

June 29, 2010

For Immediate Release

Contacts: Emily Task
The Diversity Awareness Partnership
314-436-7628
or
Nancy Tonkins
Metro Theater Company
314-997-6777

STUDENTS EXPLORE DIVERSITY THROUGH THE ARTS,
SHARE ARTISTIC STATEMENTS AT PUBLIC EVENTS

ST. LOUIS – Some address their concerns through sculpture or painting, some tell of deeply personal experiences through dance, some express their hopes through poetry, plays or films. The profound themes for all 25 students from 17 local high schools who participate in the 2010 Diversity Arts Summer Program are the same: Racism, religious intolerance, classism and sexual orientation and gender identity.

From July 5-17, the students will meet at Washington University with local artists, educators and community activists to explore social justice and diversity issues in the St. Louis area. Now in its third year, this unique arts immersion and leadership program encourages students to express themselves through the performing arts, creative writing, and visual and media art.

Two special events featuring the students' imaginative works will take place at 5 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. on July 17 at the Regional Arts Commission, 6128 Delmar Blvd. in St. Louis. The public is invited. A \$5 donation for admission is appreciated. A gallery show of the students' projects will run from July 17-22 at the same location.

Conducted by the Diversity Awareness Partnership, Metro Theater Company and professional artists, the Diversity Arts Summer Program is under the direction of Emily Task, program director at the Diversity Awareness Partnership and the founder of the summer program. "Witnessing the segregation and isolation that exists in some communities, and the hatred and ignorance that goes unchallenged through generations, can be so damaging," says Task. "I developed this program to offer an empowering space in which young people can engage in a different reality, and explore tools to create pathways back into their schools and communities."

Task notes that the program seeks to help students understand their own multiple identities, but also to support the building of allied relationships between other cultural, community and identity-based groups. "The program guides students to understand themselves better through

learning about each other, and through a better understanding of the issues that affect us in this world,” she says. “We offer them a safe space to explore, share, reflect -- and to be successful.”

Teaching artists include Emily Kohring, Rodney Smith, Dail Chambers and Brett Williams. Speakers who meet with the students include representatives from the Organization for Black Struggle, Interfaith Partnership, Missouri Immigrant & Refugees Advocates (MIRA), Planned Parenthood, and College Summit.

“We want the students to take what they have learned in the program and get actively engaged when they see a problem,” says Emily Kohring, education director and artistic associate at Metro Theater Company. “We hope they will reach out, become allies with people facing injustice, and also be more willing to fight for themselves.”

The goal is realistic, Kohring says. “We have seen a number of kids start clubs at their high schools that focus on social justice. Also, later, they take these leadership skills to college with them.” One young woman who attended last year had been the victim of a series of ugly incidents. “She spoke with us, and Emily Task helped her find resources to help resolve the issue,” says Kohring. “Now this young woman is helping others facing similar situations.” Another participant whose mother emigrated to the U.S. wrote about the struggles of newcomers.

For two weeks, the students meet each weekday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. In the mornings, they hear from local activists and guest speakers who address intolerance in its many forms. Later, the teaching artists coach the students as they craft responses to what they have learned – or, in some cases, experienced themselves. Writing prompts, theater and movement exercises and opportunities to create visual or media art all are available. Students also spend time in an “open studio,” working alone or with others on artistic projects.

Kohring notes that though the students are culturally and socially diverse, they bond quickly. “In their own environments, these kids normally would not interact, but on the first day last year, when we broke for lunch, the kids pushed tables together and ate as a group. After the program ends, a lot of them stay in touch,” says Kohring.

“These kids are crossing boundaries they don’t normally cross, getting to know kids outside their comfort zones,” she continues. “That will help them as adults to not be afraid, and to get to know people who are not like them. That is a great outcome for all concerned.”

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The **Diversity Awareness Partnership (DAP)** promotes the value of diversity through programs and initiatives that focus on embracing acceptance. Our vision is to become a leader of collaboration between community partnerships to promote diversity, heighten cultural awareness, and create an environment of respect and harmony for all people. For more information, visit www.dapstl.org or call 314-436-7628.

Inspired by the intelligence and emotional wisdom of young people, **Metro Theater Company** creates professional theater, fosters inclusive community, and nurtures meaningful learning through the arts. For more information, see www.metrotheatercompany.org or call 314-997-6777.