

# Brooklyn family

BROOKLYN'S BEST GUIDE FOR PARENTS

## City At Peace: Teens Voice Their Dreams For a Better Tomorrow

By Christy Goodman

**C**ity at Peace-New York, who recently presented the original musical "Cracks In the Concrete Canvas" to audiences, is a creative outlet for the city's teenagers.

Over 50 teenagers from the five boroughs have been working for the past year to create their own unique production based on their lives and the many challenges they face.

"There are countless reasons that the work of City at Peace is so important, but perhaps one of the most pertinent is teaching young people to cross and to communicate across their boundaries in order to achieve decreased violence, real hope, honest understanding and of course, lasting peace," said Managing Director Elin Morgan.

Brandon McGraw, 15, of East New York, joined the program to pursue his acting career.

"Once the audience comes and sees what we do, they will be amazed and shocked that a bunch of teenagers can do something of this magnitude," said McGraw. "They will start to listen to us."

The young actors meet every week to use performing arts to learn about non-violent conflict resolution.

"In the first half of the year, we do a lot of team building, trust building and problem solving to build ourselves as a group," said Karen Goldfarb of Flatbush. "The second half of the year, we put together a show."

Throughout the beginning of the program, the teens come up with and practice scenes with the help of artistic and musical directors, as well as a choreographer.

Besides the getting-to-know-you and name game exercises, the scenes mix the group to help them circulate and communicate.

"There are so many different people in the program," said McGraw. "You get to know them a lot better."

Bensonhurst's Jessica LoMonaco admitted she was nervous when she first joined because she did not know anyone.

"I was amazed to see how many people were there," said the 15-year-old New Utrecht High School sophomore. "I was really nervous and I never thought I would know everyone."

The production team, who makes calls and decisions, get together for a weekend retreat and put together a show based on the scenes they have been doing all year.

A senior at El Puente Academy in Williamsburg, 17-year-old Tania Serrano is an actor and on the production team.

"In the production team, we meet once a week to talk about how rehearsal is going and what we are going to do next Saturday," said Serrano, from Canarsie. "We don't lead the program, but we help the directors."

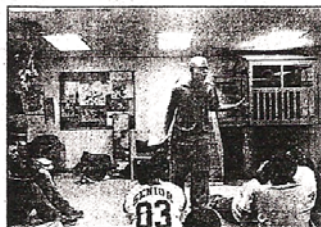
She added, "If other people in the program don't feel comfortable talking to the directors, they can come to us."

Plus, the teens get a more professional look at the world of the performing arts. They practice controlled breathing, exercises for dance and acting, as well as how to truly get into a character.

"The director chooses who would be best in the parts," said Goldfarb, a junior at the Berkeley-Carroll



Medical Director Gerald Truman works with members of the cast.



East New York's Brandon McGraw joined City at Peace to become a better actor and to gain 50 new friends.



The 2003 cast of City at Peace - New York will present "Cracks in the Concrete Canvas."



Tania Serrano rehearses a scene with her partners.

School. "Then you have scene partners and work on the scenes with them."

"Cracks in the Concrete Canvas" is a number of different stories addressing drugs, sexuality, parental acceptance, peer pressure, rape, sibling unrest and more, which work together to tell one greater saga.

"Basically, the main story is about a girl who is trying to find the essence of New York City for an English project," said Goldfarb, who plays a mother helping her daughter deal with being raped. "It goes into the various lives of kids in the city."

The teens, who were recently featured as "New Yorkers of the Week" by NY1, meet each Saturday, but as the show approaches, a lot of time is required to rehearse their dance numbers and scenes.

"In the beginning, it is not really bad trying to juggle school and the show, but when it gets to the end you have to make sure your life is in order, because if it is not you will be bouncing from school to rehearsal to show to rehearsal," laughed McGraw. "You have to do your homework."

In the previous year, Goldfarb had stage fright, but was so supported by her fellow cast members that she is acting this year.

"It becomes like your family. They are a whole bunch of people you can turn to when you need something," said Goldfarb. "It is nice knowing that there are other people in this world going through what you are going through and that want to make a difference, too."

While walking into the program could be intimidating for a teen, by the time the curtain drops these kids



Choreographer Buzz Nash rehearses dance moves with the cast of "Cracks in the Concrete Canvas."

are fast friends.

"I can be myself and I won't be judged for it," said Serrano, who plans to study the performing arts in college. "I like the fact that I met so many people from different cultures and it is the one place where I made true friends."

LoMonaco added, "It is great because I would have never met these people if it weren't for City at Peace."

McGraw could not agree more. "They are remarkable, the people I have met. Our differences make us alike," said McGraw. "We don't want to be characterized as normal teenagers. We want the world to know how unique we are."

For more information, go online to [www.Cpnational.org/ny](http://www.Cpnational.org/ny).