

unusual E-ZINE

THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS YOUTH THEATRE PROGRAM

ALUMNI update

By JENNIFER LISLE

RICKY Age 18 / Fall 2004 Optimist

Ricky lives with his family and works near Riverside. He hopes to attend The Groundlings Comedy/Improv School in June. Working with the Unusual Suspects was a great experience for him. "I had done some acting before in High School but this was the first time I did any real writing. I learned a lot, really a lot. I learned how hard it is to write a play and develop characters. The exercises we did for improv training were also really fun and really hard, but the fact that it's hard makes it good. I now know that I can think on my feet. If I missed a line or something, I would know what to do."

KEVIN Age 15 / Fall 2004 Optimist

Kevin has been living at home but still goes to Optimist High School. He is in 10th grade and studies World History, Life Science, Algebra and Urban Studies. "I've been in plays before but never helped write one. Doing the Unusual Suspects was pretty much the best experience I've ever had," he says. Kevin's favorite part of the program was the collaborative writing process where everyone gave out their ideas and he got to see his jokes and ideas for characters make it into the final production. The most challenging aspect of the program for him was working with the other kids. "I would get really frustrated by

some of the things they did. But by the end of the play, I was good friends with someone that I really didn't like at all. And now we're still really good friends."

DINA Age 18 / Art Share program in Spring 2003

Dina is a high school senior in East Los Angeles and will graduate in June. As the school's Student Body Life President, she says she is busy, "doing anything that needs to get done." She helps fundraise for class activities and events and works to recognize students' and teachers' achievements. In addition, she recently helped organize a mural-painting project in the alley outside the school. "We did the mural so people will have respect for the school, for the area," she says. She says she valued her time with the Unusual Suspects because of the "cool people, great teachers and the good vibe." She says that the experience of performing on stage was very valuable. "I learned how to project my words into a crowd and be part of a performance. It was a really great feeling."

IN THEIR WORDS

From a letter we received last fall:

"You were my family for the 12 weeks we worked with each other. If only we had met each other earlier. I was really sad we left each other. I felt empty. But I'm thankful to God for meeting you guys. You helped me believe in myself when I didn't and I thank you a lot for that."

- JOSE (AKA Jimmy), "Optimist Idol"

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Cutting Edge Theatre & Reception

Don't miss the latest stories by The Unusual Suspects Teens

MAY 7 @ 1 pm
"THE RUNAWAYS"

Written and Performed by
Youth at Camp Gonzales

Directed by John Freeland, Jr.

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NEW BOARD MEMBER PROFILE interview

Great Leaders Can Be Any Age

By JENNIFER LISLE

Suspect's Name: Remy Greeno | **Age:** 16

Suspect's Profile: Junior at Harvard-Westlake School. Started her own non-profit fundraising organization called Teenangels LA (www.teenangelsla.com) last year. The group of students and friends organizes

events and donates the proceeds to different children's charities across the country.

First Project: Held a fundraiser that generated \$860 for Hope Village, an orphanage in Tennessee.

Most recent work with US: Organized an

American Idol-style talent show in January that raised \$8,200 for US. Participants danced, sang, told jokes and threw some big karate punches. Celebrity judges included Jason Alexander, Seth Green, Alfre Woodward and Jason Ritter.

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Letter from the Executive Director

"When you see the value of continued growth, the circumstances around you become stepping stones." — CLYDE M. NARRIMORE



Growth has been the

key word for 2005 as we have set the wheels in motion to fulfill our mission by expanding our program throughout the juvenile justice and foster care systems. We have not just continued the great work we started last year. We are finding the stepping stones to grow our programs.

Our new formalized curriculum has been approved for covering the state standards by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission and has been included in their Resource Directory. This is something required of arts programs countywide. Now youth in our programs can get high school credit and community service hours (something they need to leave probation). We are finding the stepping stones to grow our programs.

Frances Carley, our intern from UCLA's School of Public Policy and Social Research, is conducting a study of our work as a violence prevention program, the first of its kind in the nation. This is another stepping stone.

This summer we will start the pilot program of what will become a key part of our mission. We will be partnering with Eagle Rock Art Center on an Alumni program allowing youth that have worked with us on various programs to create a new play on the outside which could be performed and toured around the county at theatres and schools. We are also developing a

resource directory to point youth alumni to scholarships, programs and job opportunities in their neighborhoods. With these alumni programs as a key component of our work, we can bridge the institutions with the neighborhoods and help these youth transition to other opportunities as they grow. Another stepping stone is found.

We have proposed to the LA County Probation Department a model program that would take arts programming into 9 camps over 3 years and reach 1500 youth. This would put consistent programs in the camp system and cover the state standards for the arts with these youth. This is another stepping stone.

We have contacted all the foster care group homes that work with teens in the county, and are negotiating future programs at many of them, thanks in part to Optimist's Executive Director Sil Orlando's endorsement of our work. This is another stepping stone.

Since January, we have raised over \$100,000 for our programs thanks to enormous support from foundations, government, corporations and individuals. This is another stepping stone. Thanks to postings in LA Culturenet and a donated ad in *Backstage West*, we have received interest from 20 new artists with a desire to volunteer. This is another stepping stone.

Everything is in place for us to fulfill our mission, and truly serve all of the county's youth who are part of the foster care and juve-

nile justice systems. This year we will be completing 5 programs in 3 sites. Our short-term goal is that by 2006, we can be hosting 8 programs in 5 sites. We are putting in place those stepping stones needed to get all the way across this river of neglect, violence and abuse that kids and the community drown in. Within the next 5 years, with your help and continued support, there is no reason why we can't be in every institution where teens are in need and proving our worth with these studies of our program, setting us up as a national model of how arts change lives.

There are few arts programs working with older youth. And there are even fewer foundations and grants that support this work. These youth are the role models of their younger siblings. Reaching the older youth is an important part of breaking the cycles of violence. Please enjoy the latest news from our programs and contribute what you can as we go through this time of growth. We need to triple what we have raised so far to reach our goals this year! Help us find stepping stones to bridge this chasm and change lives on an unprecedented scale!

Thanks for your tireless help and support,



ZOOT VELASCO, Executive Director

Groundbreaking Research Study takes a closer look at US Programs

BY MELISSA ANN UHLES

"The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience..." Shakespeare's Hamlet illustrates what volunteers witness in Unusual Suspects workshops.

Is it possible to prove the quantitative and qualitative success of this program? Will these students be less likely to commit crimes as a direct result of their experience with the Unusual Suspects?

Answers may come as a result of an important 3-year research study by UCLA. This study may determine the over-all effectiveness of the

Unusual Suspects Theatre program. It may impact how future programs are done internationally. The first student to start the study will be Francy Carley. Recently I had an opportunity to speak with Francy and US Executive Director, Zoot Velasco.

Has there ever been a study of this kind conducted for The Unusual Suspects?

Zoot: To my knowledge, there has never been a study of the arts as a violence prevention tool in juvenile corrections facilities ever in any art-form! This study could change the way arts and

theatre are perceived in corrections with youth. A similar study was done in the 80's with adults and showed significant reduction in violence and recidivism. (That study is in our materials and website.)

Why might this study be helpful to the future of the Unusual Suspects?

Z: If we can prove our program is not just an arts program but prevents violence and changes behavior, it would have huge implications nationwide.

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New Board Member (continued from page 1)

How did you hear about US? "Roderick Spencer, a family friend, showed me a US newsletter. I read one article about a certain boy in the program and it made me see how effective this program is. It also showed me the hardships of inner-city life."

What have you enjoyed about working with US? "It's all been really great. Zoot is really a great leader; he's so passionate about the program and about the kids."

Currently: "I'm working with another student to help raise awareness about the crisis in Darfur and how it is affecting children there."

Plans for future? "With Teenangels, we are

organizing a Battle of the Bands event for the end of the school year."

After the fundraiser in January, Zoot asked Remy to join the US Board, and her membership is to be approved at this month's board meeting.



Remy Greeno (center) and Teenangels LA present a check for \$8200.00 to US Executive Director, Zoot. [Courtesy of Teenangels LA]

Research Study (continued from page 2)

Is it possible more funding for future camps may become available as a result of this study?

Z: We are in talks with probation now on a pilot program that would eventually put us in 9 camps with an outside alumni program as well.

How will you work with Francy on this study?

Z: This is only the first leg of a 3-year study. Other researchers will follow up on Francy's work and add to it.

What's your background?

Francy: I'm currently working on my Master's of Public Policy at UCLA. I got my BA in Anthropology at CU Boulder in 2000. I started as a theatre major at the University of Michigan several years earlier.

What do you suspect this study may reveal?

F: The study is an initial look at the possible effects that the US program may be having on the kids at Camp Gonzales and Optimist. There will be interviews at the beginning of the program and at the end in order to determine whether there are any changes. Most of the data

will be qualitative information obtained through interviews with the participants. Hopefully there will also be interviews with a parent, guardian, teacher and a staff member. Quantitative information includes test scores and grades. The sample size is small, but hopefully we'll be able to see some positive changes.

Zoot and Francy will reveal results of this study as they materialize. The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company has given these kids someone to lean on. Hopefully this study will prove how vital that will be for their future.



US artists at Optimist rehearsal last fall. From L to R. BACK: Howie, John, Vivianne, Zoot, Guillermo. FRONT: Sally, Michael [Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes]

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS

US extends deepest thanks to our new and continuing funders: The James E. and Diane W. Burke Foundation, The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, the Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation, the Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation, City of LA Cultural Affairs Department, New Roads Community Partners and New Visions Foundation, Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services, City of LA Cultural Affairs Percent-for-Arts Program, Carol and Frank Biondi, Liberty Hill Foundation, the Bancroft Family Foundation, Northrop Grumman, and Creative Artist Agency Foundation. In addition, we are sponsored in-kind by Kaye Scholer LLP, Affiliated Financial Services, Inc., KESmail, Merrick Velasco, Lydia Chung, Monarch Print and Domino's Pizza. We could not function without the dedicated support and resources of these organizations and individuals, and we are eternally grateful!

THANK YOU THANK YOU

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Feedback From our Partners

By SALLY FAIRMAN

PROGRAM news

CAMP GONZALES

Camp Gonzales in Calabasas is a probation facility for teen boys. Through New Roads Community Partners, The Unusual Suspects brings its 12-week theatre ensemble to these incarcerated youth. As the kids gear up for their second show on May 7, our partners have this to say.

"It's an outlet to display their hidden talents. If left untapped, who knows where these kids will end up?"

—ERIC EFONDU, Director, Camp David Gonzales

"To see actors and directors coming to their camp gives the staff a sense of pride," says Camp Director Eric Ufodu. He points out that of the 20 probation camps in LA County many do not have these types of programs. "The kids here are more relaxed. The kids at some other camps don't have any way to let out their frustration and anger," he says.

Deputy Probation Officer Alberto Ramirez also sees a need for the program. "You guys are able to provide the one-on-one contact that they need. Since you're not probation, it's a different type of authority."

And the result? Fernando Montes-Rodriguez, Program Director for New Roads, feels the strategy works, "Especially in settings where youth feel fully academically engaged as is the case in the *US* drama program. Several participants in your last show demonstrated a higher level of commitment in preparing themselves to transition to their family and/or

communities." Ufodu sees change in the kids as well. "A couple of kids from last fall stood out," he said. "One of them stopped being destructive, and his new attitude got him into a leadership position at camp." Ramirez agrees and sees the benefit of diversity. "The kids were so happy. It was a team. Not like, 'He's black. He's Mexican.' Everyone was part of *US*," he said.

OPTIMIST

Thanks to funding by the Cultural Affairs Percent-For-Arts Program, *US* continues its partnership with Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services this spring, and the youth will perform their second original play "The Bare Mitch Project" for the public on May 14th.

"In theatre, the boys access different emotions, different characters, different parts of

"What I think is cool is that the boys forget to be defiant."

—MEGAN BARR, Art Therapist,
Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services

themselves; and they can let go of their delinquency," says Art Therapist Megan Barr reflecting on the potential of theatre as a formative tool. Music Therapist Amy Donnenwerth agrees. "Theatre potentially brings out positive aspects of the young, growing mind," she says. And, one of the best parts is that the participants are allowed to be kids. "It's great to see them having fun. Many of these boys have had to take the parent role in their lives, even steal to provide food for their families," says Barr.

According to Donnenwerth, the last show



An emotional moment at Camp G. The boys had the audience in the palm of their hand. [Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes]

created quite a buzz. "Staff that hadn't seen it kept asking to see the video," she said. Mary Hudson, Director of Mental Health Services, also gave it thumbs up. "It was not only creative and funny but was a poignant show with underlying themes that were real life for the actors."

Of all the aspects of the program, Barr likes the process the best. "I love the therapeutic merit, working through the commitment issues," she says. Donnenwerth also noted the benefits. "Several of our residents blossomed. One in particular really came into his own. Through the process, he began to open like a flower. His attitude improved, his peer interactions improved and he became quite a leader," she observed.

All agree that scheduling is the one major sticking point. The boys' time is committed to therapy, school, and other activities, purposefully leaving very few idle moments. Nonetheless, Executive Director Sil Orlando recommends it. "The residents who performed last time are still talking about their positive experience and encouraging others to participate," he says.



OUR mission

The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization of professional artists. We exist to bring theatre arts to youth, ages 12-21, from the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Our programs cultivate pride, racial tolerance and social consciousness.

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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: www.theunusualsuspects.org or e-mail *US* at: unusualsuspects@sbcglobal.net

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