything differently?

F: Yeah I would've liked to do a video maybe. Try different things.

O: What are you doing now?

F: I'm just focusing. I just graduated the 12th grade. Trying to work and go to college and continue my acting career.

O: What are your plans for the future?

F: Just to focus on acting. Try and make it in the business, as an actor.

O: Any shoutouts?

F: Shout out to John, to you Oscar, to all the guys I work with, to Monty, and also to a guy that I work with named Jordan, and everyone at ART SHARE and THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS.

O: Anything else?

F: That's about it. Audi.

Hood Story (continued from page 5)

the audience loves it. As the play continues and gets increasingly more violent, the jovial atmosphere shifts. The audience is theirs. When Tony races back to ask Olivia one more time to leave with him, and he enters her house and sees her on the floor, a 5-year-old girl (Freddy's sister it turns out) sitting on the floor next to the stage, tugs at his pant leg and whispers, "She's dead..." Freddy is brilliant. Not one word out of place plus a keen sense of making everything happen as if for the first time. His performances are riveting, and each audience showers him with praise.

Afterwards, on closing night, when all the crowds have left, we sit in a circle, the volunteers and kids, and share our memories. The kids start doing uproarious imper-

sonations of the volunteers. We are all laughing hysterically, and then everyone starts to cry. None of us wants it to end.

There is no doubt in my mind that we have made a difference in their lives – just as they have made a difference in ours. And I shall never forget what Dee Dee said so beautifully when she was asked about the program, "Every time I walked into the room the volunteers always made me feel like a '10.'" Thank you Dee Dee. I am so grateful to have been a part of this. We created a play, and so much more than a play. What a blessing. Thank you. Peace.

For Freddy. Diego. Dina. DeeDee. Carlos. David. Samantha. Rocio. Thomas. Alan. Gabriel.

CAA Event (continued from page 4)

When asked what she had hoped for from this evening, Hughes evoked the poem's message once again, "I hoped people would walk away with knowledge of the work we do, who the kids are we work with and what marvelous people they are."

Was the evening a success? "Absolutely," says Rotenberg. "People were sitting on the floor."

Lindstrom agrees, "For a moment in time, the audience and the young performers were united and the energy was electric. The unheard were heard and the unseen were seen. In many ways, it was a celebration of our common humanity."



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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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 on the Message Board on our website:

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Newsletter design: Lydia Chung
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