Youth Theatre for Change tells real-life tales of growing up

A group of 11 Clackamas County youth will share their stories at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 18, in the Osterman Theatre at Clackamas Community College’s Niemeyer Center, and they want as many people as possible to witness what they have created.

Led by professional teaching artists and Youth Theatre for Change staff, the young people have participated in a series of workshops this summer, turning their personal stories into a play called “The Great American Marshmallow Challenge.”

“The themes of the piece are based upon the youth’s personal viewpoints, and are as unique as the students themselves,” said Lisa Smith, program coordinator for Youth Arts for Change.

“The purpose of Youth Theatre for Change is to give local teens an outlet to explore creative expression and an opportunity for youth who might not otherwise get to participate in a theater experience,” Smith said.

The Clackamas County Arts Alliance operates YTC as one of three projects in its Youth Arts for Change program. CCAA is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to keeping arts and culture central to life in Clackamas County.

Process
During the course of the workshops, “the youth participate in a number of activities and theater exercises aimed at team building, communication and expression. These activities create a foundation from which the performance can be built, by creating a cohesive group with a common goal of sharing their stories in a final performance,” Smith said.

“The participants also worked with the YTC resident playwright, Debbie Lamedman, on writing exercises. She provided guidance and prompts or questions for students to engage in free writing, to express themselves and voice their thoughts, concerns, hopes and wishes in their own words,” Smith said.

Lamedman then collected all the students’ writings and adapted them to fit into a play format.

Smith said that over the past four weeks the young people have developed relationships with one another and the YTC staff.

As the process continued, “There has been an increase in the energy in the activities, and much more dialogue between everyone in the room. The participants are also being very supportive and encouraging of each other as they’re learning their lines and are getting their heads wrapped around the upcoming performance,” Smith said.

Once the play was written, students began working with Kirk Mouser, the executive artistic director of Portland’s Stumptown Stages.

That experience has been “wonderful,” Smith said, adding, “He is the rare mix of consummate professional and theater wiz; he is accessible and quick to laugh.”

She noted that Mouser has the ability to “connect and engage with the students in an effortless manner that keeps everything moving forward. He brings so much energy and positivity — it really sets the stage for the program.”
Smith added, “In a very short period of time, he has been able to show students that they will be able to learn their lines and go through with the performance. That moment, when you see that flash of acknowledgement that, ‘Wow, I can do this!’ is really amazing to witness.”

**Kirk Mouser**

For the past three years Mouser has directed the student play, but this year one of the YTC students has taken on the job of directing the piece under his tutelage, and he has seen a lot of growth as he has worked with the participants.

“The program provides an avenue for the youth to engage with others in a positive way. They have demonstrated the ability to take on what previously seemed impossible and make it possible. Students have demonstrated a growth in communication skills, peer-to-peer learning, leadership, teamwork and critical thought,” Mouser said.

He hopes the community will support the efforts of these young people by attending the production on Aug. 18.

“We should all take great interest in our county youth. These youths are given the opportunity to share and discuss the impact of their actions, within the context of their relationships and community. By supporting the play, you support the health and well-being of youth in your community,” Mouser said.

He added, “The impact of arts and cultural activities are essential to building healthy communities. This arts program educates youth while providing them with community service. Additionally the students learn in a community college environment and are offered the prospects of internships with local not-for-profits. In the end, the program reintegrates the youth into our community in a positive way.”

**Positive comments**

Six Clackamas County teens commented on their experiences this summer with the YTC program. Participants will be identified by first name only, in keeping with YTC protocol.

The best thing about the program for Tess has been “seeing kids from different backgrounds come together; all the kids have a certain level of willingness to participate.”

“The best part about this production would have to be the fact it is written in our own words,” said Starla, while for David, the best part has been working with the staff and young people.

Danika, Byron and Isabella all noted that for them the rewards have come from meeting, getting to know and connecting with people they might never have met outside of the program.

For Danika, the biggest challenge was in the beginning and breaking the ice for the group, and for Isabella the challenge was seeing her honest thoughts in a script and knowing that people will hear and see them.

As for what audiences will like best about “The Great American Marshmallow Challenge,” Tess said that “most everyone in the audience will see something that resonates with them.”

Starla said that audiences will see how well the young people work together, and how much fun they’re having performing the play.

“It’s our own words; it’s real,” said Danika, while Byron added, “These are words and stories straight from the mouths of kids who have experienced more life than most adults. There is so much to learn from this.”

“I think audiences will like how relatable our stories are even though we’re teenagers; our feelings about life cross the ages,” Isabella said.

Starla said she wished more young people participated in a program like this, and noted that the staff really cares about the participants and what they’re doing.

Isabella summed up her experience, saying, “This has been one of the best things I’ve ever done, and staff and students have been amazing.”

**On stage**

What: Youth Theatre for Change presents "The Great American Marshmallow Challenge"

When: 7 p.m. Tues., Aug. 18

Where: Osterman Theatre, inside the Niemeyer Center at Clackamas County Community College, 19600 Molalla Ave., Oregon City

Details: Tickets are $5; contact Lisa Smith at 917-721-2739 or by email at lisa@clackamasartsalliance.org. For more information, visit clackamasartsalliance.org/youth-theatre-for-change.

Youth Theatre for Change is supported by: Clackamas County, Oregon Arts Commission, Autzen Foundation and Juan Young Trust; YTC is a partnership between CCAA and the Clackamas County Juvenile Department. New relationships this year include: Clackamas Community College, Clackamas Community College Foundation, Clackamas Community
The Best Method To Pay Off A Credit Card Is Revealed
NextAdvisor

4 Billionaires Say: Something Big Coming Soon In U.S.A
Stansberry Research

How Much Money Do You Really Get from a Reverse Mortgage?
NewRetirement

Warren Buffett Just Gave Americans a Big Warning
The Motley Fool

How This Razor is Disrupting a $13 Billion Industry
Dollar Shave Club

The Next Big Thing in Wearable Tech
VentureCapital News