

Expecting the best: CAPP A Showcase

2006

by N.J. Stanley



Above: Loni Gamble conducts the full chorus for the CAPP A Showcase in the Curtin Middle School Auditorium. Right: Several kids wait for their turn "onstage" in the Cochran Elementary cafeteria.

On a bright, sunny Saturday afternoon in May, the cafeteria-auditorium of Cochran Elementary School was teeming with children. Their voices ricocheted off the walls, creating a mild din and a buzz of energy as they sat at tables chatting and laughing. Their eyes were all focused in one direction, though—toward Loni Gamble, who stood at a microphone in front of the stage. As Gamble began to speak, the room quieted. "Look at me," he said. "This is it. Look at me. Pay attention. Today is the first day that we are actually going to run the script. We've been doing this since February. And this is it. This is the way it's going to go down June 10."

Yes, this was "it": the first from-start-to-finish rehearsal of the CAPP A Showcase 2006, an extravaganza of performances by area children and youths, featuring rapping, dancing, music, poetry and much more. The theme of this year's showcase is "Raising Expectations," and to see these children hip-hopping around the stage, playing saxophone, or telling an abbreviated version of Oprah Winfrey's life story is to know that the CAPP A Showcase 2006 exemplifies its theme.

CAPP A is the Community Alliance for Progressive Positive Action, the brainchild of Bruce White and Loni Gamble, who founded the Kennedy King Basketball League in 2002. They realized a need in Williamsport: many area youth needed a structured, rewarding experience during the summertime. Now in its fifth year, the Basketball League is a still flourishing program that has involved hundreds of our kids.

Inspired by the Basketball League's success and their unrelenting desire to find new avenues to involve our children in character-building activities, White and Gamble continued to launch new programs, and in 2005, CAPP A was registered as a nonprofit organization. Also in 2005, CAPP A launched its first Showcase, an enormously ambitious program to celebrate the performing arts. According to Eileen Harley, vice president of CAPP A, "Its programs are designed to serve underserved youth. If you're not into sports, it's hard to find a niche."

The Showcase concept taps the talents of our budding artists, appealing to many not drawn to the basketball program. Loni Gamble explained that the Showcase and other programs sponsored by CAPP A are designed to "fill the void for these children. There was nothing on their plate. We used 'American Idol' as the model, but this is not a competition. It is a way for these children to be engaged and an opportunity for our youth to receive community recognition."

For two hours on that lovely Saturday afternoon in May, the participants of Showcase 2006 dutifully trooped up on stage as they were called, and then sparks started to fly. Among over 20 different acts, the Sheridan Dolls from Sheridan Elementary School performed a cool hip-hop number, Nuria Hunter played "Rockin' the Blues" on her saxophone, and near the end of the Showcase, Young L and Dollar Bill sang a clever rap song they composed that had the entire audience rocking in its seats.

Meanwhile, Gamble and Harley were two energetic whirlwinds, coaching performers and urging the array of young co-hosts to speak loudly and clearly into the microphone. The two adults made a great team, constantly encouraging and occasionally offering no-nonsense discipline.

Noticeably, there was only a small handful of adults in the large room. The entire Showcase is virtually run by the participants, who range from fifth- to twelfth-graders, and this is just how Gamble wants it. CAPP A's mission is to inspire active involvement in and nurture commitment to each project the organization sponsors. "We meet them where they are and bring them where they need to be," he said. Ultimately, CAPP A's goal is to improve each child's academics and behavior in school.

CAPP A's programs "extend the school concept into the community," Gamble added, explaining that, in addition to teaching standards of excellence and the value of self-discipline through sport and performance, CAPP A supervises a tutoring program for students who are struggling in school. Every Saturday in between rehearsals, 23 mentors from colleges and universities in the Williamsport vicinity have volunteered their services as tutors, in addition to assisting in creating acts for the Showcase.

Gamble noted that the key to the success of the Showcase, now in its second year, is the partnership forged between CAPP A and the Williamsport Area and Loyalsock Township School Districts.