

By Ahinoam Pollack

Performance Project Probes First Generation

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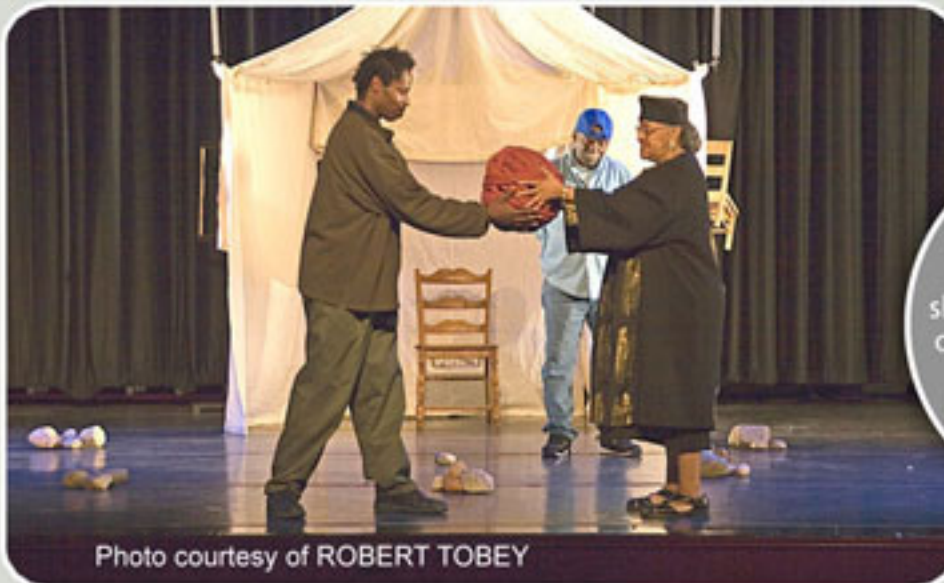


Photo courtesy of ROBERT TOBEY

"Audiences hear variances of their stories told, shedding light on their own stories that some probably never heard so clearly before,"

Clive Brown, left, and Pauline Norwood participate in the Performance Project.



At age 13, Brockton resident Clive Brown immigrated to the United States from Jamaica.

He had some trouble with the law during his youth and was incarcerated for substance abuse.

Yet, in a change of direction, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and got out of street life.

Today, Brown is a writer and musician who two years ago joined the Performance Project, a theater arts organization in Northampton that works with formerly incarcerated people of all ages. Brown wrote the music theme for the collaborative play, "A Warning for the King," which was presented at American International College in 2006.

"While writing the script with the others I had an opportunity to articulate and reflect my reasons for entering a street life of crime and drugs, and recognize my current situation, allowing me to fully embrace myself as an individual and set goals for my future," Brown said.

Now, Brown is preparing to share his experience as an "elder storyteller" for a program the project plans to do over a two-year period starting this October called "First Generation" and based at the Rebecca M. Johnson Visual and Performing Arts School in Springfield.

Participants will range in age from 15 to 22 and will identify themselves in some way as "first generation."

Julie Lichtenberg, the project's artistic

director, said this may mean the first family member to grow up in the United States or to pursue higher education or diverge in some way from the family culture.

"The idea for this project first came up when many of our group members wanted to work with youth. At the same time, a member of our project from Cambodia talked about the tensions he felt between his home culture and his individual outside world. While he talked, I realized how much I related to what he said, being that my parents are Holocaust survivors from Europe. I found that being first generation was a common theme in many of our discussions," Lichtenberg said.

Lichtenberg thought of combining the two - working with youth and

PARTICIPANTS WILL SPEND

a year developing their artistic and leadership skills through workshops

first generation issues - and discussed this approach with former project participants like Brown and Chicopee resident Paris Holmes. Holmes, through her involvement in "A Warning for the King," conveyed the experience of feeling silenced by society and others.

"I think the First Generation project will give youth a chance to express their thoughts and emotions, to say early on what they feel about their current lives and what they want from their future lives. If they feel like they don't want to join a gang, they can say what they think. They can realize and gain confidence that they don't have to do something because of family and community structure: They don't have to do what their father, brother and uncles did - they can act in their own individual manner," Holmes said of her input.

After his experience with the Performance Project, Brown became a participant in a program at the Veterans Hospital in Brockton called "Regaining Insight through Self Evaluation" and became the first person in his family to pursue more education.

Brown sees the First Generation participants as "trailblazers."

"When I enlisted and sequentially succeeded in getting out of the streets, I led the way for others in my family to do the same. Now, these pioneers can

gain the creative abilities, self esteem, self confidence and tolerance of diversity to make proper decisions," Brown said.

Participants will spend a year developing their artistic and leadership skills through workshops, some of them given by artists involved with Magdalena Gomez's Springfield based Teatro Vida project, and reflecting on their experience and then produce a "multilingual" performance in the spring of 2009.

Audiences will be encouraged to dialogue about the complexity of embracing individuality while honoring one's community and about how racism, economic oppression and violence can isolate youth from their cultural origins.

Participants will also share their skills with students in grades kindergarten through fifth at Rebecca Johnson and plans are to present the performance at other area venues.

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Belchertown resident Nancy D. Tolson, a veteran storyteller who is an associate professor of children's literature at Mitchell College in New London, Conn., is co-directing the First Generation Project with Lichtenberg.

"I think it is important for kids to flow through creativity - to have that freedom of creativity and imagination. A lot of our youth are losing that as schools make requirements around how to take a test instead of how to love reading and how to use imagination, poetry and movement," said Tolson of her interest in the program.

Cost for funding the program is put at \$60,000