



On Campus

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"Chalkward"? Not quite

by Lily Lewis-McNeil

No one was quite sure what to expect of "Chalk The Musical." Would it be a cheesy "High School Musical" replica that had everyone half-cringing/half-laughing? Would it be a classic Broadway-type musical, with flashing lights and kick-lines? Would it be unexpectedly forward and expose every dirty detail of classroom life in high school? The correct answer: none of the above. "Chalk"'s songs range in style from rap to country to latin to indie rock to gospel, and it's topics from extra credit to "the system" in which our schools run. The show appeals to both students and teachers, and it was clear who was sitting where in the audience by where the laughs were coming from. Still, no matter what age, everyone was pleased to follow "Chalk"'s main character, Eric Stahl (played by math teacher Dennis Klem) through his hilarious yet heartbreaking first year of teaching.

Since "Chalk" was written by our own science teachers Zach Snow and Todd Nocera (with help from senior Jeff Lebovici and co-author Elia Chesnoff, a former teacher and friend of Snow), there were many references to Newton North-related issues. Right off the bat, the audience saw a mysterious white material falling from the ceiling, a stopped clock, and the ever familiar "Carol didn't wear her safety goggles. Now she doesn't need them." poster.

But following the performances, most people had one question: just how much of this musical is really based on truth? Are Mr. Stahl's experiences only loosely based on experiences of Snow or Nocera? Were characters based on people right here in Newton North? We certainly all want to know more about the "Cell Rap," in which Stahl dresses up in a baggy sweatshirt, lots of bling, and even does the robot.

"Most of the ideas for the storyline came from things that either happened to me or my co-writer, Elia Chesnoff," says Snow. He said that while some of the events in the musical did really occur, many of them were embellished or completely fictional. For example, "the Cell Rap is a somewhat exaggerated representation of the sorts of things I did in my first year of teaching that I thought were creative... and fell flat on their faces."

As for the wacky and relatable characters in "Chalk," Snow said that many of them were based on real people. Anne, a calm, spiritual psychology teacher who teaches Eric deep-breathing techniques, "is a pretty clear combination of my mother and my psychology teacher in high school." Hal, a slightly jaded math teacher who helps Eric find a balance in his teaching is "based a little on how I've become, to a certain extent," says Snow. Much of Hal was based on Chesnoff's mentor/teacher who used to start and end all of his advice session with "Do what you want..." and preached the idea of each teacher having to find his or her own way. Snow also mentioned that Hal closely resembles Todd Nocera. While directing Matt Ford, who played Hal, Snow says he was having trouble describing exactly what he wanted from the character. "Finally, I said, 'I'm not gonna beat around the bush...like Nocera.' And he got it right away. A light bulb went on."

Snow said that one of the most important messages of "Chalk" is that of balance. Eric Stahl's story is a common one in first year teachers. "I see this as the kind of potential evolution of most teachers. They come in idealistic, but... the logistics of classroom management is difficult the first couple of years." Snow said that many teachers end up with the attitude of, "Forget it. When I care, it's just too painful." He said teachers can end up becoming strict and seemingly inconsiderate to protect themselves, and that's what he was trying to portray in Eric.

Of course, Snow knows how this feels. He said some important moments of his early teaching experience at Attleborough High School had to be left out of "Chalk." "Some of that still hurts a little too much to bring up. And some of it's too vulgar to include," he added.

So where is "Chalk" going next? According to Snow, scenes from the musical will be performed at up-coming professional development days ("Like when teachers all...You know, the early release days"). The cast is currently working on the original cast recording, and the live video recording is being edited. For more information on "Chalk"'s progress, visit www.chalkthemusical.com

Apparently, "another semi-autobiographical musical" is in the works for Snow. "I'm working on it. Nocera is onboard, too. And I think it's gonna be better than 'Chalk.' You can quote me on that." "Chalk" is certainly going to be a lot to live up to.

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