

Lake Clifton students showcase talent on stage

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During a time when schools throughout Baltimore are going through hardships and students have lost the will to strive for excellence, Unchained Talent is showing that amidst the daily struggles of growing up in a rough environment there is still hope and room for change.

Unchained Talent, the student-driven after school performing arts program, is based at Lake Clifton High School and exposes students to a world that many would not get to experience otherwise.

"It is so fun, I really love it. It is something that I thought I would never really get into, but now that I got into it, there are so many opportunities that you can get from it like meeting new people and coming out of you shyness box," said Samantha Porter, a student at Lake Clifton High School and member of Unchained Talent.

Founded and directed by Christina Youngston, an Open Society Institute (OSI)-Baltimore Community Fellow, the program is made up of about 25-45 students who perform about 2-3 productions a year for over 1,000 classmates and 200 people from the community.

"The big thing about Unchained Talent is that it is really from the students...There are some students that respond to school better if they have something that draws them there like the arts and they learn better that way," said Youngston.

Students write and perform their plays as a way to help express their feelings and teach them the value of theatre. The most recent production that the students performed was on Nov. 17.

Entitled "Who Will Heal Our Community?" the play was based on personal experiences and issues that the students face in their communities.

In collaboration with WombWork Productions students recreated city life on the streets through rapping, acting, and dancing and discussed issues like teenage pregnancy, drugs and gangs on stage and solutions to fix those problems.

"Most of the stuff that's in this play we wrote, we had our experiences and we want these things to change...don't think that we are just reading lines, all this stuff is coming from the heart," said Taivon Murphey, a student at Lake Clifton High School and member of Unchained Talent. "You might as well just say we are going to hell if you don't get out there and heal our community cause that's exactly where we are headed if nobody steps up."

WombWork Productions, a non-profit organization that preserves and re-empowers families and communities through creative art, dance and theatre expression, along with Unchained Talent applied for the FreeFall Baltimore grant and were awarded it allowing them to make this production free to the public.

Youngston got the idea for the program after visiting the school in 2004 and discovering that the theatre hadn't been used in 10 years. After support from various peoples throughout the community and receiving a fellowship from OSI-Baltimore, Youngston founded and developed the after school program so that kids interested in the performing arts would have an outlet to go to rather than get lost in the harshness of their communities.

"I think it is a really good idea that we have it (the program) at the school because it's keeping some of the kids, more kids then it was at first, off the streets and in school and doing something good," said Epiphany Butler, a student at Lake Clifton High School and member of Unchained Talent.

Besides writing and performing productions, the students of Unchained Talent are immersed into the world of theatre. Everything from prop work to stage management, students are taught not only how to perform, but the business management side of theatre and how to run a production as well. The students have even created a Student Management Team to help move the program in the direction that they see fit.

Opportunities such as singing lessons from professional singers, improvisation lessons and performance feedback from professional actors, one-on-one sessions on public speaking with local elected officials and going to several professional theater performances have been provided to help enhance the students learning experience.

Through the program students have formed mentor relationships with various professionals from the theatre community. This is how the partnership with WombWork Productions was formed. Seeking the need to further advance their acting potential, students wanted to work with performs more experienced then they were to help motivate them and make them better performers.

"This show is really the young people wanting to inspire people to go into their neighborhoods and make changes," said Rashida Forman-Bey, program director for WombWork Productions. "Because if change is going to happen it comes one person at a time, one neighborhood at a time and we really can't wait on other people to help change our community. We have to take a stand and do it ourselves."

For more information on Unchained Talent or WombWork Productions you can visit www.unchainedtalent.org or www.wombwork.com.