

Unusual Times

City leaders call for programs like *US* to prevent gangs

By JENNIFER LISLE

"...behind any gang member arrested today or tomorrow, there is a 10-year old being recruited somewhere else to join another gang. In order to truly eradicate our city of gangs, we must start raising an entire generation of kids that will not join gangs in the first place."

— COUNCILWOMAN JANICE HAHN, 15TH DISTRICT. FROM AN ARTICLE IN *SAN PEDRO MAGAZINE*, FEBRUARY 2007

City leaders, in a break from traditional law-enforcement tactics, are calling on programs like *US* to take a larger role in renewed gang-prevention efforts. Councilwoman Janice Hahn of the 15th District said that for too long the city has focused on suppression of gangs, a strategy that has not worked.

"In the twenty years we have been fighting the war on gangs, we have incarcerated more than 400,000 people; but today we have seven times as many gangs and twice as many gang members than when we started. We are failing because we have not invested enough money in prevention, intervention and after school programs."

While citywide crime has dropped to its lowest levels in 50 years, gang-related crime was up 14% in 2006 with gangs responsible for 56% of all murders, according to the LAPD. In addition, incidents like the racially-motivated killing of Cheryl Green, allegedly by a member of the 204th Street gang last December, have brought the issue of gang prevention to the public's attention.

In response, Connie Rice, a *US* Advisory Board member and head of the Advancement Project, produced a comprehensive plan for

the city to overhaul gang intervention programs in January. Calling it a "Marshall Plan," she told the *LA Times* that it would focus on 12 so-called "hot zones" around the city and mix law enforcement with gang intervention and job programs, community outreach and newly created community oversight groups.

"The LAPD knows how to surge and purge," Rice said. But "after the LAPD clears out a neighborhood, we don't know how to hold and build."

To help "hold and build" neighborhoods, Councilwoman Hahn proposed a ballot measure to provide \$50 million in funding for gang-prevention programs, intervention and after-school programs. The proposal received unanimous support from her City Council colleagues and will be put before voters in 2008.

Board Chair Laura Leigh Hughes, who founded *US* in 1992, welcomed the response by city leaders and said that while it was not a new concept, it was an endorsement of the potential of programs like *The Unusual Suspects*.

Hughes was inspired to start the program after seeing the city torn apart by racial [continued on page 3]

ALUMNI updates: *Where are they now?*

By OLIVIA KILLINGSWORTH

Stephanie

Age: 14 /Narbonne High School Summer 2006

US recently caught up with Stephanie, an alum from the Narbonne High School Summer 2006 program, who just celebrated her 14th birthday. She shared some fond memories with us from the show: she told us that she liked the prom scene the best (since she got to wear a pretty dress!), and that she's been hanging out with her new friends from the program a lot more often these days. Stephanie wanted us to know that she's doing much better in school these days, especially in dance class, which is her favorite.



Stephan

Age: 17 /Narbonne High School Summer 2006

Alumnus Stephan Jackson tells us that his experience with *US* in the summer of 2006 "dramatically" changed his life: he was never a big talker, and people had difficulty hearing him, but now he has much better self-confidence and is able to speak up for himself! He also mentioned that he was really surprised when he first showed up to his first workshop with [continued on page 2]



YOU'RE INVITED TO OUR UPCOMING EVENTS

APRIL 25

Staged reading by professional actors of play written by youth at **Star View Adolescent Center** in Torrance, CA – NEW PILOT PROGRAM

may 19

Performance written & performed by youth at **Camp David Gonzales Juvenile Detention** in Calabasas, CA

june 16

Performance written & performed by youth at **Vista del Mar Child & Family services** (Palms area)

june 30

Staged reading of play written by participants at **Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility** in Chino, CA – NEW PARTNER SITE!

Letter from the Executive Director

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS CELEBRATES 15TH ANNIVERSARY

YOUTH ASKS, "WILL THERE BE A SEQUEL?"



On April 29, 1992, actress Laura Leigh Hughes, our founder, caught a falling ash in her hand following the Rodney King verdict and knew that she wanted to find

a way to help bridge differences in the community. She got together a cadre of fellow artists – actors, writers, directors, etc. – and began a theatre program working with underserved young people from foster care and from juvenile justice. Her intent was to empower youth by giving them a voice.

During those first years, the community recognized our program in the media and by awarding *US* the Mid-Valley Youth Theatre Award, *Best Play*. Fifteen years and 45 productions later, the transformative impact of our program has been recognized on local, state and national levels – *US* was a recipient of the National Juvenile Justice Award in 2000 – and the demand for our program is growing.

Every week, we get calls from schools in underserved areas, youth correctional facilities, and foster care agencies requesting our program. Supervising Case Work Specialist, Jennifer Hetheron, of the Department of Juvenile Justice Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility in Chino (formerly CYA), found us on the Internet: "I saw that you were one of the only programs serving this population, but I was sure you would say 'no' because of the location." Happily, because of our sustained growth since 2004, we are now able to meet the demand for our program more

quickly and consistently. Our first workshop in Chino is set to begin on May 9. In fact, since last June, we've opened five new partner sites. Out of the total 45 programs produced over our 15-year history, 16 were completed in the last two years.


US is also in discussions to bring a pilot program to Pacoima Charter Elementary this Fall. School officials in Pacoima have seen gang involvement in children as young as age nine. In recent months, city government has publicized the law enforcement response to gang activity, and there is also a call to provide alternative, preventive services to address the underlying causes of violence, which some refer to as a "Marshall Plan."

Out of last year's Art Matters Conference, organized by the City of LA Department of Cultural Affairs, *US* helped form an arts coalition made up of officials from County Probation, City of LA Human Relations Commission, the Youth Opportunity Movement, and other community based organizations including Create Now!, Friends of the Family, and Art & Soul. The goal is to bring a continuum of arts programming to elementary through high school students in Pacoima, where 50% of children live below the poverty level.

Born of the ashes of racial strife, *US* has brought together 80+ caring volunteers from the theatre/film industry with more than 1500 youth to create original plays and perform them. Close to 10,000 community members (friends, family, community leaders, government officials, celebrities, the youths' teachers

and staff, and *US* supporters) have seen these plays and been part of one of the most beautiful experiences we know: watching the transformative power of theatre bring our youth and the community together.

In the words of participant Oscar Jackson following his recent tender performance in *Inner Wimpy*: "Will there be a sequel?" Our answer: "You bet."


Sally Fairman

Weingart Gift Challenges *US* to Raise Money from New Donors

US receives largest donation to date

A recent \$75K capacity building grant from the Weingart Foundation, under their gang prevention initiative, challenges *US* to raise money from new sources. \$50K is unencumbered and \$25K is a challenge grant for 2008 for which the foundation will match every dollar up to \$25K that we receive from new sources – individuals, foundations, corporations, and government agencies. We hope that you will consider a gift at this critical juncture and passing along the word to new potential donors. By giving now, new donors will double the impact of their gift.

Alumni Updates continued from page 1

US, because there were a lot of people he knew there from school, whom he wouldn't have expected to be interested in drama.

When we spoke to him, Stephan was really looking forward to the Narbonne reunion scheduled for mid-March, and he wanted to send big shout-outs to all his friends in the program, to all *US* teaching artists who worked in the Harbor Gateway last summer, and "to all my favorite people."

Cynthia

Age: 12 / Star View Adolescent Center Fall 2006

We caught up with Cynthia at a reunion for last fall's "The Case of the Wish Factory Mix-Up" at Star View Adolescent Center. At the time, she was very excited to be moving out of Star View and over to Vista Del Mar Child & Family Services in Palms, where the Unusual Suspects ALSO has ongoing programs! She was very excited to join us again; she remembers fondly her favorite exercises from the workshop (Pass the Clap, Bibbity Bibbity Bop) and mentioned

that working with *US* for two years helped her gain more confidence, make new friends, and as she put it, come "out of my bubble."



Youth Art
by Rian / Vista
del Mar Child &
Family Services,
Fall 2006

Empowering youth through their words

VOLUNTEER interview

Name: Jamie Diamond

Profile and previous credits:

I received an MA in fiction from NYU and write profiles of people in the arts for *The New York Times*, *InStyle*, *Entertainment Weekly* and other publications. I recently edited a book of first-person stories "From Homelessness to Hope," which was turned into a play and performed as a benefit by Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman, Alfre Woodard, and Don Cheadle.

How long have you been involved with Unusual Suspects?

Four years.

How did you get involved?

A friend who helped put up the website told me about the program at Camp Gonzales. Watching a hard-eyed teenager dressed in prison-orange suddenly open up in an improv won me over. Before my eyes, in a bleak cement-block gymnasium filled with incarcerated tattooed males, was a place in which the most sullen, self-protected kid could shine and delight.

How has volunteering for US changed you?

Working with US has given me the opportunity to see the commonalities between my world and the worlds of the kids at Camp Gonzales (incarcerated juvenile males) and the kids at Star View Adolescent Center (teenage victims of neglect and often of

sexual and physical abuse). The inventive decisions we make about plots or props, the energy we spend getting the characters right, and the communal excitement of 'let's put on a play' allow us to reach past our differences and connect. Where else could I experience that?

What do you like best about working with US?

The instant the kids get their costumes and put them on, they change. They speak with less hesitation and more volume. They stand and walk differently. A 3-piece suit or blonde wig becomes a piece of transformational magic. As we move closer to the performance date, there is a moment when the kids really get it that they're going to appear in public and they do not want to look like amateurs. You see a change in their eyes, an iota of vulnerability, a slight softening, as if they were saying, Yes, I will accept your help now. And they ask: 'Can you practice these lines with me?' You feel the change: they trust you. Finally, in the progression, you see the shift when the kids fully own the play. There is Jose, minutes before opening, and he is sweeping the dirt near the stage so it will look nice to the audience. The dirt. And during the performance, after an actor forgets to bring the alarm clock on stage, at the crucial moment, Darnell just says loud and clear, "Ring." The kids on stage have become a team, and we're standing back, watching with pride.



City Leaders continued from page 1

division during the Rodney King riots in 1992 and stressed the importance of trying to reach at-risk youth before they become gang members.

"There were so many kids at Juvenile Hall who were in prison for 25 years to life sentences who told me, 'my life would be different if I had a program like US earlier.'"

Senior Probation Director and head of the new Juvenile Justice Task Force in Van Nuys, Officer Ed Anhalt agreed that it's time for law enforcement to try new "innovative and creative" approaches.

"It's important to get kids turned onto something like the arts or sports to keep them away from gangs and drugs," Anhalt said.

He said the city, "is spending so much money on locking up these kids, that it's time to be innovative and creative in handling them."

Anhalt heads up the new Juvenile Justice Task Force in Van Nuys and has recently formed an arts coalition with US and other arts groups, including the LA Human Relations Commission and Youth Opportunity Movement. The coalition will work with schools and local law enforcement to intervene as early as possible in the lives of at-risk children.

"We hope that by providing arts and human services programs starting in elementary school and continuing through middle and high school, the kids can nurture their creativity as they mature, not lose out on services when they graduate to a new school," Anhalt said.

One of the coalition's target areas is Pacoima, where over 50% of youth live below the poverty level.

"We know that in areas where there's a lot of poverty, the youth are at risk of getting involved."

youth writing

family

Written by Youth Participant from Vista del Mar Child & Family Services
Fall 2006 from *Friends, Family & SB6*

It's a price to pay,
when you search for fortune and fame.
That's when the drama heats up,
like a torch full of flames.

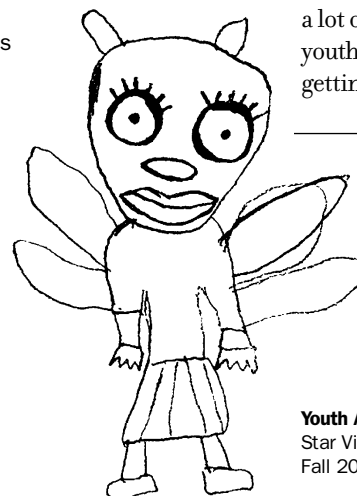
Nobody gets forced in the game,
We all choose our own path.
But then we realize that the choices
were lame.

When will the sanity end, to be famous.
As a result, we even hurt our close
family & friends.

No matter how much money you own,
or the fame you got,
It's kind of hard when you spend it
alone.

I'm not saying that it's bad to be
famous,
I'm just showing you a picture that had
to be painted.

So the next time you shine and it's the
fame your thirst,
Always put family first.



Youth Art by Deshon from
Star View Adolescent Center
Fall 2006

YOUTH interview

By OLIVIA KILLINGSWORTH



Name: Ramon Garcia
Age: 12
Program: El Sereno Middle School
Winter 06-07
Play: *Inner Wimpy*
Role: The Godfather

What did you enjoy most about playing the Godfather?

Probably yelling - I liked yelling at people.

What was challenging about the role?

Probably the blocking part because the stage was so little.

When you came to your first workshop with US, did you think you would like it?

Yeah, because all of my friends were in it.

What did you think of your overall experience with The Unusual Suspects?

It was fun.

What was your favorite part of the program?

The performances. The crowd clapping.

We know you've had a lot of drama experience but did you learn anything new from doing the program?

Learning how to change clothes really quickly and wear clothes underneath so we could go back and forth - I'd never learned how to do that before.

Did the program impact other areas of your life at all?

Yeah because now I really really know what I really want to be when I grow up.

And what's that?

An actor and a screenwriter.

Would you recommend this program to other kids?

Yes.

Why?

Because it's fun and all the mentors are really nice.

What are you doing in the near future to achieve your goal?

Well my drama teacher, he told us about a [performing arts] high school that's really hard to get into and has very few students accepted to it. He said that if we wanted to do it we should start putting stuff together, and that he would help us with the audition, because you have to be REALLY good. But you guys have helped me a lot with that too!

When will you audition for this school?

I audition in 8th grade, but I'm trying to get as much experience as I can right now.

How do you think your US experience helped you prepare for this challenge?

Probably blocking, because I didn't really know how to look forward to the audience - I kinda had my back turned during the play sometimes.

NOTE: This interviewer also thinks that after the US program, Ramon will be more prepared to take on that terrifying challenge which all actors face: The audition monologue. Ramon got very good at delivering solo speeches during our program, since he had so many of them written into his role as the Godfather! Look out, high school!

UNUSUAL news

By PRISCILLA JAWORSKI

NEW STAFF

■ Introducing... Our New Program Manager

Melissa Denton, a seasoned Teaching Artist with over 14 years of experience in arts organizations, has joined the staff at US as Program Manager. Melissa is also an actress and director who recently returned to Los Angeles from New York. Welcome aboard, Melissa!

■ Programs

NEW PROGRAMS/PARTNERS

We are proud to announce our NEW PARTNER **Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility** in Chino, CA (formerly known as California Youth Authority). We'll begin a 7-week intensive writing workshop in May, which will culminate in a live staged reading on June 30th.

3RD ANNUAL SUMMER ALUMNI PROGRAM

This year our Alumni Program will be held at Narbonne High School in Harbor City (South Bay). The 6-week acting intensive program will begin mid July and end with two culminating performances in August. For any alumni interested in participating, please contact **Richard Morgan** at (310) 558-3190 or info@theunusalsuspects.org.

■ Alumni Relations

Project Manager, **Priscilla Jaworski**, and US alumnus, **Richard Morgan**, are spearheading a plan to strengthen alumni relations and outreach. Priscilla and Richard are conducting an initial survey of the alumni and hope to focus the program's efforts on serving the youth once the responses are in. We are also implementing program reunions a few months after completion at each site, during which we will screen videos of youth performances and check in with old friends. **The New Post Group** has kindly committed themselves to donate DVD copies of youth performances for each of our participants. We hope that through these reunions, US can stay better connected with our alums.

US TEACHING ARTIST TRAINING: JUNE 9,10,23

The Unusual Suspects will be holding an extensive Training/Professional Development workshop for teaching artists to learn and further develop the skills it takes to teach at-risk youth. Over 20 hours of training in the following areas:

CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Rafael Angulo, Professor at USC School of Social Work

CONFLICT RESOLUTION & MENTORSHIP

Michael de la Rocha & Fidel Rodriguez, City of Los Angeles Human Relations Commission

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, Artistic Director of Watts Village Theatre Company

Limited space available!

For more information or to register, please contact Melissa at (310) 558-3190 or unusual_md@yahoo.com.

This training is sponsored by The Weingart Foundation & The Herb Alpert Foundation

■ New Board Member

Jennifer Lisle has worked as a journalist for the last 18 years in New York, London and Los Angeles. She has covered a range of topics, including urban and cultural trends, real estate, visual art and breaking news. Her experience in social services includes working as the grants manager at Planned Parenthood NYC, the agency that manages the three Manhattan Planned Parenthood clinics and serving on the Board of the The Rockland Parent-Child Center in Nyack, NY. At the Center, she edited a 40-page newsletter on child development issues, chaired fundraisers and helped run parenting programs. She holds a BA in English and Economics from Tufts University and an MA in Literature from Middlebury College. She's also been the editor of our *US* Newsletter for the past year and contributes her expertise throughout the year with press releases and media coverage.



NOVEMBER 2006 HOUSE PARTY WAS A HUGE SUCCESS

Hosted by *US* Board Member, **Howie Deutch**, and his wife, **Lea Thompson**, The Unusual Suspects had their first House Party Fundraiser. Fourteen Unusual Suspects alumni lit up the stage for 80 guests gathered for dinner and cocktails in the Deutch's beautiful backyard. The youth presented scenes from their original plays – some funny, some heartbreaking – addressing the issues of growing up in adverse circumstances. Thanks to Melissa Denton and Colleen Goodrich for planning the evening, along with *US* volunteers Michael Spillers, Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, Russell Bell, Gilbert Brown, Jacqueline Christy, Maile Flanagan, Lisa Hemmett, Dawid Jaworski, Elizabeth Logun, Esther Mercado, Richard Morgan, Vivianne Nacif, Robin Reiser, Lisa Stockon and Barry Thompson.



[Photo by Dawid Jaworski]

This event could not have been possible without the generous donations from the following vendors: Angel City Café, Royal Events Inc., Afrodita Flowers, Classic Party Rentals, Grey Goose Vodka, Center for the Arts, Eagle Rock & Monarch Print Copy & Design Solutions.

EXECUTIVE SERVICE CORPS

In February, *US* started working with **Executive Service Corps** of Southern California, a nonprofit organization of over 100 consultants that volunteer their time to help nonprofits meet the challenges of growth and sustainability. *US* first benefited from ESC's services in 2000, when consultant Ed Attanasio mentored founder Laura Leigh Hughes through ESC's Executive Advisory Program. This year, as part of ESC's Retainer Partnership Program, *US* will receive up to five services such as executive coaching, strategic planning, board development, developing development, and management consulting services. ESC's consultants are retired from senior positions in major corporations, businesses, governmental agencies and non-profit organizations. Our work with Executive Coach Robert J. Newmark of *The New York Times* and Strategic Planner Harold Bock of Lincoln Automotive has already paid off. In February, we added new board member Jennifer Lisle, and we will complete our new 3-year strategic plan by summer.

US PAID SUMMER INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITY

Learn the ins and outs of a rapidly growing non-profit organization.

US is offering a full-time paid internship this summer through the **Los Angeles County Arts Commission**. Undergraduates studying in LA County or who have a residence here may apply. Please contact **Priscilla** at our office for details on this 10-week position and for application instructions. Application deadline: May 4th.

Help us spread the word about this opportunity and refer prospective students our way! For more info: info@theunusualsuspects.org or (310) 558-3190.

THANK YOU THANK YOU

Gifts from February 06 - February 07

SUPER SUSPECTS

GIFTS OF \$20,000 OR MORE

National Endowment for the Arts
The Angell Foundation
The Bancroft Family Foundation
The Herb Alpert Foundation
The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation
The Weingart Foundation
Zev Yaroslavsky, Chairman of the Board, Supervisor, Third District

#1 SUSPECTS

GIFTS OF \$10,000-\$19,999

The Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation

PRIME SUSPECTS

GIFTS OF \$5,000-\$9,999

Carol and Frank Biondi • City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs
Entertainment Industry Foundation • Liberty Hill Foundation
Los Angeles County Arts Commission • Remy Greeno & Teenangels LA
Rhino Entertainment A&R • The Open Society Institute Matching Gift Program

SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS

GIFTS OF \$1,000-\$4,999

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COLORFUL CHARACTERS

GIFTS OF \$500-\$999

Jake Bloom • David Henry Hwang & Kathryn Layng • Jennifer Lisle & Michael Revy • David Schwimmer • Michael C. Small • Michael & Robbie Tolin • Westland School • Benny Wong

UNUSUAL CHARACTERS

GIFTS OF \$1-\$499

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Carrett Brown • Kris Calvin • Patricia Carroll & Mark Van Amringe
Stephen Carroll • Cindy Chupack • Kenneth & Stephanie Cooper
Cindy Crawford • Neil & Wendy Cuthbert • Jen Derwingson • Chris DiGiovanni
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Cedering Fox • Wendy & Bo Foxworth • Terry Friedman • Mary Galpin
Adam Goodman • La Faune Gordon-Conley • Lisa Goodman
Laura Lyn Greene • Kirsten Crimstad • Melissa Hall • Mariska Hargitay
Ferne Hayes • Jane Hayton Joe Henry & Melanie Ciccone • Dorothy Hill-Williams • James Hughes • Joseph Hughes • Laura Leigh Hughes • Tim Jordan
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Susan Nero • Denise Nicks • Charline Nunez • Nikolas Oetker • Michael & Renee Ogiens • Colin Okeffe • Catherine & Ken Osleger • Calvi Pabon
Viviana Pendrill • Melissa Peterman & John Brady • Tanya Hadlock Piltz
Kimberly L. Radford • Mark & Mary Ann Rauter • Darrel & Andrea Richards
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ACTIVE PARTNER AGENCIES

Barrio Action Youth & Family Center (El Sereno Middle School)
Camp David Gonzales, Calabasas • Center for the Arts, Eagle Rock • County of
Los Angeles Probation Department • Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional
Facility, Chino • New Roads Community Partners & New Visions Foundation
Star View Adolescent Center, Torrance • Vista del Mar Child & Family Services
Weed & Seed/LAPD (Narbonne High School), Harbor Gateway

Fall Show Report

By JENNIFER LISLE

STAR VIEW ADOLESCENT CENTER

At the beginning of *The Case of the Wish Factory Mix-Up*, the kingdom is in trouble. In a land where order depends upon wishes being granted, someone is undermining the citizen's wishes from coming true. Until this disaster gets fixed, the Prince and Princess cannot be wed. Luckily, Special Agent Lime is on hand to go undercover and discover the root of the mix-up at the wish factory before the kingdom's wishes disappear forever.

Comments from Melissa Denton, Lead Artist: "Now that we've done a few shows at Star

View, we've become a presence and it really showed this time both in the maturity of the kids and in the depth of their artistic expression. There were kids, one girl I'm thinking of, who was really quiet when she first did the program, and we cast her as the mouse. But for this performance, she had matured so much. She played the supervisor and came onstage with so much confidence."

The kids really appreciated the experience: "It made me feel part of something, and get recognized for the stuff I do – because I don't usually get recognition or get to feel part of something," said one youth.

"No one's perfect in the world... you try to do everything perfectly, but you still make mistakes..." commented another.

The audience was also moved by the performance:

"This was a gift to me and everybody in the audience. It was probably my favorite Christmas gift that you've given to me," said one member.



[Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes]

VISTA DEL MAR



[Photo by Laura Leigh Hughes]

On the surface, it looks like the kids in the popular SB6 group in *Friends, Family and SB6* have everything going for them: fame, fortune, fun... plus

an upcoming mega show with superstar Delicious. But in reality, the group is on the verge of breaking up. Enter reality TV show host Jerry Ringer. Jerry invites SB6 onto his show for a sneak preview. To help drive his ratings to an all-time high, Jerry has his minions dig up the dirt on each of the SB6 kids so he can stage an all-out exposé.

The day of the show arrives, and Jerry's plan

backfires. Despite the fact that their dirty laundry gets aired on television, the group patches up their differences and becomes stronger.

But getting the show into its final stages proved challenging at times, according to script supervisor Elizabeth Logun:

"Many of the kids had a hard time focusing and we were often advised (by their staff) that they wouldn't be able to handle the longer rehearsal schedule as we neared the performance. I certainly had my doubts too. However the opposite turned out to be true. The more that was asked of them, the more focused they became.

The final rehearsals, although peppered with tantrums and jitters, went remarkably well. The kids worked as a team and were extremely focused and supportive of each

other. It was a great example of how kids can rise to the occasion if asked (and expected) to do so."

The kids felt they learned a lot from the experience. Their comments:

"We found out we could work as a whole unit and build trust. We could be ourselves without worrying about what people would think," said Kyle.

"We had tough times but I still loved the program," said Gloria.

"Speaking up loud can help you become an actor in life," said Jeremy.

"You all teach different lessons and I took every single one of them," said Shay.

"Thank you for not giving up on us," said Crystal.

"We did better than I thought," said Jackie.

Winter Show Report

EL SERENO MIDDLE SCHOOL

In *Inner Wimpy*, Andrea, a world-renowned supermodel and actress finds her boyfriend cheating on her with her arch rival. Wimpy, a classmate, wants desperately to join the football team but is not allowed because he is too immature and attached to his 'sippy' cup. Andrea and Wimpy fall in love, but it's not happily ever after until they both learn that they need to be kind to each other and that everyone has vulnerabilities or "inner wimpies."

Director John Freeland, Jr. was utterly blown away by how capable the young cast proved to be.

"For middle school kids who mostly had no experience in acting, they did a remarkable job. They had to memorize lines, come onstage

and offstage and they had to keep quiet when they weren't onstage. It was a lot to throw at them."

Freeland said that by the time they performed the show for the public, they had taken the show to whole new level.

The kids had their doubts and fears but overcame them when showtime came.

"I had stage fright when I came here, and I never thought this moment would come, and I'm happy," said April Rodriguez.

Eduardo Mora said: "It helps me remember things I have to do. It was hard, I can't believe I did it."

"It really opened my eyes to different things that I can do," said Anthony Rodriguez

Oscar Jackson was left wanting more: "Are we going to have a sequel?"

The audience of mostly parents were very impressed with the show and with what their children could do:

"I praised God when I saw the show because nothing has gotten my daughter interested in anything but this program!" said Richard Gonzales, father of Sabrina.



MEET THE teaching artists

Naomi Buckley



Naomi Buckley is a South Bay local and has lived and worked in the area for the last 7 years. She is an actress, playwright, and director, as well as teacher.

After graduating from California State University, Dominguez Hills with her BA in Theatre Arts, she taught drama at Hawthorne High and numerous other places. Later, as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar of Goodwill, Naomi studied for her MFA in Acting at Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts in London. She is proud to be working at Star View Adolescent Center sharing her knowledge with a great group of kids!

Jacqueline Christy



Jacqueline Christy has been delighted to participate in the Unusual Suspects' program at the Optimist Youth Homes and at El Sereno Middle School. Jacqueline

has an extensive teaching and theatre background. She taught in the English department at Villanova University and currently teaches business writing at Los Angeles Valley College. She works as a writing consultant for BRC and private clients. In 1992, she founded Access Theater, a not-for-profit theater space in New York City. She has written four short plays and three feature-length screenplays. She is currently writing a screenplay for Cherry Road Films and Persistent Pictures.

Kristin Goodman



Kristin Goodman has worked as an actor, director and teacher. After earning an MFA in acting from DePaul University in Chicago, she worked at

several local theatres, including The Goodman Theatre, PropThtr. The Court and Chicago Shakespeare. Kristin has taught acting at Roosevelt University's College of the Performing Arts as well as in urban outreach programs and in middle and high school settings. Her screenplays have received numerous awards, including a Top Ten

Screenplay award at the 2003 Austin Film Festival and the 2003 Actor's Choice Award at the Santa Fe Screenwriter's Conference. Kristin is very excited to be working with The Unusual Suspects.

Olivia Killingsworth



Olivia Killingsworth's recent theatre credits as an actor include *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* at the Kirk Douglas Theater in Culver City, *The Threepenny*

Opera with The Open Fist Theatre Company, and Steve Martin's *WASP* at the MET Theatre in Hollywood. She has also worked in television and independent film and continues to study acting at the Larry Moss Studio in Santa Monica. She is a graduate of Occidental College and the British American Drama Academy, and a proud alumna of the Palo Alto Children's Theatre in Northern California. She's thrilled to be teaching and designing with The Unusual Suspects this season, and thanks her lucky stars (and Gilbert Brown) for bringing her into such an inspired (and inspiring) group of people.

Ruth McKee



Ruth McKee is a playwright who recently received her MFA from the University of California San Diego. Her most recent play

The Nightshade Family was a runner-up in the Alliance Theatre's Kendeda Graduate Competition, a finalist for the Stanley Drama Award and recently had a reading at Playwrights Horizons in New York. Before going to graduate school, Ruth was the Literary Manager and Education Coordinator for Young Playwrights Inc. in New York. She has also taught playwriting in the San Diego schools, at UCSD, and at Idyllwild Arts Academy. She is a lead artist at Star View Adolescent Center.

Saba Mwine



Saba Mwine is delighted to be a new member of the Unusual Suspects teaching artist team. Saba hails from Uganda and Egypt. She has had professional careers in

acting, non-profit fundraising, and elementary education for the past seven years. Saba holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology

and theater from Wheaton College in Massachusetts. She lives in Los Angeles and spends her free time doing yoga and playing with her soon-to-be three-year-old son.

Omar Ricks



Omar Ricks is energized and challenged by the playful yet hard work of creating theater. He recently graduated from UC-Irvine's Drama

Department, where he appeared in several productions, including, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The War to End War* and *Kiss Me, Kate*. He has also appeared on FX channel's award-winning cop drama *The Shield* and TNT's 2007 NBA All-Star Game. This summer, he will be playing Caliban in *The Tempest* at Shakespeare Santa Cruz. Omar is excited about working with The Unusual Suspects and the wonderful souls at Vista del Mar.

youth writing

untitled

SHE'S TOO SHORT
HE'S TOO TALL
HER EYEBROWS ARE TOO THICK
AND HIS NOSE IS WAY TOO SMALL
SHE ACTS TOO SAD
HE LOOKS TOO WEIRD
HER FRECKLES ARE TOO BIG
AND NO ONE LIKES HIS BEARD
HER MOUTH IS FILLED WITH METAL
HE HAS FOUR EYES INSTEAD OF TWO
HER HAIR IS WAY TOO DARK
AND HIS EYES ARE TOO BLUE
SHE PAINTS HER NAILS BLACK
HE ALWAYS WEARS A TIE
SHE'LL NEVER SMILE
AND HE'LL NEVER CRY
SHE WON'T BE NOTICED
HE WON'T MAKE THE TEAM
HER NAME WILL NEVER ACHIEVE
HIS DREAM
WHY MUST WE ALL BE JUDGED?
WHY IS BEING ACCEPTED SO TOUGH?
WHY DO PEOPLE TRY SO HARD?
AND WHY ARE TEENAGE YEARS
SO ROUGH?
NO ONE SHOULD BE JUDGED
NO ONE SHOULD HURT FROM
SOMETHING YOU SAY
NO ONE SHOULD BE EXCLUDED
AND MOST OF ALL NONE SHOULD BE
TREATED THIS WAY

YOUTH

interview

with **Troy** *Age 17, Camp Gonzales*

BY JAMIE DIAMOND

Ever had any theater experience before?

I played a tree in kindergarten. Then in high school I moved up and during black history month, I played Malcolm X which made me learn a lot about him.

What have you learned in these few weeks from the US theater program?

Lots of acting techniques and terms. Like now I know what proscenium means.

What part of the program do you like best?

The improvs. You can act out what comes to you. That feels natural to me. I like it that you feed off of the other people and they always surprise me. I don't know if acting is in my family or not but my sister does plays at school.

Is there any part of the program that helps you in your daily life at Camp?

It calms me down. I know if I mess up, I can't come back. And participating in the writing and doing the improvs makes the time go faster.

Does being in the program affect your relationship with the other participants?

I make more friends. Guys who take it serious, we become friends and bond because we both have the same goals.

profile: Chris Sisley A Star Behind the Scenes

While she admits to having zero interest in (and mortal fear of) ever performing on stage, Chris Sisley's personal and professional experiences affirm that theatre is a very beneficial and rewarding activity for people from all walks of life. Chris Sisley, founder and principal of Solid Foundations, was introduced to the Unusual Suspects Theatre Company in 2005, with the possibility of becoming a grant writer and foundation advisor for the organization. She was impressed with the quality, credibility and longevity of the organization, which was relatively small but determined, and especially due to the dynamism and leadership of Sally Fairman, Executive Director, a dedicated board, and attention to outside credible evaluation. Since that time, US programs have increased by 300% and the organization has raised more than \$140,000 toward its \$240,000 capacity building goal to break out by adding partner agencies, serving more kids, adding key staff, expanding fundraising strategies, and strengthening the artist training program.

Chris Sisley has a 25 year career as director of two major philanthropic foundations, and, since 2001, has a consulting business, "Solid Foundations," to advise new donors/small foundations and nonprofit organizations.

With a strong program and history, the Unusual Suspects was poised to grow and thrive, with the critical support of foundations. In close collaboration with the Executive Director, Chris was able to advise on

foundation prospects, developed foundation proposals for capacity building and general support goals to build momentum, grow the organization and broaden its base of support and visibility.

Sally Fairman says, "I think Chris's biggest impact on our fundraising has been in knowing the field intimately, offering insights, discovering new prospects, and tailoring our proposals to suit potential funders."

In writing proposals for the Unusual Suspects, Chris says that it is critical to match the organization's needs with the particular foundation's interests and priorities, at which Chris is very skilled. She finds this part of the process rewarding, because there is a benefit on both sides of the equation. The foundations discover a worthy recipient organization for their charitable purpose, and the Unusual Suspects receives the funds needed to further the mission.

But, Chris said, in the end, "the ultimate reward of my work with The Unusual Suspects boils down to knowing that kids in dire straits may have their lives changed by the experience. Having seen two shows, and being reduced to tears, I feel rewarded personally for having contributed in some small way to this hopeful and well managed enterprise, which can change the course of young lives in a positive direction."

Youth Art by Cristol

from Star View Adolescent Center Fall 2006



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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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 by emailing us at:

info@theunusualsuspects.org

or write **US** at:

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