

New Haven Register

Students get to see their plays performed

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By Vanessa Inzitari

NEW HAVEN — Imagine having the opportunity to write a play and see it come to life in an off-Broadway theater.

That would be a dream come true for a lot of adults, and for 10 local middle school students, the opportunity is reality thanks to the Dwight/Edgewood Project.

Created by Yale Repertory Theatre and Yale School of Drama, the Dwight/Edgewood Project is an after-school program that brings middle school students together with Yale School of Drama student mentors.

Ruth Feldman, director of Education and Accessibility Services for the Yale Repertory Theatre and Yale School of Drama, said five students each from Augusta Lewis Troup and Wexler/Grant Community schools were selected by the principals to participate in this year's program.

Through a variety of interactive games and activities, students in the program, now in its 14th year, learn about theater and playwriting, Feldman said. All activities, she said, prepare students to eventually write their own two-character plays. Written by students on a weekend retreat at Camp Wightman in Griswold, the one-act plays are performed by mentors at the end of the program, she said.

"This program allows (students) freedom," Feldman said. "It's all about

the child's voice."

Started in 1995, the Dwight/Edgewood Project is modeled after the 52nd Street Project in New York City, Feldman said. Unlike the 52nd Street Project, Feldman said D/EP works in a compressed time frame of about four weeks, with fewer youths.

There also is a greater emphasis on one-on-one pairing "from the get-go," not just during the playwriting process, she said. Students aren't officially matched with a mentor until about the end of the second week, mentors are rotated among the children until then. This allows mentors to work one-on-one with each student and for mentors and students to get to know one another better, Feldman said.

Feldman, also producer of the project, said it is "an incredible learning experience" for students, as it allows them to develop and learn more about themselves and of what they are capable. "They find their voice," she said. "It opens doors of possibility; it makes things accessible to them."

Wexler/Grant sixth-grader Quashanta Stewart said the project is "very fun" and is helping her learn more about writing.

"I like it a lot," Quashanta said. "It's a good thing for me because I want to be a writer. It fits my image for what I want to be when I grow up."

Taqir James, also a Wexler/Grant sixth-grader, said he was undecided about doing D/EP at first, but truly likes the program.

“We get to write about whatever we want, not what a teacher tells you to write. I can write about soap and make it funny,” he said.

Jorge Rodriguez, producing director of this year’s D/EP, said being part of it is a rewarding and incredible experience for everyone involved.

“I was a mentor last year and it was one of the best summers of my life. I’ve seen many students grow and break their shells, even the shyest ones, and that for me is the greatest gift,” he said. “And for the students to watch their plays come to life is quite a gift too.”

This year’s general manager, Amanda Spooner, said her favorite part of the project is working with students and seeing their ideas.

“I’m pretty sure none of them knew they could accomplish what they have in such a short amount of time,” Spooner said. “This program sets high standards and they’ve all been meeting us on our artistic levels. The skills they learn here can translate into anything.”

Stephanie Hayes, a first-year mentor with the program, said she wanted to be a part of the D/EP to better connect with the community and because everyone who’s been a mentor in the past “raved about it.”

“All of the students are enthusiastic and respond beautifully. This kind of work is good for anyone: it builds character, confidence and curiosity,” she said.

Plays, free and open to the public, will be

performed at 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday at Off-Broadway Theatre, 41 Broadway.