



## Art can lead to success in the real world



Jim Gehrz/Star Tribune

Advanced-placement literature teacher Mary Sylwester, right, embraced former student Martrice Jackson at North High School, where Jackson, now a sophomore at the University of St. Thomas, visited to offer advice to students participating in Project Success. At top: North High senior Dominique Nolen said the project helped her buckle down and now she hopes to major in pre-medicine at the University of Minnesota.

## Program uses theater to help students plan their futures

By Kristin Tillotson  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

"He had the wrong dreams — all, all wrong," says the character Biff Loman of his father, Willy, in "Death of a Salesman."

That line, among others, stuck with Jonathan McConico after he attended the Guthrie Theater's production of Arthur Miller's play last fall.

"It made me think about my own family, my own life, and which way I want it to go," said McConico, a senior at North Community High School in Minneapolis. "A play can be more than entertainment. It can help you figure out why people act like they do, why you act like you do yourself."

McConico is a participant in Project Success, an 11-year-old

program that uses theater and practical workshops to help students set and meet goals, from getting a better grade in math to getting into college. Nearly 8,000 middle- and high-school students from eight urban Twin Cities schools are enrolled this year. Most of them will see at least a half-dozen plays, from "Black Nativity" and "Under Milk Wood" to "The Lion King."

Most high schools have resources to help teens with their post-graduation plans, but Project Success' creative use of an art form to spark discussion, then action, sets it apart.

### SUCCESS continues on B5:

- There's no prerequisite, no homework.
- Sixteen theaters donate tickets for the program.

## SUCCESS from B1

# Guthrie staffer: The great plays contain life lessons

"From 'Macbeth,' they learn what happens to people consumed by greed and power; from 'A Christmas Carol,' that humans truly can transform themselves," said Sheila Livingston, director of education at the Guthrie. "How do you achieve success? How do you decide what's right and wrong? Most great plays contain these messages."

On a recent Tuesday afternoon at North, about 20 seniors, all Project Success enrollees, were using sixth period to pore through college catalogs, figuring out what paperwork they needed to complete applications. They heard from three program alumni, all now attending universities, who had stopped by to help out.

"I used to go home after school and not do anything, just watch TV," said Dominique Nolen, a classmate of McConico's at North. "Now I've got a job. I'm on a mission to make my transcripts look good."

The program's structure makes it inviting even to the initially reluctant, said founder and director Adrienne Diercks: There's no prerequisite other than being a student at a participating school; there's no homework beyond play-reading assignments coordinated with existing English-class curricula (the North students had finished "Oedipus" and moved on to "Antigone"). Eleven staff facilitators work individually with students. Students are regularly taken on tours of area colleges beginning in the ninth grade, and each spring several from each school also go on an out-of-state tour, this year to California.

In a survey of Project Suc-

***"This program really helped me to know what I don't want, too. I don't want to study liberal arts, because I want to make money."***

— **Dominique Nolen**, North High School senior

cess alumni conducted by the University of Minnesota last spring, 88 percent ranked the program as being more important than friends, teachers and counselors in assisting them with future plans, second only to parents.

"A lot of these kids will be the first generation in their families to go on to post-high education," said Stella Jones, who has been a guidance counselor at North for 34 years. "They need this kind of support to show links between taking smaller steps now for bigger steps later."

### Bang for the buck

Nolen's datebook is so packed with penciled-in reminders of ACT and SAT tests — her work hours as a hospital-patient escort and volunteering schedule — it looks solid gray from a distance. Nolen used Diercks' cell phone to arrange an informational interview at St. Thomas, but she said she has her sights set on pre-med at the University of Minnesota.

"I'll get the most bang for my buck there," she said, with the authority of someone who's been critiquing campuses for two years. "This program really helped me to know what I *don't* want, too. I don't want to study liberal arts, because I want to

make money."

McConico was dressed in a suit because he had an internship interview with Target later that afternoon. Next year, he plans to attend North Central University in Minneapolis with a major in religious studies and a minor in music.

"This just gives me another kick in the butt to keep things moving," he said.

Jones calls Project Success unique not only for its use of theater for practical skill building but for giving kids exposure to the arts.

"They don't have the money to do things like this on their own — even if they wanted to," she said. "If it was a Timberwolves game, they'd be all excited even if they'd never been to one, but theater is a more foreign concept."

The Guthrie was the first theater to offer free tickets to students and their families. Now 15 other local stages, including Penumbra, the State-Orpheum-Pantages troika and Jeune Lune have joined in.

Over the years, the play-attendance component of Project Success has stretched to accommodate not only students, but also their families, scheduling evening outings instead of school-day matinees and even providing transportation if requested.

"One mother said it was the first time she had ever been out like this socially with her son," said the Guthrie's Livingston. "Our actors used to worry whether the kids would behave. Now they ask when they're coming again."

The program's top two funders are LifeTouch, a national company that markets school photography and yearbooks, and Target Corp. The annual budget of \$712,000 is now bolstered by more than half that amount in ticket donations, Diercks said.

For more information, see

<http://www.projectsuccess.org>.

*Kristin Tillotson is at [ktillotson@startribune.com](mailto:ktillotson@startribune.com)*

#### QUOTE OF THE DAY

"I used to go home after school and not do anything, just watch TV. Now I've got a job. I'm on a mission to make my transcripts look good."



— **Dominique Nolen**, a senior at North Community High School in Minneapolis, on how the theater-based Project Success program has motivated her to go to college.