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3. The long-silent stage at Lake Clifton-Eastern High School reawakens through the efforts of students and community volunteers.

Talent unchained on stage

Drama: An outsider re-establishes a club to tap teen creativity.

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Byline: Laura Loh

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Caption: 1. Laughing at their 1950s clothes are actors Brian Hill (left), 14, Aaron Banks, 15, and George Jacobs (on floor), 14. Mandela Eric Brown (right) examines costumes.

2. Performers from the "Unchained Talent" school drama club bring a dance number from "Grease" into the 21st century during a rehearsal for their debut show tonight.

3. Antonitio Briggs (right), 16, who plays Danny Zuko in a skit from "Grease," and Candice Banks (center), 14, who portrays Sandy Dumbrowski, practice curtain calls with the rest of the cast of "Unified" at Lake Clifton-Eastern High.

4. Director **Christina Youngston**, cast and crew - including Janie Hines (wearing glasses), Candice Banks (in pink), Mandela Eric Brown (right) - clasp hands before rehearsal.

There were only two days left before the big show at the Lake Clifton-Eastern High School complex, and things were not exactly as **Christina Youngston** would have liked them to be.

The clock in the vast, seldom-used auditorium was frozen at 11:48. Only four of the stage lights were in working condition; the rest were bulbless, collecting dust on a shelf. There was still no sign of the microphones or costumes someone had agreed to provide for the show. But **Youngston**, the volunteer director of School No. 426's drama club, set aside those worries as her 15 actors gathered on the dimly lit stage to warm up. Together, they swung their arms, rolled their heads from side to side and blew raspberries to loosen their lips.

The group's debut performance tonight will officially break the silence that settled on this stage nearly a decade ago, when curtains fell on the school's theater program. Tonight's show, *Unified*, includes a snippet from the musical *Grease*, a couple of scenes written by the African-American playwright George C. Wolfe and a few musical numbers.

The revival of theater at Lake Clifton, which houses School No. 426 and two other schools, seems especially hard-won in this city accustomed to deprivation, where none of the things that students elsewhere take for granted - summer school, the homecoming dance, a textbook for every student - is a routine part of high school life.

Youngston, who works for the nonprofit group Civic Works, decided to form the drama club after touring the sprawling school this summer. She was struck by the sight of the empty auditorium, its venerable wooden stage framed by catwalks and balconies. "Nothing much happens here," she was told.

A week later, she had a dream about the old theater, she said, and a voice told her to start a drama club there: "It's really cheesy, but I don't feel like I had a choice. I feel like if I didn't do this, who would?"

The rest quickly fell into place. The principal, who **Youngston** feared might not be willing to let an outsider into the school, was enthusiastic. And **Youngston** found others willing to help, including Damian Briscoe, a 1994 Lake Clifton graduate, and theater workers from Winters Lane, a Washington stage production firm.

"I put a call out to the theater community and a bunch of people stepped up to the plate," said **Youngston**, who was involved in drama throughout her high school years in Texas. All of the club's props and equipment were donated, she said.

Some students immediately jumped at the chance to join the club, dubbed "Unchained Talent." Others trickled in over the next few weeks.

The students, all freshmen and sophomores, had different reasons for joining. Candice Banks, 14, was looking to hone her singing and dancing skills as she waits to reapply to the Baltimore School for the Arts. Antonitio Briggs, a quiet and serious 16-year-old, wanted to get into acting. Janie Hines, 14, the group's assistant stage manager, said she signed up because her cousin and friends did.

Arkeena Reid, who joined the club with her two sisters, said she probably would skip school if she didn't have drama to look forward to. "My godmother says if I don't come to school, I can't come to drama club, so I come to school," she said.

Briscoe said he's happy to help a new generation of students discover theater the way he did in high school:

"Theater helps you get outside of your shell. I have a level of confidence that I only got through theater, and that's what I want to instill in them."

Some of the students already have done things they never dreamed they could do. Mandela Eric Brown, who had turned down a role because it required singing, launched into an impromptu solo Wednesday as the group rehearsed a rendition of "Stand By Me."

"You have no idea how far these kids have come in three months," **Youngston** said.

Some students, however, still suffered fits of self-doubt.

Before a dress rehearsal, as **Youngston** handed out pants, shoes and dresses - belonging to her and her boyfriend - for the lunchroom scene from Grease, the students fretted about the morning performance they would have to put on for their fellow students on the day of the show.

They howled with laughter as George Jacobs, a tall 14-year-old, emerged from backstage in a pair of tight jeans, tapered at the ankles.

"My reputation's at stake!" he wailed, stomping across the stage. "Dudes gonna clown me!"

Antonitio agreed. "When you're out there, in front of naive children, they're going to make fun of you," he said. "In front of the adults, it's nothing."

But Martika Cypress wasn't worried about a thing. "We're prepared," the 14-year-old said. "Right now we're just having fun. Can't wait till the audience gets here."

The students, who are African-American, initially balked at the Grease scene because they could not relate to the characters, who are white teen-agers in the 1950s. But they learned to adopt the personas, while sticking with their own mannerisms and inflections.

Antonitio, who plays the role of Danny Zuko in the scene, said didn't want to imitate the way John Travolta played Danny in the movie version of Grease.

"What I do, it just comes natural to me," he said. "I feel that if I put too much into the character, it'll be overacting."

But Antonitio acknowledged that he needs to work on projecting his voice, especially if microphones fail to materialize for the show. After his scene, Crystal Bowie, 14, whispered to him: "Just a little louder. You faded at some point."

More than two hours into rehearsal, after a comic scene involving two talking wigs and a bald girl, the students began visibly drooping from hunger and fatigue.

That's when Principal Tricia Rock breezed into the auditorium, bearing trays of spaghetti, garlic bread and salad - a gift from a parent whose child will be an usher for the show. The students gathered around as Rock, a former ballet teacher, arranged the food on top of an old grand piano.

Sitting on the stage with plates of food in their laps, freshmen Candice and Martika talked about how Lake Clifton, reputed to be one of the city's toughest schools, was not as bad as they had feared.

"We're so excited that we actually have something to do after school instead of running in the streets, and it's fun," Candice said. "Lake Clifton is not what people say it is."

Then, they tossed their plates away and prepared for another run-through.

Youngston said yesterday that she had given up hope of getting professional costumes, though she still hoped to find some microphones for the soloists.

"We have to be patient because it's our first show," she said. "If they don't have costumes, that means [the audience is] gonna notice the kids, and that's where the attention should be. They're going to do fabulous, and all of these other details won't matter."

The show begins at 7 o'clock tonight in the Lake Clifton-Eastern High School auditorium, 2801 St. Lo Drive. Tickets are \$5 for adults, \$2 for students and children. More information can be obtained by calling 410-235-0462.

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