

Theatre Is Conduit For Students' Message

BY SHANA HOILMAN | SPECIAL TO THE BRISTOL HERALD

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Mountain Youth Drama cast members are turning peer pressure into a positive influence through the power of theater.

Developed 14 years ago, Mountain Youth Drama is a compilation of teenagers from three Russell County, Va., high schools. The group gives performances for children in grades 4 through 12, using their own prevention-oriented plays about age-appropriate themes and issues.

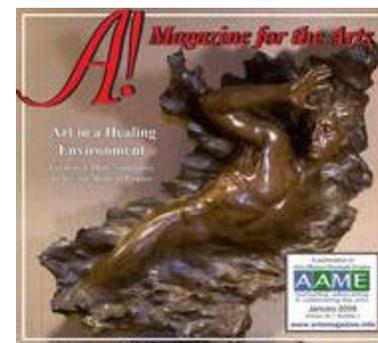
The group has tackled such weighty topics as suicide, teen pregnancy and alcohol and drug abuse in their performances.

The troupe's director, Lori Gates-Addison, a licensed therapist, began the group in 1994 with the collaborative efforts of the Russell County School Division and Cumberland Mountain Community Services.



Cast members of Mountain Youth Drama rehearse scenes at the Theatre Bristol ArtSpace for an upcoming show. (Photo by Andre Teague/Bristol Herald Courier)

THIS MONTH'S COVER



"Full Figure #3" from Frederick Hart's "Ex Nihilo" sculpture. This limited edition and other pieces by Hart are on display at Bristol Regional Medical Center. The exhibit is on loan from King College and the sculpture owners, Dennis and Kathy Lee Owens.

Photo by Jeffrey Stoner

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"The arts provide young people with an avenue to sharpen their ability to be creative, as well as present themselves on a regular basis to a group of people," Gates-Addison said of the program's goals. "More importantly, this group has given youth a forum to address openly the issues that they themselves feel the need to problem-solve."

Cast member Shawntina Lawson is glad the group provides an avenue for teens to discuss difficult issues.

"It's hard these days when you try to talk to kids," she said. "It's really important to get a meaningful message out there."

Actor Luke Addison agreed that teens face tough choices in today's world.

"Not everybody makes the right decisions, and usually we all end up in situations we don't want to be in. Hopefully, we will influence people to make the right decisions," he said.

Mountain Youth Drama members are required to sign contracts, promising to stay away from drugs and keep their grades up at all times.

Gates-Addison said the positive motivation carries through because a high number of former cast members pursue higher education.

"At least 85 percent of the kids in the group go on to college," she said. "I have seen the lasting effects blossom over the years through the accomplishments of many former members."

Justin Trout is a former group member who went on to college and continues to stay involved with the troupe. Trout, as well as other former members, performed with Mountain Youth Drama on Friday [April 11] in a special free performance at Theatre Bristol's ARTspace.

"I played football in high school, but after watching a performance by the group, I felt like it was something I could do to really change people's lives," Trout said. "I have seen the result it has on kids."

This year, Mountain Youth Drama is composed of 17 members who meet weekly for practice. Often they write their own material. They share their message of constructive problem-solving techniques with peers throughout the Russell County school system.

"I have had the privilege to watch young people take a stand for presenting messages that have not always

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been the popular thing to do with their peers," Gates-Addison said. "I have also watched them reach out to promote to their audiences a message of hope to students who may be facing a difficult time in their life."

High school senior and first-year cast member Rachael Jones is thankful for the bonds she has formed with fellow actors.

"When you're in this group, you become a huge family and bond with one another," she said. "This has been a wonderful experience."

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