

MOVIE on the

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Troupe Imagine members Andy Johnson (from left), Morgan Johnson, Elizabeth Chappell and director Kathy Fuchs-Johnson sing at the opening of their performance of "Pierce the Darkness" at Camp Good Days and Special Times June 15.

Acting out your convictions

Being in a production about peace and accepting others can go well beyond reading from a script. That's what Elizabeth Chappell has discovered from being in Troupe Imagine, a group of teens from six Finger Lakes-area schools.

"I'm not in it for just the acting," stated Elizabeth, 16, who explained that her involvement also reflects personal convictions. "I'm having fun and getting a message across at the same time." For instance, she said, "There's a lot of racism, and people getting picked on for not having much money. I just think people should accept people for who they are, not just what's in their wallet."

In "Pierce the Darkness," Troupe Imagine offers songs and skits that implore teens to be accepting of everybody around them. In a June 15 presentation, the troupe told the fictional story of Howard Gray, who was picked on as a teen and walked around with a sign saying "Kick Me." The narrator, who had laughed until she cried at the taunting, intoned, "Through my tears I could see/The tear-stained eyes of him looking back at me." She went on to say that later in life, she was haunted by the look Howard Gray had given her.

The troupe also raises questions during its performance about human tendencies toward violence and desire of material goods, asking, "Why do we seek greater comfort and power at the expense of others?" The show ends with a song, "The Storm Is Over," an upbeat message of hope for peace.

Troupe Imagine's most recent showing of "Pierce the Darkness" took place at Camp Good Days and Special Times in Yates County. It was held in conjunction with a peace retreat June 14-15 for 35 youths who have been trained as peer



Elizabeth Chappell acts in a skit with Jason Bryant (center) and Justin Bryant.

mediators at high schools in the Rochester and Finger Lakes area.

"Pierce the Darkness" was written by Kathy Fuchs-Johnson, a former youth minister in the Rochester Diocese. Inspired by such tragedies as the 1998 hate-crime murder of Matthew Shepard and the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, Fuchs-Johnson began writing the play last spring.

"These things were really wearing on my heart. I thought it would be best to develop a peace play," said Fuchs-Johnson, who for 15 years has designed productions targeting teen participants.

Fuchs-Johnson said she recruited troupe members — approximately 40 in all — by visiting various Finger Lakes schools. "I offered Mountain Dew and pizza, and of course they showed up," she quipped.

Some of Fuchs-Johnson's gang come from her alma mater, Geneva DeSales, as well as from the Canandaigua Possibilities Center, a specialized program that she teaches in the Canandaigua School

District. Other participating schools are St. Francis/St. Stephen in Geneva; Geneva High School; Geneva Middle School; and Newark Middle School.

"I liked the experience, meeting people from different towns," said Elizabeth, who attends the Canandaigua Possibilities Center.

Chris Fanning, 16, serves as a game-show host in "The Purpose of Life," where "contestants" in the skit can opt to either make money or give back to the world. He describes Troupe Imagine as "little talents from each group" coming together. Morgan Johnson, 17, said she is especially impressed by the middle-school students, commenting, "They're pretty deep for, like, sixth-graders."

The themes are more intense than any production in which Morgan has ever taken part. "When you try to portray something as deep as that, it's difficult. You have to know what you think to portray it to other people, but you don't always know," said Morgan, a DeSales student who is Fuchs-Johnson's stepdaughter. However, she said she likes the creative license that Troupe Imagine members have with the production: "It gives us a chance to put our own input into it, because we were putting it on for other teenagers," she said.

Troupe Imagine has also performed "Pierce the Darkness" at Geneva Middle School in mid-May, and at DeSales High earlier this month. Fuchs-Johnson said her goal is for the troupe to perform monthly at different schools. Chris, who also attends DeSales, said the audience response thus far has been excellent.

"Everyone I've talked to said they loved it," he remarked.