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 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.

“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 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 withdrawn. 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.