

Students creating 'City at Peace' in musical

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER - Imagine a city free of drug pushers, pollution and bigots of all colors.

A city where fathers never abandon mothers who come to them with unplanned pregnancies

A city where every child born goes to school and learns about his or her cultural and racial background in an atmosphere filled with enlightened teachers.

If this scenario sounds more like fiction than a vision of future reality, that's because it's a play. *City at Peace* is the name of the musical sponsored by the Peace Child/Rochester, a not-for-profit arts/social interaction project, opening this week at Nazareth Academy.

But as even the production itself reveals, creating a city at peace — or a musical expressing the concept — can be a challenge for even the most idealistic of minds.

"We call it 'City at Peace,' but it doesn't start out a city at peace — We have to make it a city at peace," observed Christine Staropoli, a junior at Nazareth Academy.

Staropoli is not simply mouthing rhetoric. She and her 22 fellow core cast members, drawn from various high schools and middle schools in Monroe County, have been at "war" for two weeks, arguing over the musical's slightest details since they began rehearsals at the Unitarian Church of Rochester.

"It seems to me that we have to communicate with each other," said Teknaya Watson, a Nazareth junior. "It seems that's what a whole lot of people in this group don't want to do."

"We have to get in 'sync,'" said Kolu Dennis, a junior at East Rochester High School, speaking of the students' numerous disagreements. "I don't know how that's going to happen or when it's going to be.

Probably the (opening) night at Nazareth," she laughed.

Any group of students would find the challenge of mounting a musical in two weeks to be rough going. According to director Maria Scipione, the aspiring singers, dancers and actors have been working on the play's skits from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sundays.

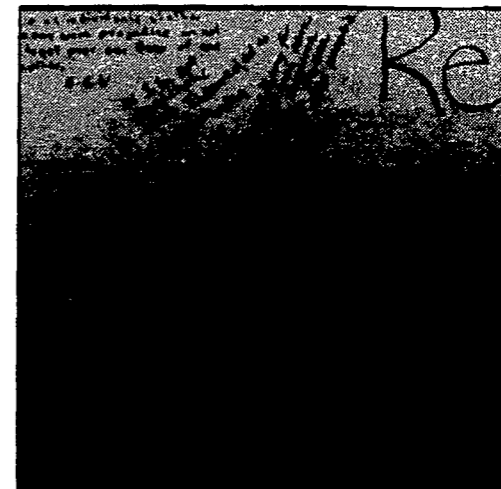
In addition to culling songs and skits from the original *City at Peace* production staged last year in Washington, D.C., the area students must write some of the skits and songs themselves in order to localize the feel of the musical.

Through group discussions, the students chose to focus their skits on the issues of teen pregnancy, pollution, inter-racial relationships and black history curriculum in schools.

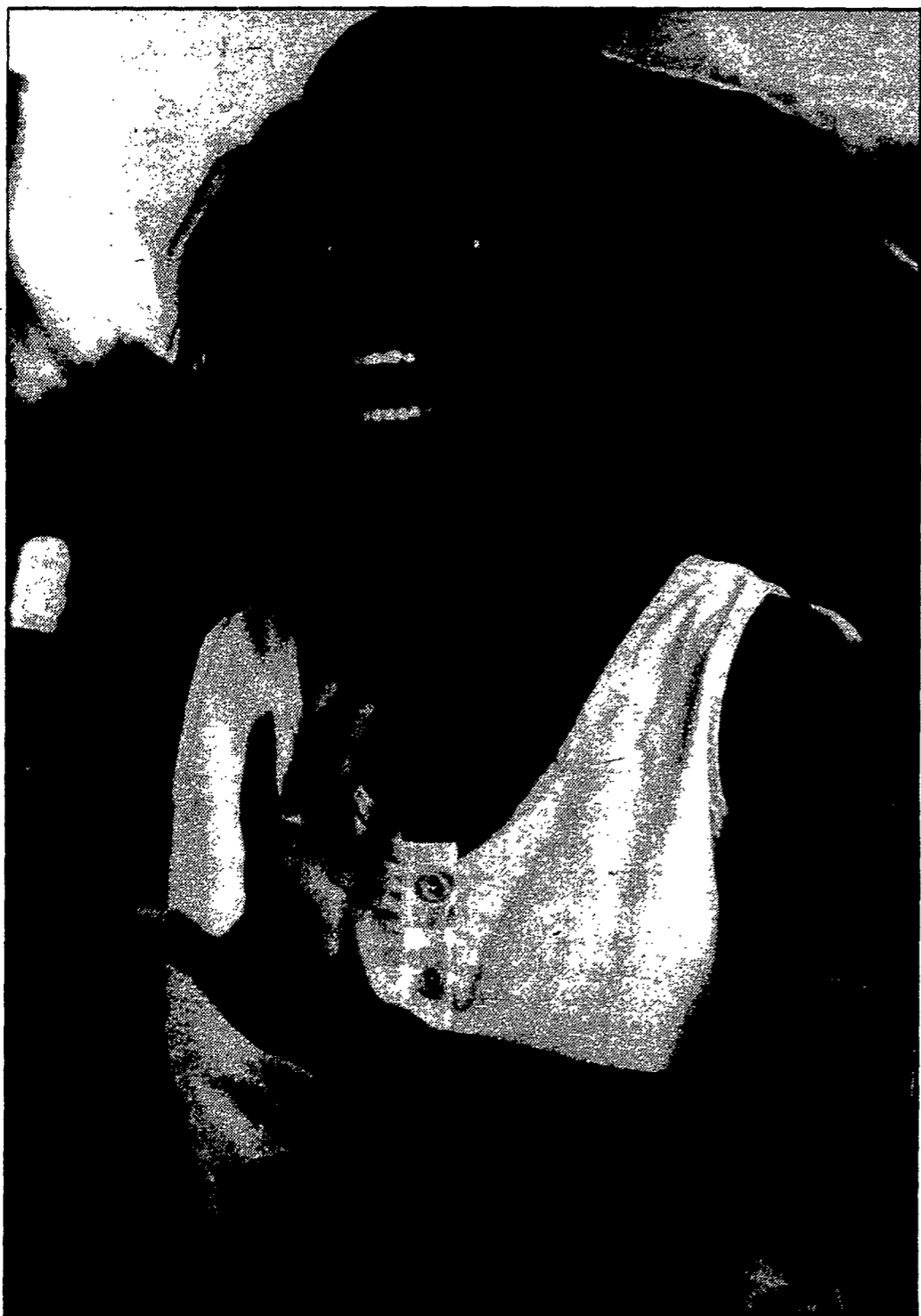
Keesha Fleth, a junior at Nazareth, helped pen a skit about a black girl not getting invited to go to a party her white friends are attending.

"I've been in situations like that," remarked Keesha, who is black. "I've been with blacks who don't think I should be with white people, and vice versa."

Showing young people how to deal with such negative peer pressure is one of the



Lynn A. Thornberry
Michael Scalzo (from left), Sylvester Wright, Bollvia Genovese, Keesha Fleth and Chris Clark are confronted by Robert Dixie, Jr. during rehearsals for the musical 'City of Peace,' which opens this week.



Lynn A. Thornberry
Keesha Fleth, a junior at Nazareth Academy, reacts to the presence of drug dealers in her community, during a scene from the play 'City of Peace.'

underlying themes of the show, said Christopher Clark, a McQuaid High School sophomore. He noted that racism crops up among his peers at school, and that after doing *City at Peace*, he may be better able to combat it.

Watson commented that she is already trying to practice the play's philosophy of leading her peers toward better approaches to problems.

"Well, personally, I take pride in being a leader and not a follower, especially in negative things," she said. "I'll try to teach people what I learned from (*City at Peace*). I'll tell them why I came here and what I have found."

Staropoli said she, too, will take an emotional souvenir back from *City at Peace*, but she's not sure all of her high school friends will appreciate it.

"I've seen a lot of the problems of

racism that this play deals with, and it has been solved in this play, and this play is a way to deal with it," she said, noting that the play deals with racism by emphasizing the beauty of different races. "My friends, I think, will understand, but a lot of people are stuck in the mud," she said.

But if somebody pulls out of the world's racist mud by seeing *City at Peace*, that's better than leaving him or her in the dirt to spin their wheels, according to Clark.

"Even if it affects just one person, it makes a difference," he said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Tickets for the musical *City at Peace* are available through the Village Green Bookstore by calling 716/385-5566. The musical will be performed at 8 p.m. on Friday, Aug. 24, and Saturday, Aug. 25.

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