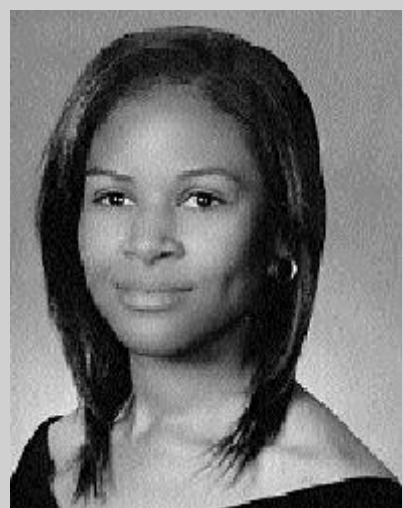


Latest Role Helps Canarsie Co-ed Understand Acceptance

By Linda Steinmuller



Shantel Nelson

Canarsien Shantel Nelson knew she wanted to be an actress back in the fourth grade when she played the Tin Woman in a production of "The Wiz," alongside her brother as the Cowardly Lion, for the Jackie Robinson Program.

The 18-year-old has been acting ever since and is featured in the upcoming City Lights Youth Theatre production of "The Laramie Project" that opens on Saturday.

Nelson's family moved to East 88th Street in Canarsie in 1998. She attended Holy Family School and is currently a senior at Bishop Kearney High School. As a member of Kearney's speech team, she specializes in drama interpretation and ten-minute monologues and said she is ranked No. 1 in the state and No. 3 in the nation. She joined City Lights, which begins its 16th season, as a way to exercise her love for acting in an environment of people with similar motives and has performed two plays with the group to date - "Bang, Bang, You're Dead" and "Now You See Me" - both focusing on tolerance, awareness, and acceptance.

"The Laramie Project," which began as a play before it became an acclaimed made-for-HBO movie in 2002, takes place in Laramie, Wyoming a year after the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay student who attended the University of Wyoming. Shepard was snatched from a bar and taken to a remote site where he was beaten, and left for dead tied to a fence post.

The incident was considered to be a hate crime motivated by homophobia. A versatile actress, Nelson plays the role of Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father, a dramatic role with an emotional courtroom scene. She portrays eight other characters in the play - three main and six minor roles.

Nelson said, "The Laramie Project has stood out as the most substantial project I have been a part of. The message it conveys does not only pertain to homosexuality but issues as a whole. In a world where acceptance is hard to attain, 'Laramie' highlights the importance of it. It spews forth a positive message - something that we can all learn from."

"This play has taught me the severity of acceptance," Nelson added. "Though my opinion may differ from others, it is imperative that I respect opposing views."

Nelson plans on attending American University in Washington, D.C. where she can pursue her two favorite subjects. Since she loves both theater and politics, she plans to major in political science and minor in theatre.

"The Laramie Project" opens on February 3 for six performances (February 3, 4, 8, 9, 10 at 7 p.m. and February 11 at 4 p.m.) at The McGinn/Cazale Theatre above the Promenade, 2162 Broadway between West 76th & 77th streets.

For tickets to "The Laramie Project" call 1 (212) 262-0200 and for more information on the City Lights Youth Theatre, visit their Web site at: www.clyouththeatre.org.