

# Teen's neighborhood efforts are labors of love

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — It's a neighborhood that pulls Tabatha Santiago-Cubano's heart in every possible direction.

One of Santiago-Cubano's favorite spots along Clinton Avenue North is a vacant lot near Clifford Avenue. The area features two colorful murals on brick walls. The paintings were done to honor a neighborhood resident who was shot dead last year, reportedly during a game of Russian roulette. Broken liquor bottles are strewn at the murals' base.

"Ozzie was such a popular guy. People really loved him; he was a sweetheart," Santiago-Cubano recalled.

She added that she lost two other young friends within the last two years. All three deaths, she said, were linked to drug use.

"I had a friend who tried cocaine just once, and two hours later he cut his wrists. I also had a friend jump off a building, and Ozzie was on pot (at the time of his shooting)," Santiago-Cubano lamented.

On a recent spring evening in this Hispanic-dominated section of Rochester's inner city, girls even younger than the 16-year-old Santiago-Cubano could be seen wheeling their own infants past the many graffiti-covered, boarded-up buildings on Clinton.

"I'd say that 85 percent of my (former) sixth-grade class is pregnant or has already had babies," Santiago-Cubano said. "I don't want to be a mother right now, seeing what I have seen. I look at babies as a real incredible thing God has given to women, and women in Rochester are putting that gift to terrible use."

"It really hurts me that the Hispanic



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor  
Tabatha Santiago-Cubano, a junior at Our Lady of Mercy High School, stands in front of a Clinton Avenue North mural honoring a friend who was shot dead last year, reportedly during a game of Russian roulette.

community has dropped to such a level," she added.

Yet despite the fact that this neighborhood is hampered by poverty's many effects, it is also one that Santiago-Cubano cherishes deeply.

In fact, she often walks the mile-and-a-half from her Jay Street apartment to her volunteer job at Puerto Rican Youth Development, 997 Clinton Ave. N., so that she can stop and chat with her many friends along the way.

"The Hispanics on Clinton, we're just happy people. We're very united," she said.

Few residents can match Santiago-Cubano's energetic efforts to improve her community's quality of life. She is the only youth serving on the Puerto

Rican Youth Development's board of directors. Through PRYD, she helps out with programs such as "Project Redirect," for people with drug addictions; and "Project Connect," for teenage mothers.

Santiago-Cubano believes that the counseling she offers can be especially effective because of her rapport with teens.

"I think it makes (youths) feel more comfortable. They can relate to me better than other people. A lot of adults just don't have the experience; they

only tell you what they hear," she observed. "I think, 'How can people say not to be in gangs if they don't know what it's like (to live in this environment)?"

In addition to her PRYD work, the bubbly teen belongs to the Rochester-area Youth Participation Program and is helping plan a YPP conference this fall. She also tutors Hispanic students at School No. 8, 253 Conkey Ave.

Although she is now deeply involved with community affairs, Santiago-Cubano noted that she was once in danger of falling into the same traps plaguing many of the teens she counsels today.

"When I was in fifth or sixth grade, I was bad," she admitted.

Her mother, Sandra, sent her to Puerto Rico after seventh grade to live with her grandmother, Gloria. Santiago-Cubano returned to her native Rochester in time to begin the ninth grade at Our Lady of Mercy High School, 1437 Blossom Road, Brighton. She credits the guidance of her mother and grandmother in saving her from the street's pitfalls.

"They've been a great inspiration in my life," she acknowledged.

Santiago-Cubano is nearing completion of her junior year at Our Lady of Mercy. She would like a career in social work or law, and is anxious to apply her future professional skills toward the betterment of her beloved neighborhood.

"I feel good knowing that I might hopefully be a part of the change," she said. "The only way my hope would go down is if people stop listening."

## Kearney, Mercy announce spring play dates

ROCHESTER — Two diocesan high schools will present their spring plays in the upcoming weeks.

Bishop Kearney High School, 125 Kings Hwy. S., has scheduled the musical *Godspell* for Friday and Saturday, April 23-24, at 8 p.m. in the school auditorium. The cast includes 27 Kearney performers under the direction of Bob Smyth.

Tickets will be available at the door at \$7 for adults and \$5 for students and senior citizens. For information, call

716/342-4000.

Aquinas Institute, 1127 Dewey Ave., will perform the musical *Pippin* on April 29-30 and May 1-2. Show times are 8 p.m., with the exception of a 2 p.m. performance May 2. More than 30 Aquinas students are in the cast, with 1988 AQ graduate Theodore Mancini directing.

Ticket prices are \$6 for general admission, \$3 for students and \$4 for senior citizens. For details, call 716/254-2020.

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