

Student performance group addresses diversity issues

By Steve Waldhauser '70

While task forces and committees deliberate to develop plans for enhancing diversity at Gustavus, students often find more direct ways to achieve that goal. The student-led "I Am . . . We Are" Theatre Company is not only one of the most diverse groups on campus but also one that has found a way to effectively address respect for other cultures and colors and different viewpoints using scenarios and language that particularly resonate with other students.

"I Am . . . We Are" has been featured at the College's annual "Building Bridges" diversity conference every year since the conference was first organized. In addition, the group now leads the "E Pluribus Gustavus" community awareness session scheduled as part of First Year Orientation each fall, presenting black-out skits, improvisation, and story-telling to facilitate discussion of racism, sexism, homophobia, alcohol and drug abuse, verbal abuse, and physical violence. It also has been invited to develop presentations for regional conferences and for a number of other campus programs, including Safe Zone training, "Take Back the Night," and Disability Awareness Week. Some company members are theatre majors, but others represent a wide range of majors across the campus—all have been drawn to the potential of performance to work for social justice.

The company has its roots in a theatre-in-education (TIE) course taught during January Term 1995 by Vanita Vactor, who was in residence during the 1994–95 academic year on a Joyce Dissertation Fellowship. The course used techniques developed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Bertold Brecht's *alienation*, and South African theatre for development—techniques that encourage audience members to participate and feel em-

The current "I Am . . . We Are" company (Fall 2004): Josh Boertje (junior), Adryane Calloway (first-year), Nick Dillenburg (senior), Tura Foster (junior), Andrew Howard (sophomore), Matt McGlennen (senior), Neo Moroka (junior), Olivia Roque (junior), lighting technician Erik Ruser (junior), Kaitlin Schaefer (senior), Emily Siedschlag (junior), Carla Smith (sophomore), Dee Thao (junior), Phanat Vang (junior), and Marie Williams (junior).



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powered by the performances—to address issues of race, gender, and class. Course participants created a production called *Theatre for Diversity*, and as part of the theatrical presentation (which came to be titled *Voices of Diversity*), they collaborated with Professor Mark Braun's media production class to create the multi-media portions of the production. The project was widely viewed and acclaimed by the College community and earned its participants a Magnuson Student Leadership Award in 1995.

Following the TIE production of *Voices of Diversity*, another group of students approached Vactor with an idea for developing a similar program that would promote diversity, social justice, and healthy lifestyles to high school audiences. As her dissertation research and writing responsibilities prevented her from assisting in their efforts, Vactor recommended that the students work with Mariangela Maguire, associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies. Under Maguire's direction, the students organized an independent study project for January Term of 1996, and the Conundrum Performance Company was created. The company's production, *Worth Fighting For*, was presented at a number of area high schools. Conundrum too earned a Magnuson Award for its contributions to the campus community.

Vactor, who was offered a three-quarter-time teaching position in the education and theatre departments for 1995–96, was instrumental in creating the next incarnation. “I Am . . . We Are” evolved from her 1996 spring semester theatre course, which used the techniques explored in her TIE course to create a production addressing the issue of date rape. Former Special Assistant to the President for Diversity Denise Iverson-Payne, who had initiated a diversity awareness session for First Year Orientation titled “E Pluribus GAC” when she joined the College's administration in 1991, recognized the potential of Vactor's students and training. She teamed with Vactor to develop a company that might assume responsibility for a wider-scale “E Pluribus Gustavus” performance during orientation. In succeeding years, Iverson-Payne provided a home and support for the group in the Diversity Center.

The “E Pluribus Gustavus” show has become “one of the most effective ways Gustavus students are ever addressed on subjects such as hate speech, stereotyping, and sexual assault,” according to Amy Seham, associate professor of theatre, who took on leadership and mentoring responsibilities for the company when she joined the faculty in 1997. Seham explains, “The students use improvisation, writing, and story-telling to develop material based on their own lives and experiences (with additional research when needed). The show is always created afresh with each new group, and is thus a project that the entire troupe feels connected to and passionate about. This process creates shows that resonate with students, and are clearly heartfelt and genuine, making the shows more valuable than any pre-scripted show could be. Issues of social justice are always front and center.”

Raj Sethuraju took over Iverson-Payne's coordinating role with the performing company when he arrived at Gustavus as diversity director in 2001. The group has continued with joint Diversity Center and theatre department sponsorship. “I Am . . . We Are” has also continued in the tradition of its predecessors, winning Magnuson Awards in both 1998 and 2001 for its contributions to the campus community. 



The pioneering Conundrum company in 1996—front row, from left: **Zahilya Austin '99**, **Ken Feer '96**, and **Cortney Carlson '99**; middle row: **Eric Wolfram '96**, **Slade Thompson '97**, and **Rhonda Pruitt '96**; back row: **Michael Strong '98**, **Erin Johnson Turner '97**, and **Kara Buckner Peterson '97**. Missing from the photo is **Shantea Snider '99**.

