

Arts & Entertainment

WF Graduate Siko Appears In TV's 'Law & Order: SVU'

By SUSAN M. DOUGHERTY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD — Allison Siko had reason to celebrate on Saturday, January 13: it was her 19th birthday.

But this 2006 Westfield High School (WHS) graduate has a host of other reasons to celebrate.

One of 16 select students in her class/troupe at Rutgers University's Mason Gross's Bachelor of Fine Arts program, she is a working actor.

One of her most recognizable roles is as Kathleen Stabler on the TV show, "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit." "Kathleen is a middle child," Allison explained of her role on the popular prime-time program.

The character of Kathleen is sarcastic, and verbally jabs at her father who is divorcing her mother. Allison, who admits she is not sarcastic by nature, explained, "Getting to hop into a character's shoes can be great fun."

She praises fellow actor Chris Meloni, who is her stage father in the nine episodes of "Law and Order: SVU" she has done since 2002.

"He's been great through the years playing my father. He is quite the joker and keeps things moving," she said.

The only child of Joseph and Cheryl Siko of Westfield, Allison distinguished herself years ago at the Paper Mill Playhouse's Summer Conservatory. That, according to Mrs. Siko, served her daughter well.

"The training there was phenomenal," Mrs. Siko shared in a telephone interview with *The Westfield Leader* and *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*. At Paper Mill, Allison performed in the main stage productions of *Carousel* and *Gypsy*.

In 2004, when her 16th birthday came around, Allison appeared in the movie, *Speak*, which premiered at the famed Sundance Film Festival.

"My mom asked me if I wanted a Sweet Sixteen [party] or if I wanted to go to Sundance," Allison said.

She chose the latter. While at WHS, Allison starred in a number of productions, including *My Sister Eileen*, *A Junkyard Christmas Carol*, *Plain and Fancy*, *Evita* and *Pirates of Penzance*.

Although she has taken voice lessons for more than seven years consistently, she has zeroed in on a particular love in the theater. "Acting is

FW Library Pledges

To Feature More Arts

FANWOOD — The Fanwood Memorial Library will introduce a new series of arts programming during the winter and spring months in keeping with a pledge to bring more arts to the community.

In collaboration with the Friends of the Library, the library will host a series of music, movies and lectures. January brought film-video archivist Russell Scholl, who presented a brief history showcasing the pioneering work of black actors and filmmakers from the first half of the 20th Century.

On February 4 at 2 p.m., the library will have a presentation of *Paul Robeson Through his Words and Music*, featuring Derrick McQueen as Paul Robeson and written by Gayle Stahlhuth.

The program is an intertwining of two dozen songs sung by Robeson ("The House I Live In," "Of Man River,") with a narrative of his life as actor, singer, activist and humanitarian.

To hear more about these and other programs soon to come, call Library Director Dan Weiss at (908) 322-6400, or Carol Campbell, the president of the Friends of the Fanwood Memorial Library.



Allison Siko

what I love. It's turning into my life," she said.

It's not easy to juggle a schedule of going to college full time and being in TV and movies, but Allison says her professors are working actors themselves, "so they understand when I have to miss a class."

Since "Law and Order: SVU" is filmed in North Bergen in a sound studio or on the streets of New York City, it's convenient for her to "hop on

a train and get to the city for a shoot."

The energetic blonde continues her voice lessons, takes a vocal class at Mason Gross and a class of movement for actors, but feels she has a definite passion for acting.

"I love being on a set," she said. "Oh, there's nothing like being in front of a live audience — no canned laughter or canned applause can rival the real thing — but right now, I'm enjoying it all."

The Crucible Opens Feb. 2 At CDC Community Theatre

CRANFORD — What do the Salem Witch Trials have to do with contemporary society? The Cranford Dramatic Club (CDC) Community Theatre invites the public to judge for itself when *The Crucible* opens its three-week run on Friday, February 2.

Arthur Miller's 1953 classic play is seen by many as more of a commentary on "McCarthyism" than the actual Salem trials. "McCarthyism" was the name given to a movement led by Senator Joe McCarthy and his House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950s.

This movement involved the hunting down and exposing of people suspected of having Communist sympathies or connections. Using the historical subject of the Salem trials, Miller's play presents an allegory for events that occurred not just in the 1950s, but that also can be related to contemporary events throughout today's America and the world.

In the play, the accusing girl becomes 17-year-old Abigail Williams, the niece of the Reverend Parris (portrayed by Kevin Kessler) and the former employee of John Proctor and his wife, Elizabeth.

Abigail (Dana Vigliotti) has been dismissed by Elizabeth Proctor (Tracey Randinelli) after her affair with John Proctor (Chris Gibbs) is discovered. As events unfold, Abigail, in an effort to reconcile with her former lover and gain revenge on his wife, Elizabeth, spins a web of accusations of witchcraft that envelops numerous members of the community, including the Proctors' servant Mary Warren (Corinne Chandler), and neighbor Rebecca Nurse (Jean Dembaugh).

Other main characters who are caught up in the story are Betty (Lucy Bacque), Tituba (Zhenia Bemko), Rev. Hale (Rick Brown), Francis Nurse (John Duryee), Yom Putnam (Thom Korner), Giles Corey (Bob Pells), Sara Good (Becky Randazzo) and Ann

Putnam (Jacqueline Schreiber).

The Crucible will be directed by Sandi Pells and Michael Marcus, produced by Judi Chandler and performed on Friday and Saturday evenings at 8 p.m. from February 2 to 17. Tickets are \$15 for adults, with senior discounts available.

A special student discounted price of \$10 is being offered in recognition of the fact that *The Crucible* is studied in many high-school curriculums.

In addition, a complementary reception with refreshments is offered on opening night, February 2, with a chance to meet the cast. Tickets are sold on a reserved-seat basis, and can be obtained by calling the box office at (908) 276-7611 or through cdctheatre.org. The CDC Community Theatre is located at 78 Winans Avenue in Cranford, off of Centennial Avenue near exit 136 of the Garden State Parkway.

WSO Performs in Program To Highlight Jewish Rescue

WESTFIELD — Moral courage in the face of unimaginable evil will be the theme at Carnegie Hall's Isaac Stern Auditorium on February 5 at 8 p.m., where internationally acclaimed conductor David Wroe will lead the Westfield Symphony Orchestra (WSO) in a varied program that will give special attention to the rescue of the Bulgarian Jewish community during the Holocaust.

Bulgaria's Jewish population of 50,000 was saved as a result of incredible acts of courage by Bulgarian civic and church leaders, in addition to a widespread response from people, who refused to capitulate to Nazi genocide, and ultimately, by King Boris III himself.

The program, entitled "PARTNERS OF HOPE: Honoring Bravery and Humanitarianism: Stories of Rescue during the Holocaust," will feature the WSO, as well as acclaimed Israeli singer/musician David Broza and actress/singer Eleanor Reissa, along with rising Bulgarian star soprano Anna Veleva (annaveleva.com) in a program of symphonic works, Israeli songs, dramatic readings, and popular opera arias.

As well as Mozart's Symphony No. 40, the WSO, under Music Director Mr. Wroe, will perform Robert Cohen's new composition "Of Eternity Considered as a Closed System." This will be the world premiere of Cohen's musical dramatization of the poetry of World War II Veteran and Jewish-American poet Hyam Plutzik (hyamplutzikpoetry.com), who wrote extensively about anti-Semitism and

By LINDA B. CONDRILLO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

MOUNTAINSIDE — When was the last time your child came home from school and told you he beat a teacher at his own game? In fact, nothing would make the Deerfield School's sixth grade science teacher and chess club advisor happier.

Milan Smikovec, better known as "Mr. Smik" to his students in the Mountainside school district, has held court over the chess club for the past decade, and this year has attracted an impressive 112 members.

That's more than 15 percent of the entire student body that meets once or twice a week to play a game that doesn't include anything remotely resembling a hand-held controller. The amazing resurgence of the interest in chess is a puzzle in itself; but according to Mr. Smik, it was something that was simply "waiting to bloom."

Mr. Smik told *The Westfield Leader* and *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*: "My goal is for everyone to beat me, because that makes me happy." Noting the chess club was a "personal issue" with him, Mr. Smik remarked that chess helps "keep the kids off the streets and out of trouble."

As an expert who learned to play chess at the age of eight just by watching the older kids on the playground at the Hawkins Street School in New-

Taught by her father at around the age of eight, Mrs. Isaacs attributes the young interest in chess to her. Mrs. Isaacs noted, "The younger kids are enthusiastic about learning. They're still at a point where they like going to school, and so are much more willing to take chances and try new things."

The youngsters are taught by sitting around the floor with a giant chessboard with oversized foam playing pieces. Explaining the moves with diagrams, cards and handouts, it doesn't take long before the children get the hang of it and are eager to play. The younger set meets for 45 minutes once a week. Mrs. Isaacs noted, "It's really fun to watch the kids while they're thinking. We've also received a lot of positive feedback from the parents."

And while the game of chess has been around for centuries, essentially unchanged, it isn't immune from going high tech. A school that prides itself on state of the art technology (computers are virtually in every classroom) has installed Chessmaster, a popular software program onto the laptops in Mr. Smik's room.

He noted, "since there aren't enough chessboards to accommodate all the players right now, or when we have an odd number of players, the kids are welcome to go on the com-



THE THINKER...Sixth grader Austin Bregman ponders a strategy before making his move during chess club at the Deerfield Middle School in Mountainside.

puter for a quick game. Plus, they like a challenge and want to play at different levels."

Mrs. Isaacs added, "It also has a very good tutorial." Mr. Smik noted, if there are members of the community who have spare chessboards they would like to donate, email him at msmikovec@mountainsideschools.org.

Deerfield chessmen meet twice a week, and until recently, the club was limited to grades 6 through 8. This year, Mr. Smik decided to open the club to fifth graders, with the provision that their grades don't slip—which isn't likely to happen, as some educators believe playing chess can actually help improve academic success.

Mrs. Isaacs noted, "Chess, like math, requires problem solving. Critical thinking, recognition of patterns, and concentration are all components of playing chess."

Opening up the club to fifth graders was a lucky break for Dennis Sobol, who enjoys the practice between tournaments. With an official public rating of 1385, he took first place for his grade in the K-12 competition last November, which was sponsored by the New Jersey State Chess Federation.

Dennis is a member of the Wizards of the Mind Chess Club, where Mark Schwartzman taught him. In a telephone interview with *The Leader/Times*, Mr. Schwartzman said, "Dennis is a great example for other kids. Dedication and hard work (are) what stand out, and that is what Dennis is all about." Wizards of the Mind, which is located in Springfield, teaches exclusively to kids on eight different levels of chess and meets on Wednesday evenings and all day Saturdays. Check them out at wizardsofthemind.com.

Dennis told the newspaper he thinks chess is "fun," and remarked, "I like to think about different tactics and ways to win, sort of like a war; and it also helps you with your memory and your thinking."

Fellow club member Rachel Hendrzak was taught to play by her father, just like Mrs. Isaacs also at around the age of eight. When *The Leader/Times* asked Miss Hendrzak what she liked most about the game, the sixth grader paused for a few moments and then answered, "You learn something every time you lose a game."

Rachel also remarked she especially likes to play against Mrs. Smik because when she does, she "learns his moves." And what does it take to be a good chess player? Rachel told the newspaper, "They should have a good memory, and also be the kind of person who thinks about their moves before they act."

Perhaps Benjamin Franklin summed it up best when he said, "Life is a kind of chess, with struggle, competition, good and ill events."

If only our schools were smart enough to add chess to the curriculum.

Keith Hertell to Chair Westfield Symphony Gala

WESTFIELD — Longstanding Westfield resident and Westfield Symphony Orchestra (WSO) supporter Keith Hertell will again chair the WSO's major fundraising gala.

This year's gala, *East meets West*, will have an oriental theme, reflecting WSO's season focus on "Orientalism" in Western classical music.

The evening will include a cocktail reception, gourmet dinner and dancing to a 10-piece band. A highlight of the evening will be the live auction, conducted by charity auctioneer and New Jersey Assemblyman Jon Bramnick (LD-21), which will focus on travel and vacation opportunities and offer multiple getaways to exotic locations throughout the world.

Silent Auction Chair Linda Frame has put together a silent auction of items donated by more than 70 local retailers, restaurants and businesses together. "I am overwhelmed by the generosity of the local community," Mrs. Frame said. "The continued support and goodwill of the local businesses has significantly contributed to the success of the WSO over the years."

The silent auction will run throughout the evening, which will culminate in the drawing of three winners for the cash raffle. Raffle tickets may be purchased at the WSO office.

Invitations will be mailed to WSO subscribers and supporters, but attendance, which is capped at 250 due to space constraints, is open to the public and invitations may be obtained on a first-come first-served basis by calling the WSO office at (908) 232-9400.



Keith Hertell and Linda Frame

CDC Community Theatre presents

The Crucible

by Arthur Miller

FRIDAYS
February 2, 9, 16
8 pm

SATURDAYS
February 3, 10, 17
8 pm

TICKETS
\$15 Adults
\$10 Students
Senior Discount Available

FREE Opening Night Reception!

Presented by special arrangement with
Dramatists Play Service, Inc.

Reserve Now
908.276.7611

CDC COMMUNITY THEATRE
78 Winans Avenue Cranford, N.J. 07016
www.cdctheatre.org

PIANO LESSONS ALL AGES

Our program inspires excitement, creativity, and virtuosity.

You will find our experienced teachers that motivate, who can teach many styles of music, and utilize technology seamlessly with learning.

Nowhere else will you get a professionally mastered CD of your music simply by taking lessons at the studio.

The performing opportunities at the studio are fun, encouraging, and invite success.

Our adult student program takes great care of adults who want to pick up the piano again, and makes the brand new student feel comfortable and inspired.

Academic Year Lessons and Summer Session: call any time for availability.

Paul Nazzaro Music Studio
Piano Lessons and Music Technology

137 Saint Paul Street, Westfield
www.NazzaroMusic.com 908-232-3310