



Dwight  
**"Lewis"**  
 Local Editorial

## Summer is just one season for boosting youngsters who need it

### They were simply fantastic.

In fact, their performance felt as if it were taking place in a theater on Broadway or at the famous Apollo Theater in Harlem.

They were indeed Puttin' on the Ritz, and they did it to the tunes of Hello Dolly, Mr. Bojangles, Singin' in the Rain and I Like To Be in America.

And they danced and sang to The March of The Siamese Children, Do-Re-Mi, Your Arms Too Short To Box With God, then closed the 45-minute presentation with such patriotic songs as Yankee Doodle Joy, Anchors Aweigh, The Caisson Song and America the Beautiful.

Oh, what a performance, and everybody who showed up at the Rose Park Middle School auditorium in the Edgehill area Thursday night seemed to have loved it. I know they did. You could tell it by how they stood and cheered and clapped.

But what's so fascinating is that most of these performers were youngsters in the third grade through high school.

"They're very energetic and want to share what they've learned this summer," Stan Weber, president of Salama Urban Ministries, a community-based ministry that serves as a spiritual, educational and social support system to families in Nashville's urban area and surrounding communities, said as the performance was about to get under way.

The youngsters participating in the performance at Rose Park Thursday night were part of Salama's Summer of Champions program. The program, which started some 15 years ago, also offers children experiences that help make them better prepared for the upcoming academic year.

And I must admit that I was not aware of Salama's summer program nor its school-year program until this past May when I received a telephone call from a friend inviting me to dinner one Friday night downtown and a performance of Guys and Dolls at the Ryman Auditorium.

The performance was produced by the Salama performing arts program.

"We haven't been seeking a lot of publicity because we didn't want to do PR at the expense of the dignity of the people we are serving," Weber said. "But we're doing this because we wanted to create some opportunities in the community.

"We want to train and equip young people in the context of the family. Participants in our programs must pay 25% of the tuition for the program, and then we raise the other money through contributions."

He added that with youngsters paying some of their way, "they, as well as their parents or guardians, will hopefully take more responsibility at succeeding in the program."

...caring,  
 diligent,  
 truthful,  
 teachable.

It seems to be working.

But for those youngsters who cannot afford to pay anything, like \$125 for the summer program, they will not be turned away, Alice Weber, director of children's ministry for Salama, said.

As I sat in a room at Christ Presbyterian Church on Thursday afternoon watching a graduation program for a group of youngsters in one of Salama's summer programs, I listened as teacher JoEllen Thatcher read words of blessing and hope to student Armeshia Bunch.

"Armeshia, here are some of the characteristics I see in you: fun-loving, risk-taking, honest, caring, diligent, truthful, teachable.

"God didn't put these qualities in you by accident. He has a plan for you."

The scene, not the same words, was repeated to other students participating in the program, and I couldn't help but think how wonderful it is to have positive things said about you.

"I have a heart for these kids," said Shannon Presha, 24, director of youth ministries for Salama. "I see a lot of myself in them. In the communities from which most of them come, there is a lot of untapped talent, and I feel my call is to help them to see their goal and future.

"Some do but don't know the steps to take to make them real."

Salama's programs involve youngsters from different walks of life. While many come from homes with incomes below the poverty level and one-parent households, others come from two-parent families.

"Some kids have experienced drug abuse by one or both parents," Presha said, "and some are in foster-home situations. And then some of them have been confronted by drugs and violence in the community. And others have no hope and function in a very basic survival level, meaning they want to know where will the next meal come from.

"This program is a vision and hope for the future."

Presha said Salama attempts to teach the youngsters that "my present circumstances do not necessarily dictate my future."

"If people aren't investing in Salama, they're missing out," Stan Weber told me.

From what I've seen, he's absolutely correct. And I would urge others to make an investment in Salama Urban Ministries or find a way to do some of the same things with other youngsters who need help along the way.

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to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his