

Students prepare for trip to Tanzania

By Tania Chatila, Staff Writer

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Show helps those with AIDS



PHOTOS BY MIKE MULLEN / CORRESPONDENT
Cheyanne Reynosa, center, and Julian Hinjosa, 11, left of Cheyanne, sing "I Want to be a Rocket" as students from the Creative Planet School of the Arts of Baldwin Park perform Saturday during "Malaika: A Safari of Hope" at the Baldwin Park Performing Center of the Arts.

BALDWIN PARK - It was a performance with all the elements of a Broadway musical - plus a touch of Tanzanian flare.

Students from the Creative Planet School of the Arts culminated a two-day showing of "Malaika: A safari of hope," this weekend in preparation for a two-week excursion to Tanzania to help AIDS patients and AIDS orphans.

"It was phenomenal, it was so amazing," said Santo Ragno, director of development at the Baldwin Park-based K-8 school. "Everyone enjoyed it. The performance was really moving."

For nearly four years, Creative Planet has been partnering with the Phil Simon Clinic at Pasadena's Huntington Memorial Hospital to assist AIDS and HIV-infected patients in Tanzania.

Tanzania is east-African country with 40 million people. About 9 percent of Tanzania's people have HIV or AIDS, according to information from the Central Intelligence Agency.

At Creative Planet, the school's students use their artistic abilities to raise money for the clinic, which regularly sends teams of doctors, nurses and social workers to Tanzania.

This year, the school decided to send a contingency of students along with the health care team.

"I think it's just the idea of finally meeting the people who they've helped for so many years," said Billy Rugh, Creative Planet's artistic director. "They will get to grasp and see, even though it seems small here in America, what we're doing is global."

A group of between six-and-nine students ranging 10-to-18 years old will be leaving on Feb. 7 for the two week excursion to the city of Arusha.

"It's going to be an amazing experience," said 12-year-old Sascha Rios. "I'm looking forward to sharing my experiences with them. We are very (much) the same, they are just struggling with AIDS."

Since the start of the school year, administrators at Creative Planet have been integrating Tanzanian history into its academic curriculum.

Students have been taught how to speak Swahili, an important language in Sub-Saharan Africa, and have learned about Tanzanian culture and etiquette.

Students have also been hosting fundraisers to prepare for the trip, which will cost about \$60,000. Friday and Saturday's performances of "Malaika," - which means little child or angel in Swahili - attracted crowds of about 700 people, Rugh said.



Students from the Creative Planet School of the Arts of Baldwin Park perform during "Malaika: A Safari of Hope."

The musical followed a young American boy on his journey to Tanzania to help a mother whose child dies from AIDS.

"Through the process of getting closer and closer to getting (to Tanzania), I feel like my life has changed so much," said Rios, of Montebello. "I feel like when I get back, I'm just going to be this whole beautiful person."

While in Tanzania, Rugh said students will be working eight-to-10 hours a day, lecturing in local schools about HIV and AIDS, setting up an arts-education program for more than 200 AIDS orphans and translating for doctors treating patients.

The trip will be videotaped as part of a documentary, Rugh said.

Once the students get back, Rugh said he hopes they will have a better appreciation for the lives they live in America.

"I think," he said, "an iPod will definitely seem less significant to them."

tania.chatila@sgvn.com