

Acting, Community... and a Whole Lot More

Program targets kids in transition and gets them thinking about the future

By Sherry Karabin

With patient attention to detail and an eye to the future, it's as if Thurman E. Scott is running a finishing school.

His "Builders of the New World" program, a theater and education initiative, gives children between the ages of 8 and 12 who live in transitional housing in New York City the tools and inspiration to make their dreams come true.

"I tell them to look ahead 20 years," Scott said. "What do you want to be and what educational decisions do you have to make now to reap the benefits of tomorrow? Everyone must have an intention in life."

The award-winning actor, writer and director started the program 14 years ago at the Actors Theatre Workshop on West 28th Street in Manhattan as part of an initiative of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the Board of Education and the Department of Homeless Services. Children who go through the 12 to 15 week program work on their reading, writing and creative skills. Specifically, they are encouraged to use their imaginations to envision a positive future for themselves and their communities, which they then draw, write about and perform under his direction.

There are typically two semesters each year, with participants selected

Students begin their afternoon with a nutritious meal, which they share with their mentors at several large tables. Top New York City restaurants donate the food and, in some cases, it is the only hot meal the children may have all day.

from after-school programs run by various shelters throughout the city. Classes include 30 to 35 children and meet Tuesdays from 5 to 8 p.m. Students begin their afternoon with a nutritious meal, which they share with their mentors at several large tables. Top New York City restaurants donate the food and, in some cases, it is the only hot meal the children may have all day. The experience also provides structure and gives the kids a chance to get to know and develop respect for their mentors and one another.

"The concept was to create a family-style dinner setting," said Scott. "Growing up I was loved and accepted by the woman

who ran the next farm. She happened to be white, and her acceptance of this young black American made me understand that when people share genuine compassion, love, race, sex or status in life can't create a bulwark of separation. We've done the same thing here: give black, white and Hispanic children a chance to come together and have positive encounters."

"The mentors and the children come from very different backgrounds and environments," said Mariko Enkoji-Busch, director of marketing at the workshop. "Dealing with something different and feeling safe around it means the children can feel safe in the world."

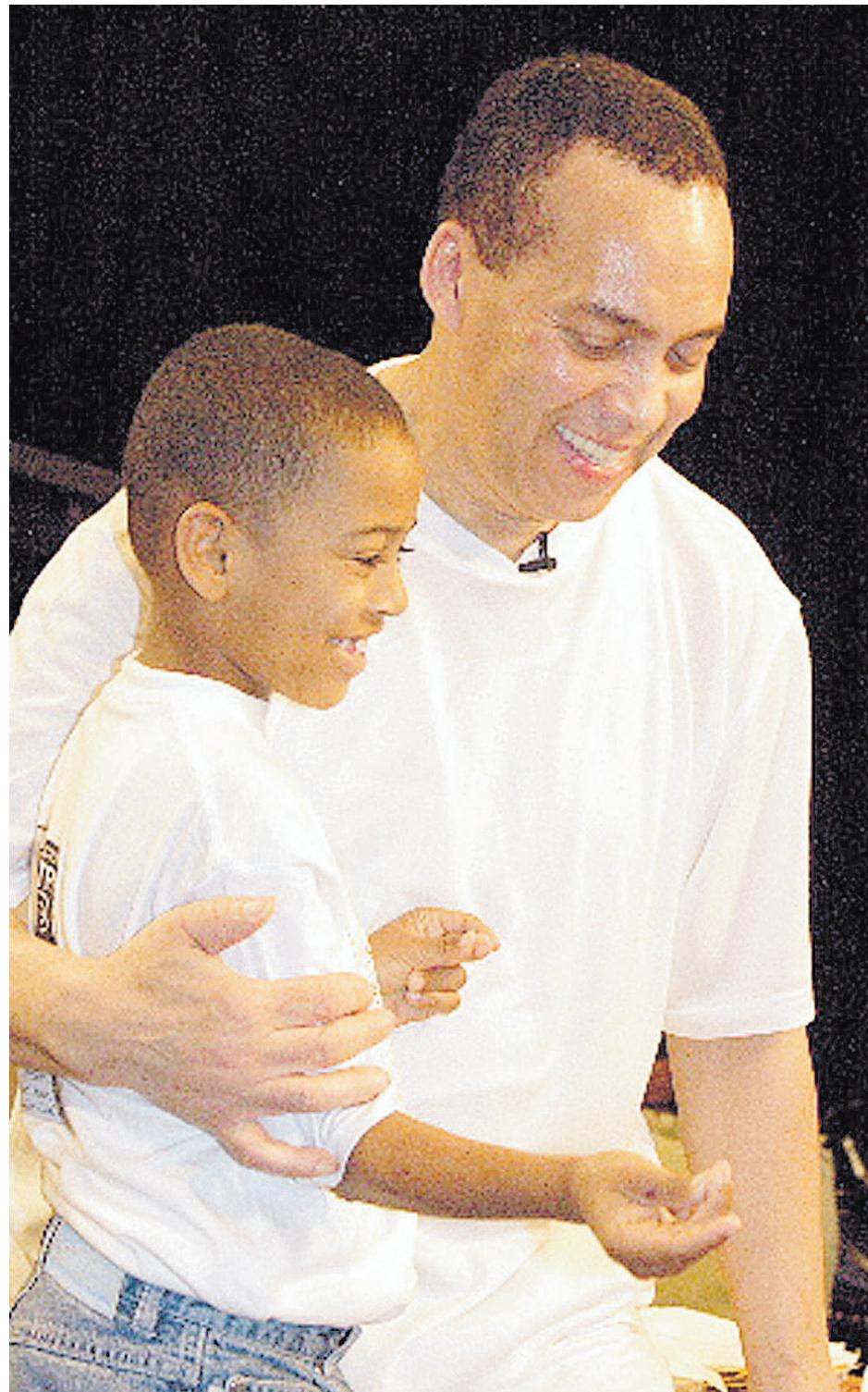
After the meal, Scott teaches the lesson for the day, with each class focusing on a different goal. The children are taught teamwork and respect, with everyone being required to listen to one another, as well as to their mentors.

"The children like having the structure and discipline the program brings," said Eileen M. Burke, a founding member and treasurer of the Actors Theatre Workshop. "Losing your home is chaotic, and structure makes them feel safe."

Each Builders of the New World semester culminates in a performance directed by Scott. Over the years the children have created a wealth of material that Scott said, "reveals creative, powerful answers to some of the unsolvable issues we struggle with as a society." For example, one of his students created "The Life Restore Generator" that cures all diseases; another created "The Learnbratory," where people of all backgrounds learn to use computers.

"It's very powerful when the children stand up and present their creations, and the community responds with oohs, aahs and enthusiasm," Scott said. "The child can see that what's coming out of him touches others. This is the moment when the tremendous feeling of abandonment a homeless child can feel has the potential to be washed away."

Scott has certainly realized many of his dreams. Raised on a sharecropper's farm in North Carolina, he served in the U.S. Air Force, where he became All Forces Middle Weight Boxing Champion. It was during a party in the Air Force that he decided to pursue theater, going on to study at the London Academy of Dramatic Art and under renowned



Thurman E. Scott congratulating Francisco Carreras on a very good performance

Broadway actress Stella Adler. Scott went on to have a successful career, founding the Actors Theatre Workshop in 1990. At the workshop he develops and directs original plays, teaches his original acting techniques and offers community programs—such as the Builders of the New World.

"The program works because it's taught by an artist," said Diana Windhorst, coordinator of Builders of the New World. "When the children start the program a lot of them are quiet and with-

drawn. But by the end Mr. Scott has helped them to express all the beauty that's inside and they stand up strong, tall and motivated to succeed."

The next semester of Builders of the New World is scheduled to start in October. Those interested in getting more information about the program, or serving as a mentoring and program assistant, can apply online before Oct. 6 at www.actorstheatreworkshop.com, or contact outreach@actorstheatreworkshop.com.