

Acting Out

Independent Actors Theatre Brings Edgy Entertainment To Columbia



Ashley Hicks struggled not to shake in the bathroom of El Rancho. The 20-year-old blonde actress fought to give herself a pep talk, to simply sit still. A glance at the director's notes and a prayer helped. At least the workers at El Rancho had been cool during dress rehearsals. This certainly differed from a standard staging area, and a bar differed from any standard stage. The other day El Rancho people gave her weird looks because her red bra was showing and make-up covered her face.

Taking a deep breath, Hicks faced the chill February air and charged into Eastside Tavern, located next door on Broadway, and became "Leona," a hysterical woman grieving over her gay brother's death day. The bar was dead silent, its string of blue lights illuminating posters of Quentin Tarantino movies, an "X-Files" pinball machine and a wall of action figures. Pullout chairs crowded one corner, though the audience was spread

throughout the whole bar. Ben Friesen, 26, stood at the bar playing bartender "Monk" and pouring iced tea and water from liquor bottles.

"You ... *mother!*" she yelled, approaching the bar that this night would be "Monk's Place" rather than Eastside. "I was talking to you from the stove and you weren't there. Three hours I spent shopping for and preparing a memorial dinner while you watched TV."

Thus began the recent Columbia performance of Tennessee Williams' 1967 risqué play "*Confessional*," produced only a few times since its initial run. The play throws around words that can't be printed in this magazine and holds back nothing. It explores the "sadness and sickness" of the gay scene and features a simulated sex act twice in one of the bar's booths.

Yet underneath the mature surface is a play rich with depth as characters explore their darker sides in emotional, candlelit

Directors of the Independent Actors Theatre, Columbia's newest theater company (from left): Brett Johnson, Shawna Kelty, Ross Taylor and Charles Willis III

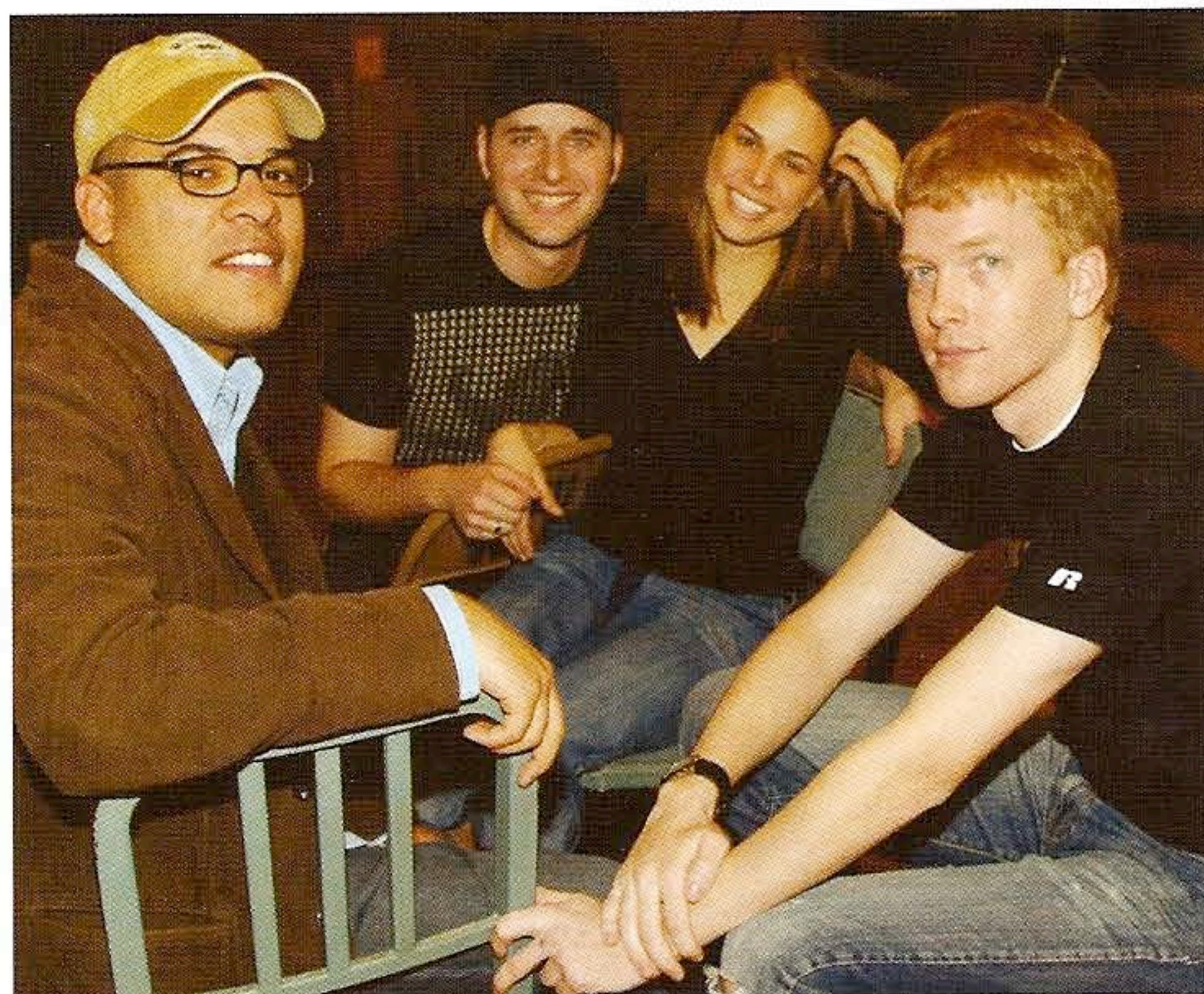


confessions reminiscent of a Dostoevsky novel. Director Brett Johnson made brilliant use of sound in the February production — one character strummed a guitar atop a table, others tapped and breathed to offer texture — and somehow eked emotion from the Evanescence song “*My Immortal*” when Leona sauntered up to the Touchtunes jukebox.

“Your heart can’t vomit the memories of your lifetime,” she declared early on in the play.

A New Brand Of Theater

“*Confessional*” marked the third and strongest performance from the Independent Actors Theatre, a new nonprofit company formed in August 2007 by Ross Taylor, Shawna Kelty and Charles Willis. They brought 26-year-old Johnson on board as a fourth director of education in September. The group aims to deliver mature theater to Columbia, although scripts are not chosen for shock value alone. The directors all worked with



the University of Missouri’s Theatre Department for years, ranging in age from undergraduate Taylor’s 23 years to Kelty’s 36.

IA Theatre’s first two performances succeeded on their own terms, yet never quite put the company on the map. The group produced “*The Blue Room*” — directed by Willis and starring Taylor and Kelty — in November at Shattered and the one-man, David Sedaris-penned “*Santaland Diaries*” at Cherry Street Artisan and Ragtag Cinemacafé in six December performances.

The latter started to attract community attention and drew around 50 people each time except on one heavy snow day. Willis calls “*Santaland Diaries*” a blockbuster that exceeded all expectations, but its director Taylor is more cynical.

“It was a pretty intentional moneymaker,” says the restless redheaded actor, referring to Sedaris’ popularity, the tamer venue and the appeal to Christmas spirit.

Taylor says he loves the control he has with IA Theatre but he isn't satisfied with the pond he's in or the reality that MU's Theatre Department fails to push him anymore. He wishes IA Theatre had better venues and dreams of moving to New York and eventually matching up with Johnny Depp and Jack Nicholson, actors he once idolized as a high school student in Jefferson City.

MU professor David Crespy has worked with all four directors and is quick to praise each of them, particularly Taylor. What the company offers, he says, is the next step for actors beyond college theater.

A Sentimental Education

"You're going to create a moment with the object," Johnson says to 15 actors as he paces MU's McKee Gym. His command is casually natural and the tsunami waves lining his red shirt fit the lesson's meditative nature. "You don't have to explain — you come up, do it, and then you



Get biking. Get walking.
Get more out of life.



leave.”

The students, which include Kelty and Taylor as well as “*Confessional*” veterans Hicks and Friesen, pick everything from floor mats to Mountain Dew bottles and create psychophysical moments. Taylor, for instance, throws a pink paper airplane into the corner.

So far they’ve skipped, punched the air, and most importantly attained a feeling of ease as they learn about physical acting and Chekhov’s “four brothers”: ease, form, beauty and a sense of the whole.

This is IA Theatre’s eight-week Stanislavski Master class, which meets every Sunday from 1 to 2 p.m. Taylor teaches the company’s other class, which focuses on improvisation. Teachers are the only ones IA Theatre currently pays.

“This is not an intellectual activity!” Johnson shouts. “How can I become one with the object?”

Establishing A Presence

“From a personal standpoint, I’ve been very proud of this,” Johnson says to the other three directors as the song “*Desperado*” floats across the Heidelberg along with the sounds of rattling dishes and laughter. “It’s something I needed as an artist that the department didn’t provide, and I don’t think we stepped on any toes.”

It’s a week after “*Confessional*” and the four directors meet over burgers and salads at the Heidelberg, officially

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welcoming Johnson as the fourth director and Friesen as the new coordinator of public relations. The soft lights and cheerful tone belie the gray rain outside. They’re discussing their next show slated for May,

“*Orange Flower Water*,” and new expansions such as podcasts and philanthropy. Johnson and Friesen want to reach colleges and actors beyond MU and find a better system of checks and balances for directors to ensure quality performances. Ultimately “*Confessional*” dominates the talk.

“Our ticket sales for ‘*Confessional*’ were over \$1,100,” Kelty reports. “Three hundred-some for expenses.”

“Nice margin,” Willis says with a smile.

Classes are also working out well so far and showing signs of a broader community presence. Taylor mentions a daughter and father who came to his first class.

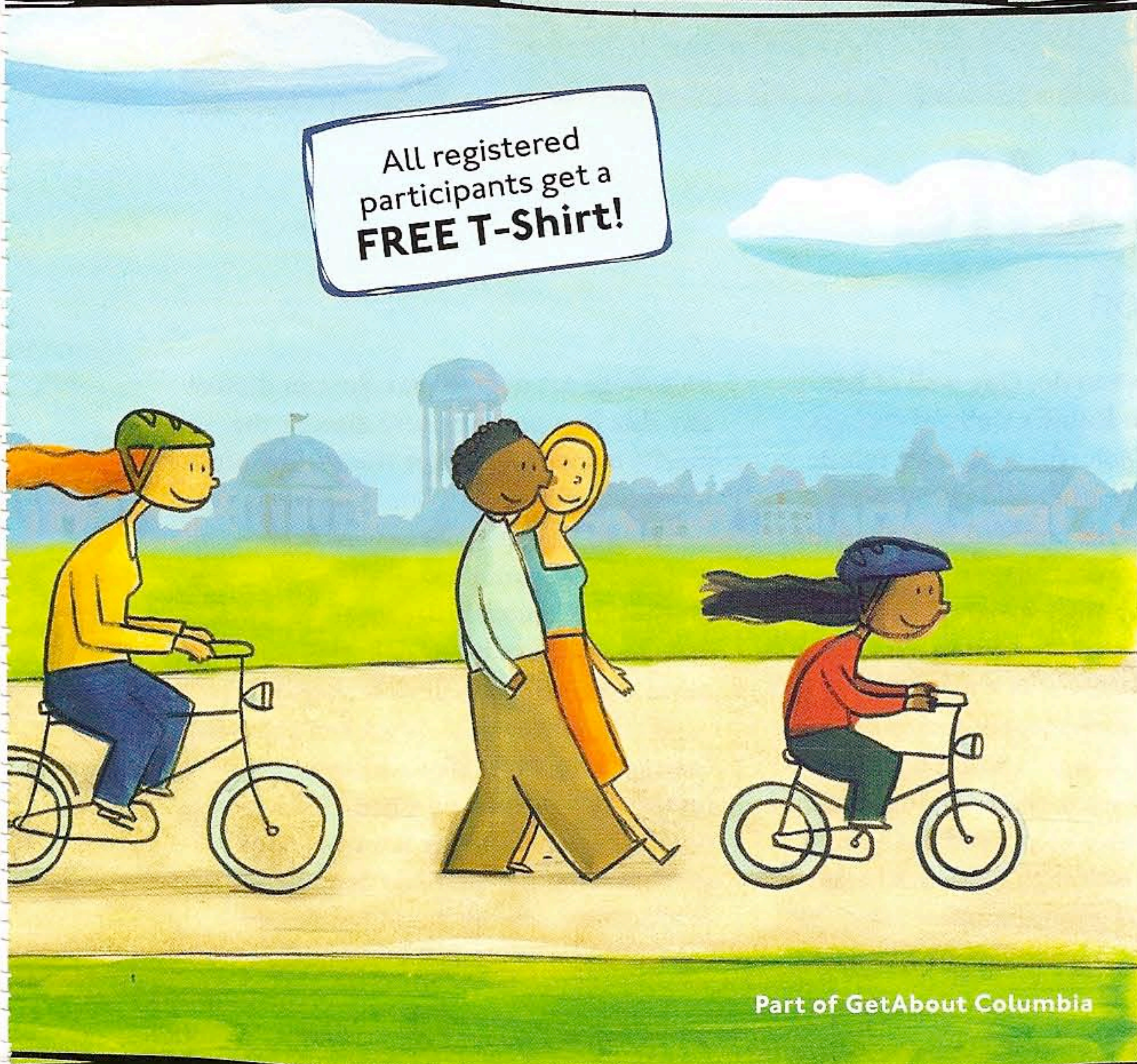
“He’s 50 and looking to start something new,” Taylor says.

The future is their focus. They hope to expand the board of directors and continue the company after they leave Columbia in a few years. They have \$2,100 total now and already imagine next season, increasing to five or six shows and potentially even paying people.

“It’s time ... because the interest is there,” Johnson declares. “Let’s make the most of it.” ■

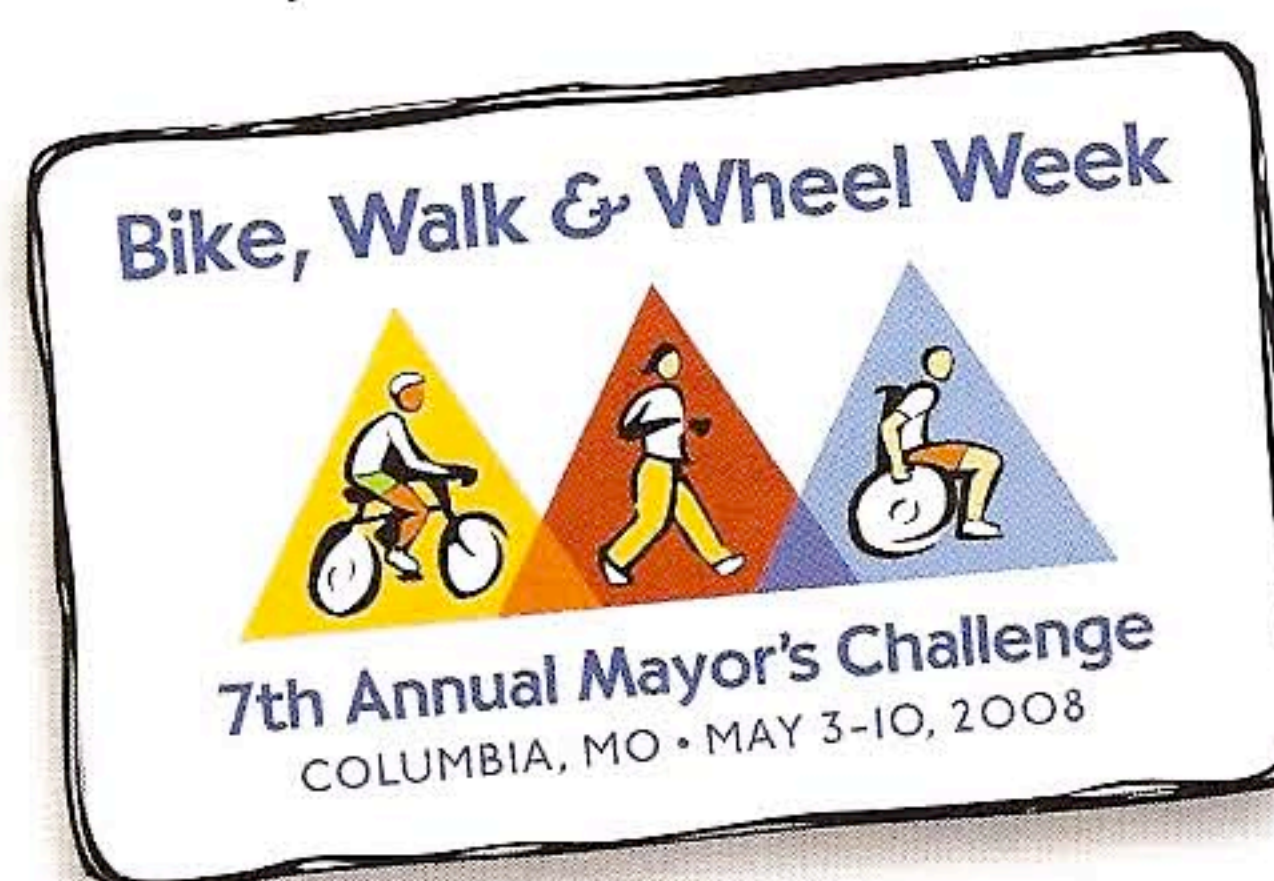
Photos By L.G. Patterson

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