

It's colorful theater - & confidence-builder for Queens high school girls

Clem Richardson

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Farriella for NewsDeepa Purohit (l.), Catherine Jhung (c.) and Nancy Kim of the Queens-based Rising Circle Theater Collective.

As you read this, 30 Queens high school girls of Asian and South Asian descent are spending their winter school break at Queens Theatre in the Park.

Organizers hope it is a life-changing

experience.

The girls, all from Queens area schools, are in day three of the four-day Q Up program, a first-time offering by the Queens-based Rising Circle Theater Collective that uses performing arts to help young women build self-awareness and confidence.

"A key part of what we think is a huge leadership skill is telling your story," said **Deepa Purohit**, 39, teaching artist in the program and Rising Circle's artistic director. Her husband, **Sanjit De Silva**, is co-artistic director.

"If I can say it out loud, even if I go into politics or into medicine or anywhere, as long as I can say my story out loud then I am going to be a leader," she said.

That newfound confidence will hopefully be on display tomorrow night when the students, many of whom have never participated in theater, perform pieces they created during the program in front of their families and friends.

Of the many hands in the bowl from which Q Up sprang, none was more prominent than that of **Nancy Kim**, a Korean-American artist whose one-woman show, "How To



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"Find My Inner Asian," provides both the idea and inspiration for it.

The play is Kim's take on a variety of issues affecting Asian women. She got the idea several years ago after she discovered several self-help books targeting Asian-Americans that she found hilarious.

"One was called 'Dating Asian: A Guide to How to Find Asians and Date them,'" Kim said.

"I wanted to do a show that kinda made fun of these books," Kim said.

"I mentioned that to some people in Rising Circle, and they encouraged me to make this happen."

Kim, 32, performed the piece at the [Manhattan Theatre Source](#) in 2008-2009. She kicked off Q Up with a Wednesday night performance for the students.

Other instructors in the Q Up program include [Brooklyn](#)-based Taiwanese-American Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai and Indian artist [Deepti Gupta](#).

Kim said she has long wanted to mount a confidence-building program such as Q Up

that would benefit young women like herself.

"When I was a young woman, if I wanted arts in my life, I had to go seek it out myself because I didn't see other people who looked like me doing that," said Kim, who grew up in [Woodside, Queens](#), before moving to [Syosset, L.I.](#)

"I wanted to do something for the 16-year-old girl who didn't have a place to go and didn't have people to look up to."

Fortunately, Kim also found Rising Circle, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year.

It was started by Purohit, who is South Asian, and [Rod Bowen](#), an African-American who is now the Rising Circle's board president.

At the time, both were actors who found their efforts to develop and display their skills hindered by a lack of roles written for people of color.

"Our mission is to get the stories of people of color on the American stage. We feel that if we put a focus on that, we can contribute to diversifying what stories are getting told

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out there," said Purohit.

The collective's membership has changed over the years and now includes Charity Henson-Ballard, Kim, [Catherine Jung](#), Purohit and De Silva.

Since 2004, the group has been concentrating on mounting original work on topical subjects relevant to communities of color.

A 2004 production, "Pulling the Lever," was almost an oral history of that year's election process, Purohit said.

Rising Circle hopes to hold another Q Up session later this year if funding is available. To find out more about Rising Circle and Q Up, go to www.risingcircle.org.

For more on Queens Theatre in the Park, visit the Web site www.queenstheatre.org.

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