

# Learning to Perform Onstage to Help Kids Perform Offstage in Everyday Life

## *Bay Area All Stars and the Bay Area Business Community Helps Kids Sing and Dance Their Way to Development!*

By Deborah Burstyn

Alicia Keys, Fifty Cent and Jennifer Hudson better look out. Anysa, Youngin and Treszher are catching up. These breath-taking young performers were among the top trophy winners in a recent afternoon talent show at the Historic Sweets Ballroom in downtown Oakland presented by the Bay Area All Stars, a program of the All Stars Project, Inc.

Wait a minute. Joyce Dattner, the effervescent director and a founder of the Bay Area All Stars wants to say something.

"This is not another American Idol," quickly explains the Bronx native. "Everyone gets a medal here. Everyone is a winner. That's why it is called 'All Stars.' We're a talent show where every young person makes it! Sure, there are young people who come through our program and go on to show business careers. Mekhi Phifer and Lil Mama got their start in our New York All Stars. But we're a talent show not looking for only the most talented or at risk. We create a stage for all inner city youth to use what they love to do- perform- to grow and develop as learners, team builders, choice makers and leaders."

So why, you're probably thinking, are you encouraging these kids to rap, break dance and sing on stage instead of tutoring them in school subjects? Again, we turn the microphone over to Joyce.

"We believe that if you can perform on stage you can perform in everyday life," says Dattner, who is also a business and life performance coach. "All Stars is about building confidence. We take some of the best that kids look for in gangs - a sense of belonging and validation - and offer it to them in a productive environment."

Dattner is a feisty Boomer who cut her activist teeth during the 60s upheavals of the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements. When she was a student at New York's City College in Harlem, she saw past the students marching and carrying signs to the

surrounding community and realized they had other worries.

Dattner recalls, "There was a disconnect between the community and the campus. The community's concern which became mine was how to support the development of young people in disadvantaged circum-

stances. All Stars grew out of a community organizing and welfare rights movement."

The kids of adults active in that movement told Dattner and her colleagues that they didn't have anything to do. They asked them what they wanted to do. Their answer: let's put on a show. The year was 1981. A South Bronx church basement was procured. The All Stars program was launched.

In the ensuing years the success of this unique motivational performing arts program for youth inspired Dattner, a member of the All Stars Project Board of Directors, and her colleagues to replicate the program in other cities. There are now All Stars programs in Newark, N.J., Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles and as of six years ago, the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area. During those six years, over 1000 Bay Area kids have beamed to the sound of an audience applauding just for them; nationwide the numbers swell to tens of thousands since All Stars' inception.

Basically this is how it works. Twice a year, the Bay Area All Stars produces talent shows to give kids an opportunity to strut their stuff. For six weeks at the beginning of each talent show cycle, volunteers with red vests and clipboards fan out to neighborhoods in some of the Bay Area's poorest communities to sign up kids to come and audition.

The audition criteria? Show up on time -- and with the five dollar registration fee.

"That's very important," explains Dattner. "That conveys to the kids that we take them seriously - that we have expectations for them. One of the worst things in life is



Photo 1  
 Dr. Elouise Joseph, Youth Programs Manager for the Bay Area All Stars and (r) Tony Bush Jr., All Stars MC, look on as rappers Ajman Thrower and Greg Griffin receive their awards

Photo 2  
 Da Movement Dance Squad getting ready for their performance

Photo 3  
 Joyce Dattner, Founder and Director of the Bay Area All Stars

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not to be taken seriously and no one has any expectations for you."

Then every participant who gets on stage and performs is congratulated and accepted into the program. What follows is a three-hour workshop on a Saturday. The assignment at a recent workshop was for each kid to imagine that they're a talk show host and prepare several questions they would like to ask other young people.

"Why do you think there's so much violence? How do we stop violence? Did you grow up with a father? What do you think about homelessness? They ask very poignant questions," says Dattner. They are also coached in treating others with respect.

"No booing allowed. We take responsibility for each other." But they are not coached in singing, dancing or any other aspect of performing.

Performing in the business world though is an area where All Stars Talent Show alums 16 to 21 years old can now also get some coaching thanks to All Stars business partners such as the San Francisco law firms,

Heller Ehrman and Latham and Watkins. The firms have held onsite Development Workshops that bring All Stars participants to their offices for a half day.

Before their introduction to the financial district, they join other workshop applicants at a group interview; are part of an improv theater workshop where they practice their conversational and question-asking skills. And they get to visit Bloomingdale's and learn the difference between dressing casual and dressing for work.

But kids are kids. What if someone doesn't want to suit up?

"We tell them you can make that choice. It's up to you. But you won't be successful in the business world. We're not trying to turn them into lawyers. We're trying to develop in them the capacity to do whatever they want to do," explains Dattner.

"They learn they can take BART from Oakland to go to an office in San Francisco. If a kid says I'm nervous, we say you've been on stage. Use your capacity to perform to take you places you've never been before; to enrich every area of your life. All of human activity requires performance.

If you can perform on stage, make a decision to use that skill to do what you want to do."

Dattner also points out that a performance is also a social activity that helps build community. Whether it's bringing together inner city kids, mostly African American and Latino, with affluent adult professionals or turning kids from different neighborhoods into an ensemble of performers, or creating that special magic of a performer connecting with his or her audience, All Stars makes participants aware of different communities that can offer them options for positive productive outcomes.

It's the business community investing philanthropically in youth development that is funding the expansion of the All Stars, Dattner explains. The organization eschews government grants and instead prefers private independent funding. "There are more than 1,000 active Bay Area donors. We're a unique partnership between inner city youth and adults who want to invest in an innovative development program that can help lift kids out of poverty.

Partners from Merrill Lynch, Latham and Watkins and Dunn and Bradstreet have been generous

donors. Hunter Hunt is a member of the All Stars Project Board of Directors. In addition, members of San Francisco's venerable arts community volunteer to serve as a panel of judges at the talent shows. They help decide who will receive first, second and third place in each performance category although all participants receive a medal.

That afternoon at the Talent Show in Sweets Ballroom, rappers, dancers, singers and spoken word artists all took their turn in the spotlight. Tony Bush, Jr. the lively emcee was himself an alumnus of the All Stars Talent Show program.

Amid the creative original lyrics and hip hop rhythms, when a talented young singer named Master C lent a new timber to the Temptations' "My Girl," the grandparents and parents in the audience thrilled to the familiar melody. But the crowd of over 200 gave enthusiastic applause to each and every performer.

To learn more, visit the All Stars website at [www.allstars.org](http://www.allstars.org) or contact Joyce Dattner at [jdattner@allstars.org](mailto:jdattner@allstars.org) or 415 986 2502.

Photography by Margot Duane, [planetmargot.com](http://planetmargot.com)

## Mark your Calendar...

### East Bay Women in Business Roundtable Ten Year Gala Event!

On February 1, 2008 the East Bay Women in Business Roundtable (EBWIBR) will celebrate its Ten-Year Anniversary. In 1998 when a small group of savvy corporate female professionals and entrepreneurs of the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce gathered to connect, support, learn, and grow - EBWIBR was born.

In the beginning, EBWIBR's membership was sixty percent corporate professionals and forty percent business owners. Now the breakdown is 30 percent corporate professionals and 70 percent business owners. Recognizing that women-owned businesses are the fastest growing piece of the small and mid-sized business segment in the country, EBWIBR will continue to bring thought provoking and stimulating topics to its audiences of both women and men.

SAVE THE DATE on February 1, 2008, when Fran Solomon, senior vice empress of Playfair, will lead our lunchtime festivities for the Ten-Year Gala event. An inspirational teacher and irresistible motivator with a uniquely entertaining style, Solomon is an expert in the field for conducting interactive workshops and group sessions on teambuilding, creativity, recognition, and FUN. Mark your calendar now for this commemorative event. To learn more, contact Darlene Crane at (510) 886-4483, [dcrane@pcicraneconsulting.com](mailto:dcrane@pcicraneconsulting.com) or Elsie Lum at (510) 272-6426, [elsie.lum@acgov.org](mailto:elsie.lum@acgov.org).

### Deaf Hope 5th Annual Glimmer of Hope Gala

Join DeafHope as they celebrate their 5-year anniversary on February 23, 2008 with their annual gala Glimmer of Hope event. Appetizers and dinner will be served by VIP waiters and there will be live entertainment, a silent auction and raffle.

DeafHope is now in the early stages of realizing its dream to design and build a new shelter for Deaf survivors in the San Francisco Bay Area. The new facility will be a very special place with temporary living quarters and space for a host of social services within a supportive community environment designed specifically for Deaf survivors.

Proceeds will benefit both the capital campaign and day-to-day operational services.

The event will be held at the Ten15 Club, 1015 Folsom St., San Francisco, CA. To order tickets or learn more, visit [www.deaf-hope.org](http://www.deaf-hope.org).