



Monthly Visions

Reflection
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Youth Theater Program 2008 Final Performance: "What You Want"

By Betty Huang, Youth Theater Program 2008 participant

During Summer 2008, I participated in New Visions' Youth Theater Program, a program that develops youth leaders in dating/domestic violence prevention using theater as a tool for social change. Although the formal program ended at the end of summer, the youth participants met once a week with New Visions' Youth Arts & Activism Community Action Team (YAACAT) to create a short skit. The skit would be used to raise awareness about dating/domestic violence and to promote action amongst youth and community members.

I never imagined myself to be much of an actor—I wasn't really into glamour or celebrities. However, on November 14th, 2008, I was on stage! I was not acting for entertainment, rather, for a social cause—to spread awareness of dating/domestic violence. The performance would mark the completion of the Youth Theater Program.

Together with YAACAT members and youth participants, we performed a skit entitled, "What You Want," which is a story about two high school students in a relationship and the impact that their family, friends, and overall society have on the relationship. I played Ethan, a naive teenager who allowed the influences of his peers and family to define his relationship and ends up being a perpetrator of dating violence.

We utilized a form of theater called forum theatre, which allows the audience to step into a role and intervene with the characters. The purpose is not only to educate the viewers on the many factors of dating and domestic violence, but also to take a step further in brainstorming ways to intervene as a witness to an abusive situation. We replayed the last scene, in which our couple begins an argument in an ice cream parlor in front of a few friends. The scene portrays Ethan, the boyfriend, being physical and grabbing his girlfriend, Lily, by the arm and shouting at her. At this point, the audience is asked to talk about the scene and eventually discuss dating violence. Then, during the replay, the audience stops the scene when intervention is necessary and a volunteer takes on a role.

At first, the audience was very tentative; everyone knows to step in and stop Ethan, but when? What was the line between acceptable behavior and dating violence? Acting out the situation really put things in perspective. To be realistic, I had to put myself in the shoes of the perpetrator—the person no one thinks they are. Rationalizing violence, on the other hand, wasn't as impossible as I thought. After lots of practice, it was easy to convince a bystander, a volunteer who stepped into the role, to think of the situation as private or to make them feel uncomfortable enough to leave me, alone. In reality, the actual action of grabbing and stopping someone in a foreign situation is harder than it seems. The fear of intruding upon someone else's privacy is a strong learned social behavior. As Ethan, I naturally became offended or brushed off the criticism. The second time around, the volunteers were much more careful and I was pulled off to the side in a private confrontation. After the first failed attempt, the audience really empathized and thought about what a realistic solution would be, speaking out of honesty and really trying to convince me that the fundamental beliefs about women and relationships should be changed. In one possibility, a woman completely opened up to me and told me an example of her own life. It was surprising and really so much more powerful.

When we first started acting, I was really insecure about the impact of our performance—of my skills as an actor and of the possibility that adults would listen to younger adults like those in YAACAT. The results really astounded me. People genuinely acted the way they did normally in public, even though the situation was on stage. Forum Theatre became a medium that empowered others to take a stand when difficult situations, such as dating and domestic violence, occur in real life.



New Visions is a community-university partnership whose mission is to inspire and support sustainable community action for ending violence against women in Asian communities of Southeast Michigan. Affiliated with the University of Michigan School of Social Work, we work with local Asian communities and domestic violence-related agencies to achieve one vision: "Asian women are safe, and Asian communities are free of violence."

Our Voices, Our Actions: Be the Change

By Elsa George, New Visions Community Action Team Facilitator

On December 5, 2008 New Visions organized an event entitled, *Our Voices, Our Actions: Be the Change*. The purpose of the event was to raise awareness among Asian and non-Asian communities about domestic violence in Asian communities. Most importantly, the event encouraged community members to take action in preventing violence against women.



The program consisted of a theater performance by New Visions' Arts & Activism Community Action Team (CAT) and the Shanti Project CAT members. The CAT members performed the sketch, "A Step Up," a short skit about a woman in an abusive marriage. The sketch highlighted the different relationships in the victim's life and the dynamics of these relationships. At the end of the performance, the audience had opportunities to step into a role and provide an alternative approach to the situation. Through the performance, the audience members were able to discuss the problems that they were seeing and different approaches to help the situation. The purpose of the performance was to highlight the importance of the bystander's role in ending domestic violence.

After the theater performance, a vocal performance by Dr. Jin Sook Hong followed. Dr. Hong is a survivor of domestic violence and a classically trained vocalist. During her 11-year abusive marriage, she found solace in music and is now using her talents to raise awareness about domestic violence. Each song she performed had a story and Dr. Hong brought an array of emotions to the performance. In the song "Gretchen Am Spinnerade" (Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel), one could feel the pain of the woman missing her lover. The song mentioned the loss of her peace and her heavy heart. Dr. Hong's classical style displayed those emotions and it was very moving.

What was even more powerful was Dr. Hong's personal story. Dr. Hong shared with the audience about her abusive relationship and how she had to take action. She talked about her husband's prominent role as a minister in the community and the respect he had among the members. She further explained the shame and pain she experienced within her community. She mentioned how community members would blame the victim and therefore, that had led to her silence.

However, the pain became so overwhelming that she had to flee for her own safety and the safety of her children.

She encouraged the audience members to not stay silent and help those in abusive relationships. She emphasized the importance of victims having support from family and friends.



As I watched the performance and heard Dr. Hong's story, I was encouraged by her strength. She reaffirmed the notion that there is hope for victims of abuse. I was also pleased at the amount of people that attended and participated in the theater portion of the program. Having people at the event reflected the fact that people want to see and be the change. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people."

SPOTLIGHT

Jen Lobo Arts & Activism Community Action Team

After receiving a degree in Nuclear Engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston, Jen Lobo came to the University of Michigan to pursue a career in medicine, an aspiration she has had since childhood. During her first year of study in medical school, Jen was able to cope with the pressure and stress through her involvement with the Arts and Activism Community Action Team (AA CAT).

The combination of using theater as a tool for educating the community about domestic violence was a unique concept that attracted Jen to join. The performance aspect of the organization is not new to Jen. She is a talented singer who performed in musicals and in chorus throughout her life. She was a part of her church choir and even created a CD with her A cappella group from college, which she was involved with for four years.



But Jen's involvement in student life went beyond just the performing arts. While completing her degree at MIT, Jen was president of the student government for two years. During this period, she had the role of regulating the student organizations on campus and addressing concerns among the student body. She was also involved in the Race Relations Committee, which recognized the cultural diversity of the student body and provided conflict/resolution strategies.

In addition to her involvement in various organizations, Jen has done research in the oncology and pediatrics departments at the University. Currently, as a second year medical student, Jen is a member of STATS (Students Teaching Aids to Students). This group has afforded Jen the privilege of traveling to different high schools within the Ann Arbor district to educate youth on AIDS. Her experience in the performing arts and her zeal for social justice were combined through AA CAT.

While an AA CAT member, Jen had the opportunity to act and write a script. She mentioned that the performances challenged her own personal approach to the situations in the script. In one sketch, she played the role of a character who perceived the solution to a problematic dating situation as clear cut, but the other characters understood why the survivor was still with the perpetrator and were able to provide the type of support the survivor needed. These performances challenged Jen to consider the dynamics of domestic/dating violence with more depth.

Even with script writing, Jen faced challenges of reaching out to the community. At times when she was forced to eliminate information from the script, Jen thought, "Is this a lost opportunity to connect with the audience?" She also discussed the challenge of taking different experiences and making it cohesive.

Overall, Jen's experience with AA CAT has been most memorable. She has had the privilege of connecting with members and, at the same time, have fun. The characters within the script were eye-opening and challenged her personally. Jen acknowledged that if members are being challenged within AA CAT, the community has a higher potential of changing as well. Therefore, she believes that the work AA CAT accomplishes is important and needs to continue.

Thank you for your time and support in helping to end violence against women in Asian communities. We look forward to working with you in Year 2009.

Year in review....



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