

MAST ACADEMY

THE SILVER SCREEN

AN ASPIRING FILMMAKER FROM COCONUT GROVE WHO WROTE A SCRIPT EXPLORING RACE, CLASS AND SEXUALITY WILL SOON SEE HER WORK ON THE BIG SCREEN.

BY TERESSA DALPE
For The Miami Herald

Whitney Peters is a fan of photography, making short films and would like to one day be a part of Florida State University's film program.

But Peters isn't waiting to get on the big screen. Thanks to a national contest, the 18-year-old MAST Academy senior is collaborating with a Hollywood director to make her first film — with an expected audience in the millions. No big deal, she says. "I didn't think I was good at this stuff — writing I mean," Peters, a Coconut Grove resident, said of her story.

Peters' script *Inevitable* recently won Scenarios USA's "What's the Real Deal?" contest, enabling her and two other winners to each collaborate with famous directors to produce their own short film, which will be screened in classrooms in 44 states, at film festivals and on the Web.

Scenarios USA is a non-profit dedicated to teaching teenagers about relationships, teen pregnancy and other

issues that affect them through films written by their peers. Their annual contest asks young people 12 to 22 to write from the heart about these issues. Peters' script, about a biracial, lesbian couple, did just that.

"Whitney had a very unique story to tell," said Maura Minsky, co-founder of Scenarios USA. "She was telling a story with nuances and complexity that we had never seen before. It deals with sexuality crossed with race, crossed with class. Whitney's story is a centerpiece at that intersection," Minsky said.

According to Brenda Nieborsky, associate director for Scenarios USA, Peters' story stood out in particular because of her sophisticated style in bringing up issues that "young people have a hard time articulating."

In the script, the couple must come to terms with their families and communities and also with the predetermined ideas each has of the other's race. The characters learn to "express themselves outside



TEEN ISSUES: Whitney Peters of Coconut Grove, won Scenarios USA's 'What's the Real Deal?', a national script contest. Peters, 18, has been paired up with Hollywood film director Jesse Peretz to collaborate on her script about sexuality, race and class.

MAURA MINSKY
FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

the path they're expected to follow," said Peters.

Nieborsky said that Peters' story intertwined issues such as contemporary views of homosexuality, comparisons of bigotry against gays with what happened during the civil rights movement, and the enduring teenage struggle over whether to "pursue what makes you happy or to fall in line and behave the way you're supposed to," Nieborsky said.

Originally just another assignment for Meghan Hauptli's Television Production class, Peters was unimpressed

with the prospect of writing for the contest and initially attempted to write something "as dramatic as possible."

However, Peters became passionate as she strove to "expand" her story from run-of-the-mill themes that everyone else was writing about.

"Whitney's script was impressive, because she truly has her finger on the pulse of the teenage consciousness," Hauptli said. "Whitney is good at seeing the big picture and asking difficult questions — she isn't afraid to take creative risks."

Peters, whose film will be

screened at a red carpet New York City event in May, has begun to work with director Jesse Peretz.

Peters said that in the script she tries "not to box my characters into caricatures." She shied away from reducing Haley and Veronica, her main characters, into one-dimensional black and white stereotypes.

"Society assumes you to be a certain way," Peters said. "Like if you're black you like rap music and you talk a certain way and if not you have to hang out with the white kids — there's no in between. This is about breaking out of that."

In the story, Veronica and Haley each have preconceived notions about each other's race and class. For example, Haley, who is black, assumes that Veronica, who is white, comes from a well-off family. Veronica, though, is of lower middle class and lives in her brother's house — essentially raising herself. Haley, who is considered upper middle class, is shocked when she sees how Veronica lives.

Peters hopes the movie expands teens' perspectives.

"I hope this film opens kids' minds from the very narrow point of view that schools and parents sometimes force upon them," she said.

LITTLE HAVANA

Nonprofits need help to fight child abuse

■ A network of nonprofit and community outreach programs aims to create public interest and involvement in its cause with an input session set for tonight.

BY DAVID SMILEY
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A network of outreach programs, donors and agencies in Little Havana wants to tap the community to help improve its services and extend its outreach.

The Little Havana Community Partnership brings together about 50 service providers and other groups to

TO LEARN MORE

- **What:** Little Havana Community Partnership neighborhood meeting
- **When:** 6 p.m.
- **Where:** 858 W. Flagler St.

help prevent child abuse and neglect by strengthening families and their communities.

To increase interest and gauge its programs' effectiveness, the partnership will hold

a community input session at 6 tonight at 858 W. Flagler St.

Often, many who need services don't know they exist or are afraid to ask for help, said Darna Guardia, member of the partnership's steering committee and team manager of the Miami-Dade Community Action Agency.

"A big part of the whole model is to engage the community to help families who are at risk," Guardia said.

The partnership wants to recruit residents as the group's eyes and ears, or even as informal case workers in their communities.

Those volunteers, called

Natural Helpers, will receive training in a Miami-Dade program to spot early signs of neglect or abuse and work with the providers serving their neighborhoods. The partnership will then send the helpers — many of whom have received help in the past — to work with different groups, Guardia said.

Rosa E. Pizzi, executive director of the social services agency Abriendo Puertas, or "Opening Doors," said Natural Helpers are instrumental in how her agency spreads its message.

Abriendo Puertas has trained Natural Helpers for

years.

The partnership, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Children's Trust, also promotes communication between members to ensure services aren't duplicated and to improve them, Guardia said.

Pizzi said the partnership has brought the area's different community programs together and has helped create services that are more comprehensive and more convenient to the community.

"Now we know who does what well," Pizzi said.

"We don't have clients that fall through the cracks anymore."