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Actors Relive the Past, Help the Future

'LA Street Scenes 2' presents stories from at-risk youth.

BY TIM SACCARDO

Actor Keith Flowers flashed back to his childhood when he saw a casting notice in *Back Stage West* for *LA Street Scenes 2: A Boy's Life/A Girl's Life*, a play based on real-life stories of at-risk youths in the detention camps and foster homes in Los Angeles. "I grew up in Los Angeles, and I've seen the kind of stuff that's in the script—every day," said Flowers, who plays several roles in *Street Scenes*, including Tee-O and an inmate. "After finding out that it was actually based on real-life events, I knew that I wasn't just going to act the role, I was going to relive it."

Flowers is among several actors donating their time and talents to director Diane Namm's second annual production of *Street Scenes*, which runs Nov. 16-18 at the Edgemar Center for the Arts in Santa Monica. Participating actors Nick Rey Angelus and Dijaun Michael are also former at-risk kids.

"I call them 'the forgotten children,'" said Jill Gurr, founder and executive director of Create Now!, the nonprofit organization that produces the show. "They're abused, neglected, hidden, shuffled around from one group home to one institution to another. And when those kids turn 18, the government says, 'You're on your own.'"

A script supervisor and producer, Gurr started Create Now! in 1996 to give back to her community. "It kind of hit me when I was working as a script supervisor on [Gregory Nava's 1995 film] *My Family*," she recalled. "We were shooting in East

L.A. all night long, and there was this 8-year-old boy and his 11-year-old brother hanging out with the crew. I asked where their parents were, and the 8-year-old said, 'I don't have a mother, and my father, he don't give an F.' And we wonder why they're getting into trouble."

Eleven years later, the Create Now! program has helped more than 11,000 at-risk kids in L.A., thanks to professional actors and writers who volunteer as mentors. "Some may want to work with toddlers living in domestic-violence shelters. Others may want to work with teen parents or gang members," Gurr explained. "We match them with the type of kid they want to work with, give them the training to become mentors and the materials they need for their workshops."

Caught in the System

Namm became involved in Create Now! after meeting Gurr at a screenwriting expo. "I asked if I could work with kids at a detention camp near where my son was going to high school and was welcomed in to one of their English classes," said Gurr, who taught 25 boys ages 13-18 in her first weekly writing workshop. "I asked them to tell me about a moment in their lives when everything changed, because their lives had been significantly more affected by prior events than most. They told me their stories in narrative form, and I helped adapt them into scenes."

Namm arranged the material into the first *Street Scenes* play. "I com-

bined the scenes into composite characters so that we're really talking about the stories of four to six kids instead of 13 to 20. But I kept the individual scenes intact except for changing the names," she explained. "I very specifically don't claim myself to be the writer. I'm just the facilitator and the director."

This year Namm wanted to include stories written from a female perspective, so she held a creative-writing workshop with a group of 16-year-olds at Penny Lane, a girls foster home in Northridge. The *Boy's Life* and *Girl's Life* halves of the play are tied together thematically. "I kind of did it like a teenage version of *Crash*. It covers their lives before they got caught up [in the system], how they got caught up, what happened to them inside, and the fact that they are loosely connected to each other as a result," Namm said.

Dijaun Michael, who plays the role of L.D., sees *Street Scenes* as a chance to help today's at-risk kids escape the pitfalls of growing up in tough circumstances. "I hope to help other youths in these situations to take a different path than many of these characters took. It's not easy, but it can be done. I did it, and I know others can too."

As proud as she is of the play, Namm's true satisfaction comes from seeing the workshop process create an atmosphere of trust and understanding among her students. "These boys were not all friends," she said. "They came from different parts of L.A., different gangs. But over the course of the workshop and especially after they had watched the scenes enacted, the mood changed dramatically, because each of them had truly shared a moment where their lives had taken a turn for the terrible. They never really realized that about each other until they saw it."

Tickets for *LA Street Scenes 2: A Boy's Life/A Girl's Life* are \$35-\$125 and can be purchased at www.createnow.org or by calling (213) 484-8500. All proceeds go toward supporting arts programs for high-risk and at-risk youth throughout Southern California.