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Change explored in Stark wards' play

Neil Nisperos, Staff Writer

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CHINO - With themes of community, family bonds and change, the final theatrical play written by wards at Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility could be a case of life imitating art.

The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company has been preparing for its third annual production with the wards at Stark. The Los Angeles-based nonprofit acting troupe tries to foster social justice by working creatively with troubled young people.

The Sunday production is likely the final one at the juvenile prison as it transitions into an adult prison. Stark's 400 wards will be moved in 2010 to juvenile correctional facilities in Southern California.

The play will be performed by professional actors.

"It doesn't matter what you've been through, but you have to keep on working as a team," said Steven Croft, a 22-year-old ward about the play's message.

"We are doing our play as an ensemble and in the play you've got different people working toward the same goal in the end."

The Unusual Suspects program allows wards to interact with a different life that they have never explored before, said ward Brandon Alto, 23.

"They're able to express who they are deeply down inside of them," Alto said.

The Unusual Suspects, which is comprised of actors and writers, has been meeting at Stark with about 20 wards twice a week for the past 10 weeks.

The wards used their life experiences to collaboratively write the play "Cookin' Up A Storm." The play is about a Jamaican family who has to deal with upheaval and conflict that comes from an unexpected change in the direction of a restaurant they own and run.

The wards performed theatre exercises to develop acting techniques and also read lines from their play on Wednesday at Stark's church hall.

Plastered on the walls were poster boards created by the wards that described the play's themes and characters.

"They're bringing in a lot of things from their personal life," said Melissa Denton, program director for The Unusual Suspects. "Sometimes we go deeper, but they really went for the family. This is our third time out here and, a lot of the time, the themes here are being a man and what does it take to be a man, but this one is more on the importance of community and family bonds."

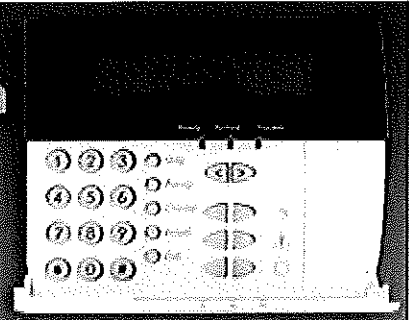
A connection was made between "Cookin' Up A Storm" and the impact that the transition to other facilities will have on wards at Stark, Denton said.

"When we're together as teaching artists, we thought it was really interesting that they wrote a play about community and bonds and we definitely have made that connection," she said. "It's going to be so good because on Sunday they'll get to do that before they leave here."

Croft said he's disappointed in moving out of Stark, but he says working on the play has helped him deal with the transition.

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"I've been with this group in different programs," he said. "Here, at Stark, we have a lot of programs and those programs are moving elsewhere. I don't know if I'm going to be seeing those people again. I don't like it, but I have to deal with it anyway, because I've learned to deal with changes in one staff running things their way and another staff running things another way. It's something I've learned."

Croft said his experience in the theatre program will help him in the future. Croft said he aspires to be a writer.

"We learn from each other and react to each other in a positive way because, if we don't, we're not going to do a whole lot of things in our lives," he said. "We're just going to come back to jail and do it over again."

Young people who have participated in arts enrichment programs in Los Angeles County detention camps had a 58 percent lower rate of reincarceration and a 45 percent lower rate of being arrested after serving time in prison, Unusual Suspects spokeswoman Amy Ellenberger said.

Most Stark wards will move to the Ventura Youth Correctional Facility in Camarillo and the Southern Youth Correctional Reception Center and Clinic in Norwalk.

Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation officials decided to move the wards out of Stark following the decision to convert the facility to hold adult inmates.

The Aug. 27 decision followed a destructive riot on Aug. 8 at California Institution for Men. The riot rendered housing facilities nearby uninhabitable at CIM.

The Corrections and Rehabilitation department will

spend \$110 million to convert Stark into an adult prison to ease prison overcrowding. CIM houses 6,000 people, but was built to serve 3,000 people.

For more information on the Unusual Suspects, visit at www.theunusualsuspects.org.


neil.nisperos@inlandnewspapers.com
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