

MWAH!

Messages Which Are Hopeful...Healthy...Hard to forget...

Messages from young people on a mission.

Driven by the man in the tan super-van.

by: Oryna Schiffman



***"I wouldn't be what I am today, as a person and as an actor, without Ray and his troupe."
-Freddy Rodriquez star of HBO's "Six Feet Under"***

Last May Robert Redford passionately explained to the Hollywood Reporter how his production of "Chicagoland" will feature "people doing heroic work in neighborhoods throughout the city"... which "has a rhythm all its own."

That distinct rhythm of the hard-boiled yet humble Chicago hero beats consumingly in the heart of Ray Moffitt – social worker extraordinaire and founder of MWAH! performing arts troupe. While attempting to save the lives of teenagers from Chicago's South Side Ray survived two attempts on his own. Yet the modest, mild-mannered music lover never changed jobs – only dance styles.

Nearly forty years after a U of I professor hired him to launch the country's first police social worker program, Ray is still healing teens with hip hop, harmony and heart felt stories. Healing scars inflicted by bigotry, bullying, depression, drug addiction, divorce, abandonment and other traumas American teens of all classes and colors encounter more often than their parents may like to believe. MWAH! is

an affiliate of the highly effective Chicago Area Project (www.chicagoareaproject.org), a network of grassroots organizations promoting positive youth development through community building for over 70 years. Executive Director Thomas Ceasar Brindisi says: “Ray is exceptional at executing our mission. He actually gets young people teaching young people how to put their lives together and stay on track. “

Every Monday Ray’s tan super-van (equipped with video games, stereo and snacks) can be seen throughout Chicagoland driving troupe members to and from rehearsals at studios or training sessions at social outreach centers (which could entail seven stops and 70 miles.) The handpicked, peer-initiated thespians sing, dance and act their way into the hearts of at-risk middle and high school students every month. They perform inspirational songs by a wide range of artists (from John Lennon to Lady Gaga) as well as original compositions. They revisit teen tragedies, perform parodies of boisterous bullies and bad boyfriends, and even teach audience volunteers just enough dance moves to hop on stage for the spirit –searing finale.

Lew Stonehouse, the troupe’s sound engineer, gets the closest view of the audience. “You look at them, students and faculty, and they’re 100% into this show. If it were an adult up there they’d tune out. But it’s kids talking to kids – that’s why it works.” Teachers and principals often call Ray to report that after crying and laughing through their first MWAH! presentation, troubled students decide to seek support from their school social workers. MWAH! mission accomplished.

These days Ray no longer limits his outreach to gang members, dropouts and drug addicts. Troubled teens from all economic classes and ethnic backgrounds can find themselves in a toxic trap requiring a generous dose of down-to-earth discipline, fervent focus and sweat-soaked passion.

“No matter what’s going on at home, I know I will always have my sanctuary at MWAH!,” says 17-year-old member Rob, who’s been bullied since third grade simply for his love of dancing. Before seeing his first MWAH! presentation, Rob used to hang out smoking with relatives who are members of a prominent Puerto Rican gang in an industrial, crime-ridden Chicago suburb. Not anymore. Since auditioning, getting accepted and taking his troupe vow, the 17-year-old senior practices his “robotic hip hop” daily, determined to perfect the technique. And, he’s moved out of the town where those relatives live.

“Without MWAH! I might not be here, I really might not be here,” exhorts Sarah, who says she had begun to contemplate suicide before MWAH! came into her life. Sara just graduated high school in one of Chicagoland’s most affluent neighborhoods where she says “kids cry if they get a Range Rover instead of a BMW for graduation.” Those kids bullied and relegated her to the “nerd group” after she refused alcohol at a party. Her parents did not empathize. “They said I was just a drama queen... just going through a stage.” Unlike her school orchestra pit, which required playing classical pieces by the book, the MWAH! stage freed Sarah’s violin to “improvise,

flow and just leave it all far behind.” Since, as she puts it, her family life is “a toxic wasteland” where parents who hate each other stay together to maintain a lifestyle, Sarah considers MWAH! her true family.

Ray, whom many troupe members have called a “father figure,” feels the same way. “They’re all my kids. The kids I never had the chance to raise.” Witnessing teen self esteem burgeoning, talent blossoming and friendship enduring is Ray’s perpetual payoff. But staying in touch with alumni has yielded some bonuses: Justin Bieber’s choreographer, a “Six Feet Under” star, an award-winning music producer, last year’s “The Next Best Thing” winner, and, most recently, a Grand Ole Opry featured singer-songwriter are among a slew of success stories posted on the MWAH! website (www.mwah.net)

Although these alumni success stories do fuel the aspirations of MWAH!’s current 15 members, what really sets off sparks in their eyes is a deeply rooted sense of peace and purpose.

“After the show where I played the abused girlfriend, these girls came up to me and said: ‘You gave me the strength to break up with my boyfriend!’ I was making a difference. I had a reason to be.”

When students approach Rob after the show to share painfully protected secrets, he listens supportively, counsels diplomatically and points to himself as tangible evidence that heavy secrets can be shed and hijacked spirits liberated, through music and dance. And of course, the man in the tan super-van.

The troupe’s Second City-trained improvisation coach Richard Oberbruner was hired 13 years ago to introduce the members to spontaneous performance incorporating the audience. “The kids all tell me that Ray is MWAH! But you’ll never see him on the stage – he doesn’t like the spotlight, he doesn’t want it to be about him.”

Though the criminals who pursued Ray have long since been incarcerated, the teenagers he was able to liberate from their paralyzing grip are thriving. Some, have kids of their own who check in with current troupe members during turbulent times. Others are still dancing their way through transformed lives and passing on “that rhythm that is all its own” to the next generation of Chicagoans.

U of C sociologist Clifford Shaw, who believed community life could “solve problems faced by young people and their families”, created the Chicago Area Project. Ray Moffitt has been proving professor Shaw’s theory for over 40 years now, in precisely the space “Chicagoland” is setting out to explore – that unique and intimate space where “politics and policy meet real people’s lives.”

