

# Amid woes, a musical is born

Students hope production focusing on crime-ridden streets will spur action

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Sun reporter

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Speaking of the hardships in her students' lives, Christina Youngston could go on and on.

Teen pregnancy. HIV. Slumlords. Eviction. Drugs. Streets strewn with broken glass and trash. Gangs. Murders. Prisons.

"Name it; what do we not deal with in this city?" asks Youngston, the director of Unchained Talent, an after-school theater club at the Lake Clifton high school complex. "It's overwhelming."

Tomorrow night, working with performers from WombWork Productions, Youngston's students will present a musical they helped write about the problems facing their neighborhoods. Called Who Will Heal Our Community?, the production will feature more than 35 young people rapping, dancing and acting to re-create life on the streets of East Baltimore.

It will be among the most personal of the eight productions that Unchained Talent has staged since Youngston formed the group as a volunteer in 2004, bringing theater back to Lake Clifton for the first time in nearly a decade. The students want to force audience members to look inside themselves, to stop complaining and start doing something constructive to make their lives better.

"We are all aware of what's going on, but it's like nobody is putting forth the effort to stop these things," said one of the performers, George Jacobs, a 16-year-old junior at Doris M. Johnson High School in the Lake Clifton complex. "We can point out every single drug dealer on our block, but nobody's doing anything to stop it."

Another performer, Crystal Bowie, is hopeful that the play will open people's eyes. "There's this part where a little girl gets shot," said Bowie, also 16 and also a junior at Doris M. Johnson. "That's true stuff. That's really happening."

Youngston, whose work with Unchained Talent is supported by a fellowship with the Open Society Institute, has taken this lesson from the work leading up to tomorrow's show: "You don't have to solve it all, but you also can't just sit back. Everyone has to be involved in helping a little bit. If we all did, we'd be well on our way."

Several months ago, the Unchained Talent students decided they wanted to perform on stage with more experienced actors. Youngston turned to WombWork, a nonprofit community theater group that also uses young actors and is committed to healing city neighborhoods through its shows.

The two organizations secured a grant this summer from Free Fall Baltimore, a program putting on two months of free arts activities around the city.

In September, the Unchained Talent students held a forum to listen to friends and neighbors talk about the problems in their community. Using that information along with their own life experiences, they started to write. Adults from Unchained Talent and WombWork melded that writing into a script.

Before the performance tomorrow, Unchained Talent will host a "resource fair" at 6:30 p.m. in the Lake Clifton lobby, highlighting the work of groups that are already trying to heal the community.

At 7, the group will publicly honor some of the people working to help the community's students succeed, from an elderly woman who lets teens into her home and feeds them, to the coordinator of an after-school program.

After the ceremony, the performance will begin. It is free and open to the public.

The Lake Clifton campus is at 2801 St. Lo Drive.