

TOWN NEWS Extra

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SUNDAY
JANUARY 11, 1998
SECTION
H

BEST BETS:

BERLIN — A free ice-fishing class will be held Friday at Middle School. Details, Page H2

PLAINVILLE — Black Brick Studio and Gallery continues Saturday with folk music and more. Details, Page H2

An Angel With A Smile, And A Mission

The filing cabinets bulge at the seams. The top of the desk is dominated by more stacks of paper, work. And a map and compass would come in handy to help a visitor find the single-windowed office tucked into the corner of a building in the Stowe Village housing complex.

But Angel Arce can't help but smile, because this is where he wants to be.

"When they brought me in, it was one of the happiest days of my life," he said. "I want to be here morning, noon and night."

DREAMERS & DOERS STEVEN GOODE

"Here" is working as a youth services coordinator for the Hartford Housing Authority. Arce organizes computer classes, field trips, programs for dropouts and athletic and recreational programs, including Junior Olympics, drill teams and boxing for youths living in the city's public housing developments.

"That's the best thing about this job," said Arce, who grew up in Stowe Village. "Dealing with kids in all the projects."

Arce, 37, had spent most of his adult life working around the country as a machinist. While working as a company in Manchester, he decided he had seen enough crime activity and teen pregnancies in his old neighborhood.

"Too many babies were having babies," he said.

Arce felt that if he could find something they would be interested in, he could get youngsters off the streets and counsel them about the negative influences surrounding them.

"Something had to be done. It hurt me to see the kids destroying their lives," he said.

So Arce went to the Hartford Housing Authority. The Authority had been unsuccessfully looking for someone to start up and run a computer lab. Arce agreed to become volunteer director. Computers would be bought with funds from Weed and Seed, a federal program that works to weed out crime and seed the community with positive programs.

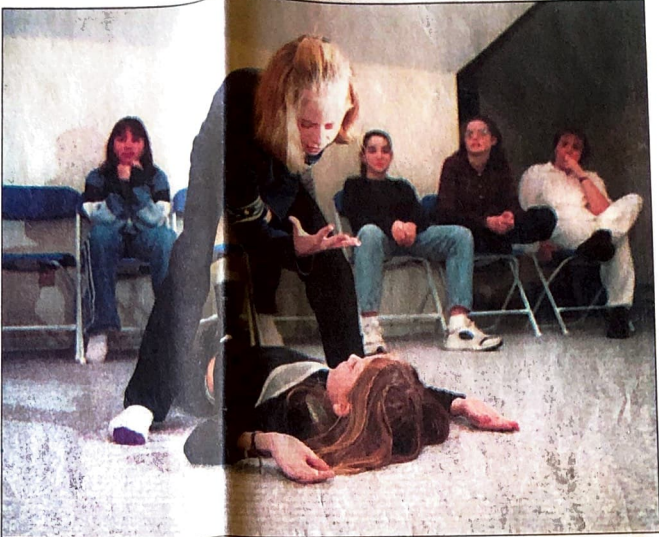
"I couldn't believe it when they said yes," Arce said.

He spent about 1½ years running the lab after finishing his 6 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. shift at the machine shop. He often kept the lab open until 11 p.m.

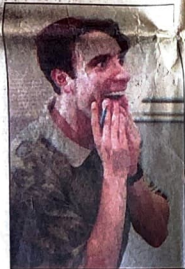
"The love I got from the kids kept me there," said Arce, who estimates that about 100 youngsters used the lab regularly in that time.

He also began working as a recruiter and community organizer for Plain Talk/Hablando Claro, an adolescent pregnancy prevention program at Stowe. Arce eventually left the program because he disagreed with the group's policy of supplying birth-control devices.

Arce said he keeps in touch with



REHEARSING A SCENE from "You're A Good Boy, Charlie Brown," Kathleen Mazza as Lucy looms large over Breanna Murphy in an acting class at the Farmington Valley YMCA in Simsbury. Watching from the sidelines are, left to right, Rachel Lazarus, Tal Dvoretzky, Amber Guyette and Amy Oblinger. The girls are all from Simsbury. Below, instructor Michael Lamb, 30, of Farmington, inspires his charges to express themselves.



It's Fun To Act At The YMCA

Organization Begins National Drive To Bring Acting Into Mainstream For Young People

STORY BY PAUL H. JOHNSON
THE HARTFORD COURANT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK RAYCRAFT
SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

It's serious work teaching young people to act.

There's the shaking and wiggling to relax youthful bodies, reciting tongue twisters like "Peter Piper" to practice diction and yelling "Zip, Zap, Zop!" in military precision to perfect focus.

Still, being in an acting class isn't all education and recitation.

"You can act insane without going to a mental hospital," says student Kathleen Mazza, 11, who says the classes divert her energies from her old hobby — torturing her little brother.

Kathleen, of Simsbury, is one of 10 students taking part in acting classes that started this fall at the Farmington Valley YMCA in Simsbury. Organizers say that while there is no shortage of soccer matches, basketball games and basketball scrimmages for sports-oriented people, there are few outlets for people who want to act.

"There are a lot of kids who have talents that are not being used," says Brian Liss, organizer of performing arts efforts for the Farmington Valley YMCA.

Only one class is in session now, but the Farmington Valley YMCA hopes to start 14 classes this month to all age groups. Michael Lamb, who teaches the Farmington Valley class, says he wants to put on a production of the musical "Pippin" starting this month.

The move toward performing arts is part of a statewide effort to provide performing arts education to young people around the state and, ultimately, around the nation.

The YMCA sees itself becoming the largest performing arts program in the nation, filling the void for restless kids who otherwise would be at home watching television. The youth organization made a similar commitment to child care in the 1970s and is now the largest provider of child care in the nation.

YMCA officials say Already, several YMCA's in the

Hartford region have arts programs up and running. The oldest is in Plainville, which started 12 years ago.

"We look at this as a growth thing for the '90s," says Hartford Regional YMCA spokesman Tom Reynolds.

Lamb, a 30-year-old Long Island native who lives in Farmington, started teaching a few months ago. A graduate of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, he lived in New York City after college pursuing a career in acting. He worked often in regional theaters around the country.

Lamb started performing when he was 8, when he joined a professional boys' choir on Long Island.

"Some kids had sports. I had music and theater," he recalls.

But the life of an actor can be rough, and Lamb tired of the endless cycle of auditions, performances and unemployment. So Lamb got more and more interested in teaching acting, remembering how important his instructors had been when he was young.

"I think some of the most positive people in my life are people who invested in me as teachers."

With a sharp wit and endless energy, Lamb wants to turn his young charges into professionals.

"I'm really trying to train them as artists," Lamb explains.

His 10 students are all girls, between the ages of 9 and 13, who meet twice a week for an hour and a half. They are hyperactive, energetic youths — in other words, they're natural actors.

When Lamb asks his students if they want to go over their parts again, all hands jump up and down in agreement. Everybody needs their moment.

"I love acting and singing. Write that down," Kristina Gordon, 11, of Simsbury, orders a reporter.

"I like expressing my feelings. And it's fun. Write that down," Kristina adds. She also points out that there are other actors in her family, that her grandmother has a pink airplane and, oh yeah, TV actor Ryder Strong is really good-looking.

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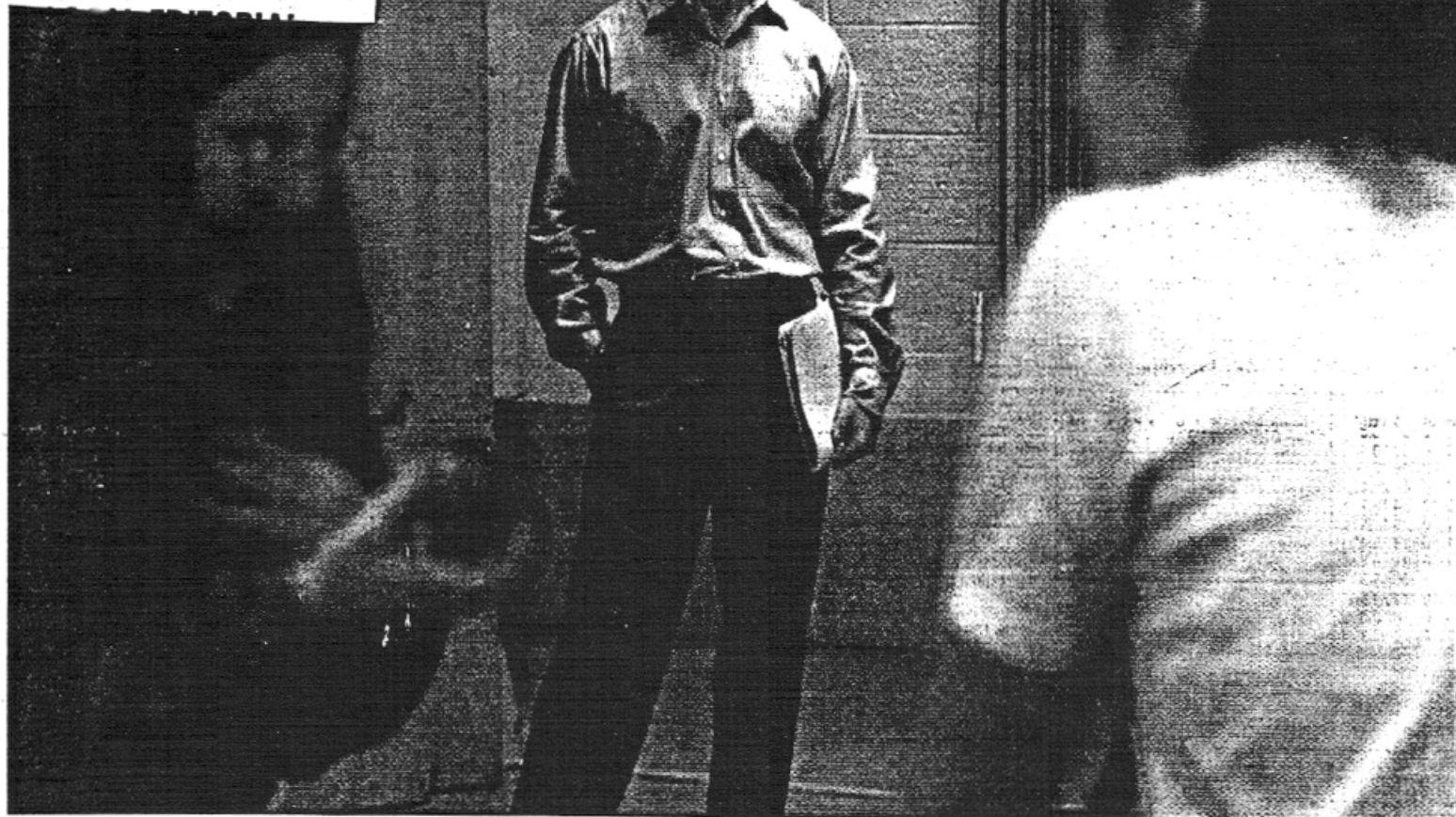
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WETHERSFIELD

Students learn about improvisational acting and build confidence through acting coach Michael Lamb's classes offered through the town's recreation and parks department. **This page**



JOANNE HOYOUNG LEE / SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

ACTING COACH Michael Lamb watches as students Alissa Kingston, 13, left, and Christine Zacchei, 11, both of Wethersfield, perform a skit during a recent class sponsored by the town's recreation and parks department.

ACTING UP IS ENCOURAGED

Improvising Builds Confidence For Students

By **ANGIE CHUANG**
Courant Staff Writer

WETHERSFIELD — The acting class is in full swing. The 12 middle school students deliver their lines with passion, float through outer space and sometimes collapse onto the floor in a tragic death.

The one thing they're not doing is reading from a script. They're making it all up.

Former professional actor Michael Lamb, who contracted his services to the town's recreation and parks department for the first time this fall, teaches the students to act through improvisation.

The technique builds confidence and creates a foundation from which students can learn more tra-

ditional scene acting, Lamb said.

During a recent class, 13-year-old Alissa Kingston and five of her classmates were frozen in position, waiting for Lamb's description of a scene they must improvise.

"You're in ... a space shuttle!" Lamb called out. "Now, work with each other. Create a character."

WETHERSFIELD

The students immediately start to float around, as if in orbit. Alissa made up her lines.

"I am sooo sick of you guys. I can't believe I came out here in space," she cried out, exasperated. "You're driving me crazy!"

Lamb nodded in approval. It's cer-

tainly a believable lament for an astronaut.

"I want them to feel that they're in a safe environment," Lamb said. "The improvisation leads to scene work. That's how it works in the professional theater. A lot of plays get written through improvisation."

A new session of recreation department classes begins next week. Lamb said he expects increased attendance in the classes, which this winter will include several levels of acting and a musical theater class. Many of his 30 students from second through 12th grade are split into classes specific to grade levels. Most will return for the next level, which will include more acting from scripts.

Lamb's East Hartford-based business, Performing Arts Programs,

provides similar programs in Avon, East Granby, Farmington, Suffield and East Hartford.

His students, who have a wide range of acting experience before they come into the class, say they appreciate his fun, confidence-building approach.

"He lets you be yourself," said 12-year-old Andrea Winiarski.

Hannah Bonaiuto, 12, said that when she first started the class eight weeks ago, she kept to herself. On Wednesday, Hannah literally was jumping out of her seat every time Lamb asked for volunteers to act out scenes or to demonstrate exercises.

"You learn not to be embarrassed, because if you are, the audience can tell and it won't be fun," Hannah said.

Suffield Parks & Recreation Now Has "Performing Arts Program"

by Joan Lussier
News Editor

Suffield: We often watch children at play and chuckle and smile at their antics, but have you ever **really** listened to their emulation of life?

Children, in all of their innocence of life, pattern their play by their family life, television shows, or even movies they have seen.

They can be funny, dramatic, and serious, but have you ever wondered what hidden talents these children might develop if there was a place or avenue of expression where they could develop these talents?

There is a new program being offered by the Suffield Parks and Recreation Department, where children can turn their love of play into a love of acting.

The program, Performing Arts Program, is offering acting classes at Suffield High School for children in grades four through six, from 6:15-7:15 p.m.

Limited to only 15 students per class. Some of the things that will be covered are theater skills, concentration exercises, improvisational games, terminology, sense memory, subtext, basic mime work, enhancing flexibility, stage confidence, the imagined "where," basic voice and speech work, acting in the moment, stage skills, character work, and scene work.

While the Performing Arts Program is designed to create a comfortable, fun, and safe environment to develop an individual's creativity, it is also a professional, progressive curriculum designed for all skill levels.

Performing Arts Program Director Michael Lamb said, "I have always liked young people and developing acting skills helps to build self-confidence and self-esteem while relating to one another helps the young people to be comfortable with one another and can be a very positive experience."

The program, while it helps to develop skills, is

a progressive, professional curriculum, which is very specific for active training.

Michael Lamb's qualifications include his performing professionally when he was eight years-old with the Singing Boys of Long Island. As he got older, his interest grew into the study of theater.

He studied acting and directing with Clay Stevenson (Hartford Stage Youth Theater) and was a first-year graduate of the Greater Hartford Academy of Performing Arts. He later studied Musical Theater at Carnegie Mellon University.

Since college, Michael has lived in New York City and has worked all over the U.S. as a professional performer and director.

Michael has been involved in local classes throughout the area for over one year where his classes have been well received in communities such as East Granby, Avon, Farmington, and East Hartford.

"This is a new venture for Suffield," said Michael, adding, "I am very excited about the prospect of having additional classes in the area."

Cindy Fisher, Supervisor of the Suffield Parks and Recreation Department, said, "This is the first time offering a program like this. The response has been very good and it is positive to know that we can offer a program that is both different for residents and that may meet the needs of different interests of the population."

This four-week session that began on September 24th will end October 15th. A second session will begin October 22nd and end November 12th.

For more information, call the Suffield Parks and Recreation Department at 668-3862 or for information on other programs available, contact Michael Lamb at 860-282-7441.

Inspiring Lesson For Aspiring Thespians

By PAUL H. JOHNSON
 Courant Staff Writer

After Quanisha Wathington finished singing a reserved rendition of "Tomorrow" from the Broadway musical "Annie," Sherry Boone asked what would make her happy.

"A trip to Disney World," said Wathington, 9, from East Hartford, breaking into a broad smile.

"OK, have it in your mind, I'm going to Disney World tomorrow," Boone said. She then asked Wathington to sing "Tomorrow" again. This time, Wathington's voice filled the room at the East Hartford Cultural Center, and everyone cheered.

Boone is a rising star on Broadway. Next month, she will sing the lead role during

matinee performances in the much talked about musical of the season, "Marie Christine," a show that takes the age-old tale of Medea and transports it to 1890s New Orleans. Boone substitutes for the three-time Tony award-winning actress Audra McDonald, who is starring in "Marie Christine."

Boone came to the Hartford area Monday at the request of Michael Lamb, who runs the Greater Hartford Performing Arts Collective, a group of people ages 8 to 18 who are serious about the theater and learning to master their craft. The students meet once a month at the East Hartford Cultural Center in downtown East Hartford to perform for each other in a master-class setting and learn what it takes to be a star.

"I'm very admiring of Michael and the work he does," Boone said during a break. "When he wanted me to be part of it, I was on the next train."

Lamb teaches students from Simsbury to East Hartford how to sing and act. He organized the Performing Arts Collective this year, taking his top students from throughout the area and giving them a little extra attention.

Many already have performed in professional theater in the area, including the Connecticut Opera and Hartford Stage.

"We both made different choices," said Lamb, who attended Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh with Boone. "I'm the educational guy."

GO TO D5

Not Your Usual Song And Dance

FROM PAGE D1

His students are young people like Wathington, who will appear in Hartford Stage's production of "A Christmas Carol." She will play a schoolboy, and she said she doesn't mind switching genders for the role.

"It doesn't really matter," she said. "If you're going to act, you have to take risks."

Boone, for one, was impressed by the confidence of the aspiring actors.

"It's very humbling," she said. When she was their age, "I didn't go in front of a group of people. They have more guts than I could think of having."

Boone, 32, broke into Broadway in early 1992, when she earned a small role in "Jelly's Last Jam." This led to roles in "Les Misérables" and "Phantom of the Opera." She currently stars in the Broadway production of "Ragtime."

A native of Norfolk, Va., the singer now lives in Manhattan and has started her own opera company.



BRAD CLIFF

STAGE STAR SHERRY BOONE, visiting with students at the Greater Hartford Performing Arts Collective Monday evening, sang two songs.

Boone said her role as Marie Christine was a breakthrough.

"I think it's the most cutting-edge musical," she said, adding that it is rare that a black woman has a lead role in a musical.

"I could only find that before in opera," she said. "I feel lucky and blessed." She will play the lead during Wednesday, Friday and Saturday matinees. The show opens in December.

When she performs, Boone said she plays make-believe and starts thinking like her character. "I try to put myself

in that situation and pretend."

A recent feature story in The New York Times described Boone as a welcome contrast to McDonald's performance: "They're both Marie Christine, but both are individualists. With Sherry there is a stage vulnerability about her. Sometimes she scares you, sometimes she's vulnerable as a bird."

Boone told the young trainees assembled Monday night that going for a career on the stage is no easy choice; it is a choice they should make only because of a love for the theater.

"The only thing that keeps me going is because I truly love to sing," Boone said. "I have the power to create."

She sang two songs for the crowd, "Think of Me" from "Phantom of the Opera" and "I Dream A Dream" from "Les Misérables."

"She was cool," said Sara Manganello of East Hartford. "She has a great voice. She can really project."

GLASTONBURY

Young actors getting great start

By STEVE SMITH
Staff Writer

Within minutes of meeting the 20 kindergarten through second grade aged children who came to her acting class, Kimberly West had their complete attention.

"It's just me," said West, but it was obvious that she has studied and has much experience with children.

"You can't say words that hurt your ears or heart," said West, as she explained some basic rules to the children. Later, she explained that those words let a child know that they are loved, and how to love.

West operates on the philosophy that children have to have four needs met before they can be creative, be expressive, or to learn. "They need to know that they are physically safe, that they are accepted," said West. "They need to know that they have expectations, and that they are loved."

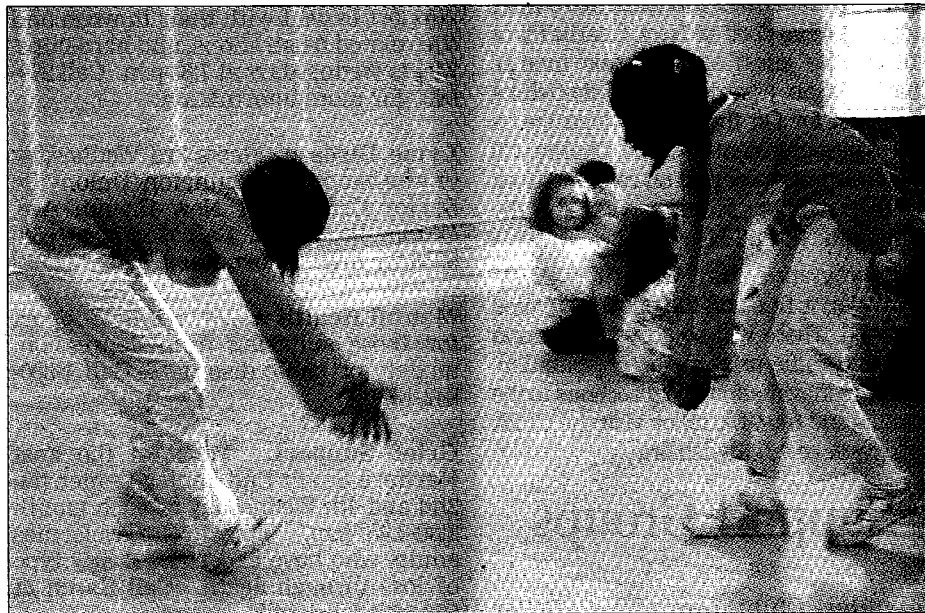
West, who works through Performing Arts Programs, a talent development and performing arts education program, said that at the first class of the seven-week course, offered by the Glastonbury Parks and Rec. Department, she hopes to have tapped into two of the four.

Children were asked to sit in a circle, and take part in exercises to warm up their voices, bodies, and imaginations. By getting the children to scream as loud as they could, then pretending to receive a phone call from her mother in Georgia who supposedly heard them, West showed an example of how she wins the children over with humor and encouragement. She then asked the children to perform the same exercise as quietly as possible, and each one complied promptly and fully.

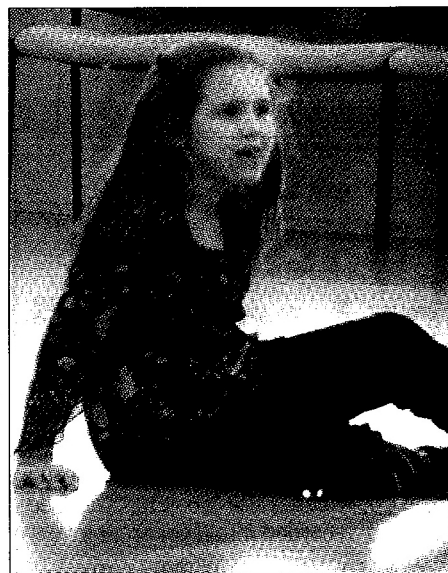
West said she tries to incorporate things she wishes children would learn in school, but don't. "Sequencing, following directions, prediction," she said.

"They will understand what it means to be a character, and what it means to use their body."

The young actors will learn how to react to visual and verbal clues, and understand that stories have beginnings, middles and ends, said West. They will also get an introduction to



Twins Jade and Jayda carry a very heavy invisible box that contains imaginary friend "Fred." Photos by Steve Smith.



Elaina energetically takes part in warm up activities.

said it usually involves her narrating a story, and the actors going to rehearsed locations and remembering body movements and expressions.

West said she hopes children come away from the course being able to speak more clearly and better interact in group settings.

The grades K-8 children are divided into are groups, and West said the older ones are introduced to sets, props, and costumes, and learn the differences be-



Carter sits cross-legged and gives his full attention to his teacher.

"Whether you're Robert De Niro, or whoever you are, you have to pretend. We have fancier words for it, we call it suspension of disbelief. It's pretending that this random person is your mom."

West has numerous stage, film and TV credits, and worked for 13 years in the Alliance Theatre Education Department in Atlanta. She has also worked with the Hartford Stage Education Department. Parks officials said they were impressed with the way she relates to

Performing arts is offered again in Middlebury

BY DANIEL D'AMBROSIO
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

MIDDLEBURY —

Michael Lamb started his business, Performing Arts Programs Inc., nearly a decade ago with the goal of making children feel good about being creative, whether that meant singing, dancing or acting.

During the week of Aug. 14, Lamb's instructors will return to Middlebury for the second year to run a performing arts camp for children ages 7 to 12. The children will spend the week honing their acting, dancing and singing skills in anticipation of putting on a 20-minute show at the end of the week for friends and family.

Lamb himself might even pop in for a visit.

"I always tell parents, 'I'm the luckiest guy in the world,'" Lamb said Thursday. "I get to make children feel good about themselves and validate their creativity. We have kids who are Broadway-bound, and we have the staff to work with them, but it's really about feeling good about being creative."

The camp costs \$180 for residents or \$190 for non-residents. Performing Arts leases the space for the camp, which will be held in the Shepardson Community Building, from the town.

Lamb said he believes everyone has a creative side, but adults are often reluctant to tap into it. Children, on the other hand, are generally more open to giving their creative side a chance to break free. Hence his company's catch phrase — "Unleash your creativity."

Middlebury Recreation Director Carole Cipriano said Lamb has a good reputation around the state, and that his program was "very well received" in its inaugural run last year.

"It's a very worthwhile program for children who are not into sports, an alter-

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CAROLE CIPRIANO,
MIDDLEBURY RECRE-
ATION DIRECTOR

native for kids not going to the flag football or basketball camps we offer," said Cipriano.

Performing Arts Programs, founded in South Windsor, operates year-round, visiting some 80 towns around the state.

"We come to town and we do acting classes, dance classes and performing arts camps," said Lamb.

The camps typically register between 30 and 50 children, according to Lamb.

Even though it is a for-profit business, Lamb said his company has a "nonprofit spirit." But Lamb decided early on he didn't want to rely on the grants that nonprofits need to keep going.

"The grant money is just not there," said Lamb. "There are so many people fighting for it."

Lamb began his performing career at 8 years old, when he was asked to join the Singing Boys of Long Island, a professional singing group patterned after the Vennena Boy's Choir. Lamb toured with the group for five years before his family moved to Connecticut.

After high school, where he continued to sing, Lamb majored in acting at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Performing Arts.