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Teenagers for Darfur

High school student enlists Broadway's help to raise awareness and funds for Sudan

BY JOSH MAX

Violeta Picayo isn't one of the stars of the benefit for victims of Darfur, Sudan, at her school's performing arts center in Greenwich Village, and that's surprising.

The event would go on to raise \$11,000 - and with her 50-cups-of-coffee energy, high-watt smile, obvious people skills and wholesome good looks, the 15-year-old seems a natural for show business.

Instead, she's the master organizer, PR expert, cheerleading squad and the head of a team of students who have dedicated what little spare time they have to raising public awareness as well as funds for victims of the humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

Since 2003, when conflict and ethnic cleansing broke out in the region, an estimated 180,000 to 400,000 people have been killed and 2 million people have been forced from their homes.

Picayo, a 10th-grader, was so moved by reports of the situation that she collected a circle of like-minded friends from her school, the Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School.

Together with seniors Lily Wiggins and Kamillah akLaff, they gathered literature on the crisis and composed invitations to Broadway performers.

"At most theaters there is someone outside of the stage door," says Picayo. "We left packets with those people and asked them to give them to the performers."

They also contacted agents and searched the Internet Broadway Database to invite cast members to perform and raise money.

Calling the evening The Relief Concert for Darfur, in a short time the team landed performers Frenchie Davis ("Dreamgirls," "Rent," "American Idol 2"), Tshidi Manye ("The Lion King," "The Stick"), Saycon Sengbloh and others to headline the evening



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Violeta Picayo, 15, and other students at Little Red Schoolhouse organized a relief concert this week.

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of music and dance.

All proceeds from the benefit, which was held Monday, go to Oxfam International, a confederation of 13 organizations working with over 3,000 partners in more than 100 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty, suffering and injustice.

"They're helping with sanitation and getting people clean water as well as preventing malaria with insect repellent. Most importantly, they're getting the people fed," says Picayo.

It's the day of the show, and a large room at the performing arts center is abuzz with students readying a black stage, adjusting lighting, setting microphone levels and rehearsing music.

Picayo is dressed in black leggings, purple top, red belt, peace-sign ring on one finger and a bracelet reading "Hear Our Voices, Save Darfur" on a wrist.

"We're selling these bracelets for a buck each," she says. Picayo drags over two chairs to a corner, sits and answers interview questions with a poise and maturity that make it easy to forget she just started her sophomore year.

"The world said genocide couldn't happen again after the Holocaust, but it's happening in Darfur," she says. "The whole situation is complicated, and tragic. It's difficult to raise awareness because it's not a natural disaster, first of all. Technically, these people are not refugees because they're still in their own country.

"If governments let them into other countries, then they are legally bound to take care of them. So the people are stuck. They're constantly running, and they don't have anyone to protect them. The UN can't go in because they don't have the support of China and Russia, who have an interest in the oil fields there."

Picayo says her idea of holding a benefit concert didn't start with Darfur. "We have a community service round table at our school, where we raise money and give to needy people in the city," she says.

"Different cultural groups come in, a variety of people. We discuss situations and what needs to happen to help. Last year and in the beginning of this year, we had speakers come in and talk about Darfur. One student went to a rally about it in Washington, and a bunch of us decided to go, too - 10 of us, for a day. We also attended the rally in Central Park along with thousands of other people on Sept. 17 after finding out about it from Amnesty International, where one of the students is an intern."

Soon the sound of the piano in the performance space blares through the speakers, and we have to move the interview onto the stairs in the hallway outside. A moment later the class bell rings and dozens of students come stamping down the steps. The principal's office is procured, the door is closed and we sit amongst the goodie bags Picayo and her colleagues have put together as a thank-you to the performers.

"We've got some magazines, some cosmetics, jewelry, watches, CDs," she says.

"People in the school community donated the items."

She is quick to credit the many others assisting her in producing the show, saying, "I don't want it to seem like it's just me putting it together. We've all been working a lot of hours together and dealing with different aspects of the production."

Her pal Dylan Rossman, 15, says, "Violeta's very caring and she wants other people to care, too. She's not pushy about her cause. She has this personality that makes it really easy for you to listen to her. She makes you want to go out and do good things."

Picayo's older brother Javier, 19, attends NYU for educational theater, and is directing the concert. "Violeta's the perfect person to do this," he says. "She's a natural leader. She even got HSBC to donate money to rent the sound equipment."

She also has a younger brother, Emilio. When she's not organizing benefits, she says, "I'm in the chorus and the musicals. I go to a lot of Broadway shows. We're all really into that."

Picayo says her family background has influenced her desire to help others. Her mother is from Ohio and her father from Cuba.

"He came to the U.S.A. with nothing. My parents worked their way up and did what they needed to do to be successful. Dad's a photographer; Mom was his agent in the beginning. They both sit on the board of trustees at the parent association. I think as the offspring of immigrants, we're a little more encouraged to give to the community. As Americans, a lot of us don't realize what we have. I know I'm very fortunate."

Ruth Jurgensen, the school's principal, is proud of Picayo - and the many others students like her at the Greenwich Village private school.

"Violeta is a great representation of the kind of student we have here," she says.

"Very involved, active, thoughtful and citizens of the world. Her grades are excellent; she's academically in great standing. In addition to everything else she and the other students are doing, they also carry six academic courses, sports programs and life outside of school."





But for Picayo, tonight all that is on hold for Dafur.

"We are one of the most powerful nations on Earth," she says. "When we see genocide, we should do something. We know that the Sudanese can't help themselves. We're just trying to make a difference."

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