

# NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

MAY 6, 2009 ■ PAGE 15

## Behind bars: Oak Hill students choose change

By **REBECCA BLATT**  
Current Correspondent

“Choosing Change,” on stage this week at the GALA Hispanic Theatre, begins with a blast of music, the smash of a gavel and a simple line: “Once upon a time I made a choice, and there was a change.”

Then the actors recite a series of echoes:

“Once upon a time I was doing what I wanted. ...”

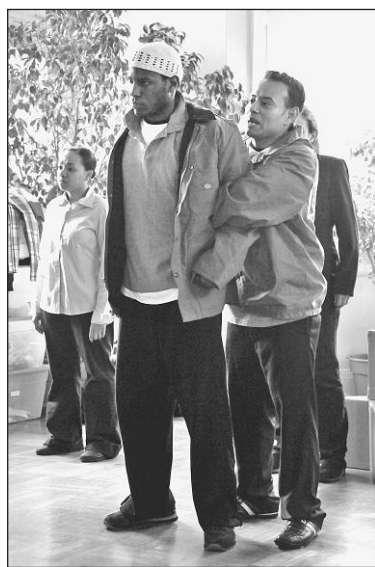
“Once upon a time I fell in love with the streets and the stacks. ...”

“Once upon a time I was smoking and fighting and didn’t care. ...”

“Once upon a time there was a choice and a change, and kids got locked up.”

In the scenes that follow, dozens of voices emerge from the mouths of the six cast members. Among them are those of about 60 real-life teenage boys who have been convicted of crimes. They are in the custody of D.C.’s Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, and they go to school at Oak Hill Academy in Laurel, Md. Their voices are usually kept behind layers of barbed wire and uniformed guards, but this week public audiences will have the chance to hear them in “Choosing Change.”

While the show begins with “Once upon a time,” the narrative is far from a fairy tale. It traces the stories of two Oak Hill students as



Bill Petros/The Current

**Actors with the Young Playwrights’ Theater voice the histories and daily lives of residents and staff at Oak Hill Academy, which serves students in D.C.’s Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. The play’s script is largely taken from Oak Hill student essays.**

they navigate through the juvenile justice system.

The play is the product of a partnership between the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services and a nonprofit called Young Playwrights’ Theater. The mission of the nonprofit, based in Columbia Heights, is to give students opportunities to express themselves through playwriting. Each year, students across D.C. write hundreds of short plays under the group’s supervision, and professional actors from Young Playwrights’ Theater perform several of them for public audiences. This year, “Choosing Change” is among them.

David Andrew Snider, the orga-



nization’s artistic director and chief executive officer, proposed the collaboration to the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services late last year. He said he felt particularly drawn to work with the Oak Hill students.

“This is one of the populations that is the most isolated from the rest of the community and really

deserves a platform,” he said. “I think that this is a population that has some of the most compelling things to say.”

Snider found an enthusiastic partner in the department’s director, Vincent Schiraldi. Schiraldi says many of the students at Oak Hill have not been exposed to the kinds of activities other children enjoy daily, such as sports and the arts. He tries to bring those kinds of opportunities to students, including ropes courses, wilderness adven-

tures, celebrity visits and construction projects.

“It’s building on people’s strengths to keep them on the straight and narrow,” he explained. “For some kids that’s sports, for some kids that’s artwork, and for some kids that’s theater.”

That wasn’t always the guiding philosophy at the youth rehabilitation department. Schiraldi said that when he took over the agency in 2005, the curriculum at Oak Hill was dry and the conditions were

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### HOME & GARDEN

## Contest highlights trend toward craft

By **CAROL BUCKLEY**  
Current Staff Writer

Headlines aren’t the only barometer of economic well-being, we’ve discovered during this recession. We’re not just buying less, we’re buying differently, moving away from the expensive but impersonal and trending toward handcrafted items that offer a connection between artisan and consumer. One indicator of the shift is etsy.com, an online marketplace for all things handmade that has stayed strong and even boomed at times as traditional retail has foundered.

Designers at D.C.’s second annual M+D+F furniture-design competition agreed



Courtesy of Design Within Reach

**Megan McSweeney designed and built the “Sariah” desk, above, of maple and included a secret compartment. Tippy Tippens’ “Pisa” bookcase, right, won first prize for its fun and functional design.**



## Wilson High School grad creates film course to serve as prison teaching tool

By **TERESA G. GIONIS**  
Current Correspondent

When it comes to issues of social justice, Chevy Chase native Ziad Foty, now a junior at Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., has quite a track record.

As a student at Wilson High School, Foty was president of the Mecca club, composed of Muslim and non-Muslim students who worked to resolve community issues. Under Foty’s leadership, the group held a well-attended rally on gun violence and ran a concert event dubbed “A



Courtesy of Lafayette College

**Chevy Chase’s Ziad Foty is working to combat recidivism.**

Peaceful Revolution,” where students linked third-world problems with the problems in poor D.C. communities.

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# NORTHWEST REAL ESTATE

## PLAY

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poor.  
 “Most of the staff that worked with the kids saw themselves as guards,” Schiraldi explained. “Their job was, ‘I cuff them, I count them, I move them and I cuff them again.’”

Schiraldi said that, since then, he has worked to create a more therapeutic environment. He contracted out the management of the school to a nonprofit called the See Forever Foundation. He said the staff has been trained to focus on encouraging good behavior rather than restricting bad behavior. He boasted that between 2004 and 2007, the recidivism rate dropped 19 percent. But for the staff, he said, the changes have not been easy.

“At the beginning they were rolling their eyes,” Schiraldi said. “But bit by bit, they see the kids

flourishing and they, themselves, get excited.”

“Choosing Change” is, in part, about that transition. The Young Playwrights’ Theater’s Snider and his colleague, associate director Patrick Torres, pieced together the script, and they included excerpts of interviews with staff who talked about the challenges of guiding Oak Hill students day after day.

But the play is mostly about the changes students make — and resist — in their own lives. Those story lines came from writing exercises led by Snider and Torres in English classes at Oak Hill. Each Thursday this winter, Torres and Snider brought the students a different taste of performance. They watched a clip of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. They read works by Shakespeare. They made play lists of rap music. And the teachers based writing prompts on each activity.

The boys at Oak Hill file in and

out of classrooms in groups of about 10 to 15. Snider said there were students in each class who resisted the playwriting curriculum, but many really engaged with the material, sharing stories and opinions in writing each week.

Snider and Torres picked the lines and paragraphs that stood out in the student writing, and Snider said about 80 percent of “Choosing Change” came directly from those selections. The cast of the show recites monologues lifted from student essays. At certain points, the actors break out of character to recite poetry. The transitions can be jarring, but the underlying message is clear: Oak Hill students face choices every day, and through those choices, they have the power to make positive changes.

That’s a message that at least two current Oak Hill students say is true to their experiences. The Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services would not allow the students to give their names, but they

were not bashful about sharing their perspectives.

“The kids down here are making a difference,” one said. “They’re changing, waking up, realizing it’s time to do something better.”

He said he has been working to change an attitude that got him into trouble.

“I learned how to cope around certain situations,” he explained. “You have to down here. It’s like every time you fight or you get into an incident, you gotta learn how to cope.”

The other student said he was working through a similar process.

“We learn core issues and things that is deep inside and is just messing with us,” he said. “How to let the past go and look forward to the future and the present — that’s what’s going on right now.”

The students said they enjoyed working with the playwriting group. One said it challenged him to think more deeply than he had before. He said he also liked it because it allowed him to practice cursive writing, which he has been working on since he arrived at Oak Hill.

The other student took a longer view of his work with Young

Playwrights’ Theater.

“They were just trying to give us a look at that type of career in case we want to do something like that,” he said. “I might end up doing something like that. I’m not sure, but I might.”

Brittany Cox, an English teacher at Oak Hill, has a different perspective.

“What YPT does is to put our kids’ voices out there and to let their side of the story be known,” she said. “That has shown them that something does come from your speaking and writing, because your voice has power.”

Schiraldi said the power of “Choosing Change” also goes beyond the lives of individual students.


“So much of the media coverage is of them as irredeemable thugs,” he said. “If they can produce a thing of beauty, maybe that’ll break down some of those stereotypes and fear. ... If we can build on that good, we’ll save ourselves a lot of pain.”

“Choosing Change” and three other student-written plays runs at GALA Theatre, 3333 14th St. NW, today through Saturday. Tickets cost \$15. More information is at [youngplaywrightstheatre.org](http://youngplaywrightstheatre.org).

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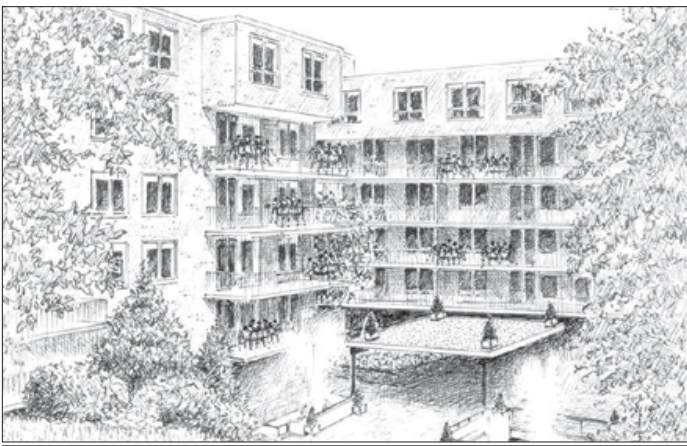
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