



Sheila Bankston (center) performs in "Voices of the Armory." She's flanked by her kids, Isaiah and Bleshonda

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'Armory' gives voice to Slope shelter residents

By Deirdre McDonnell
for Brooklyn Paper Publications

Members of the audience had no idea that some of the words read by Sheila Bankston at Saturday's play reading were in fact her very own.

Bankston, a former homeless woman, told her story in Meltdown Inc.'s production of "Voices of the Armory," presented at New York Methodist Hospital.

The dramatic play conveys true stories about some of the women who have resided in the Park Slope Armory Women's Shelter and also addresses past and recent controversies and concerns from the neighboring community.

Sheila was one of a dozen women who sat on stage reading stories that involved drugs, alcohol, child and spousal abuse, prostitution and homelessness. The play also explores hopes and dreams and solutions to the problems of the homeless.

The audience was never told whether the "actress" telling the story is a resident of the women's shelter or a member of the Meltdown volunteer troupe. In fact, they were a combination of both groups.

Sitting in the front row of that audience were two well-behaved youngsters who have heard the stories many times.

Nine-year-old Isaiah Bankston lovingly took care of his three-year-old sister, Bleshonda, as they listened for about two hours to the stories unfolding. Bankston is brutally honest about her story and proud of her accomplishments.

She admits that her troubles stem from her past drug and alcohol abuse.

And she knows that although she has made a remarkable improvement in the quality of her life, there is a long road

ahead before she can call her story a success.

Bankston found herself in the shelter three separate times from 1987 to 1993. Her children were taken away and put in foster care. She had hit bottom and knew it was up to her to change her life.

"I was in a total state of isolation when Bronwin [Rucker] and her group entered my life. And boy was I stubborn at first. I resisted as hard as I could," Rucker, a certified social worker, is artistic director of Meltdown.

Curiosity took over the resistance and slowly Bankston started to participate in the Meltdown "Voices of the Armory" group sessions held at the shelter.

"I couldn't believe that these people were actually here for me. I had a shoulder to lean on. I would go to Bronwin whenever I had the urge to hurt myself. She's like a family member to me and my children," explained Bankston.

She also credits the Bay Ridge Christian Center for helping her dig out from under.

"They came all the way to the shelter and took me to church. There I found spirituality," she said. "I was down on my luck and they treated me as an equal. I meant something to them."

First and foremost in Bankston's "road to recovery" was getting reunited with her children. She says she visited them regularly when they were in foster care, but wanted to provide a real home for them. That dream was fulfilled in 1993 when, through the help of the social workers and Rucker, she moved into her own apartment just days before she was to get Isaiah back in her care.

"I'll never forget how nervous and excited Sheila was before Isaiah arrived. She

was like a little child waiting for Christmas to arrive," Rucker said.

Bleshonda was returned to the family a few months later following seven months of foster care. Bankston and other youngsters continue to attend regular counseling sessions through Family Prevention. Isaiah, whose favorite subject is math, says he's a "so so" student, but enjoys attending school. Bleshonda, who knows her address and telephone number and how to spell her name, will soon attend a Head Start program.

Bankston remains on welfare, but is toying with the idea of attending college. Her long-term plans include writing and working as a teen counselor.

"I never knew I had such potential until I met people like Bronwin and her husband [Rick Russo]," she said.

Rucker admitted that Bankston and the children have been a "source of strength to me."

"On some levels, Sheila keeps me going," Rucker said. "There's really a positive strength in both directions. We help each other."

"Voices of the Armory" was written and produced by Rucker, who along with social worker Laura Metallo have conducted the weekly empowerment and advocacy group at the shelter since October 1993.

Due to changes in the administration of the shelter, Meltdown is no longer holding the meetings. Saturday's reading was presented by Meltdown's Master Program and the Grace Dew Anti-Violence Action Project in cooperation with Women Against Violence Everywhere.

Meltdown is a not-for-profit organization which is funded by part of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.