



19 MAY, 2022

Keys to success

Mosman Daily, Sydney

Page 1 of 3



Keys to success

Greg Flynn reports on a project helping young talents to believe in themselves and thrive

Talent Development Project School Program participants Tahlia Akyereko, 18, and Tasha Lapointe, 17. Pictures: John Appleyard

Talent can be ignored, squandered or nurtured. Fortunately for emerging artists aspiring to break into the entertainment industry, performing arts Renaissance man Peter Cousens is on hand to nurture their musical abilities.

At Sony Music's slick studios in Darlinghurst, Peter is surrounded by high-energy teenagers eating lunch-

time pizzas during a noisy break in the School Program run by the Talent Development Project (TDP).

Raising his voice above the din, he mentions applications for TDP's 2022-2023 program close on May 27 before adding that over his five years with the project, he has created an evolving program helping "highly talented young people creatively explore the potential of their imagination".

In practical terms, that

means staging workshops and one-on-one tuition for students such as the North Shore's Tahlia Akyereko and Tasha Lapointe, who ignore the free pizzas in favour of eulogising the project's benefits.

"Before joining TDP, I was so nervous and really not confident at all at singing in front of people – even my family," says 18-year-old R&B and soul devotee Tahlia. "If it wasn't for all the opportunities TDP has given

me, I'd still be nervous and still in my own little bubble."

Tasha, 17, whose career plans include musical theatre and pop, praises the project's supportive culture: "I can be completely myself. In this space you can perform without people making judgments – you can take risks and flourish outside your comfort zone."

On the subject of comfort zones, Tahlia, a former stu-



19 MAY, 2022

Keys to success

Mosman Daily, Sydney

Page 2 of 3

dent at Bradfield Senior College, St Leonards, and this month starting a Bachelor of Songwriting and Music Production degree at the SAE Creative Media Institute, says she wasn't comfortable writing songs prior to being accepted into the TDP.

"I'd never written a song in my life but here I'm encouraged to write music and, because I've worked hard, I think I'm good at it," she says.

At the TDP, an arts program partly funded by the NSW Department of Education with sponsors such as Sony and ClubsNSW, Tahlia also discovered music production while being mentored by industry veteran Philippe-Marc Anquetil.

"In the studio, Phil has been guiding me not only on production but also on vocals – for example, how to make a song sound better."

Self-assured Tasha – in her final year at Willoughby Girls High School – points to actor, singer, producer, director, teacher and film director Peter Cousens as her main mentor. In the late '90s, Peter also played the lead in *The Phantom of the Opera* in London's West End.

"As a mentor, he's helped me broaden my views, particularly on musical theatre," Tasha says. "I'd thought musical theatre was very strict – for instance, that you had to act and perform songs in a certain way. But Peter's changed my outlook. He's pushed boundaries for me so I can connect with the music in a more authentic way."

Working with TDP chief executive Anne Fitzgerald, Peter has developed a believe-in-yourself set of values at TDP – now in its 31st year and with alumni such as Human Nature and sing-

er Paulini.

"At TDP, anything is possible for the participants," says Peter. "There is no right way or wrong way to do anything, there are just better choices you can make."

"Right at the start, we explain that you're here because we believe in you and what you could potentially do. You may not see it in yourselves but we do, therefore you're accountable to us to believe in yourself."

"It's about self-belief, which is more than just confidence. Confidence can come and go but self-belief needs to be robust, it needs to be optimistic, it needs to be resilient. Those elements are what we try to instil into these young artists' view of the world."

And why should would-be participants head for TDP's website to apply for a position in the upcoming program? Peter is right on message: "This is an opportunity to discover more about yourself as a musician, singer or creative artist. Although it's a non-judgmental environment, it also requires you to be fearless. But it's also an environment which is actually a very soft place to fall."

Earlier, in a ground-floor studio, Tahlia and Tasha were asked to name performers who inspired them.

Tahlia creates initial confusion by saying "her", although not referring to Tasha. Savvy readers who enjoy contemporary R&B will immediately recognise that "her" is, in fact, American singer H.E.R.

Tasha's inspiration is Broadway musical star Renee Rapp: "With her stage presence and the roles she's played, she's my dream."

Tasha adds: "She's insane." Readers will recognise that as a compliment.

TDP's School Program is open to NSW government high school students in years 9, 10, 11 and 12. Singers, singer-songwriters, musical theatre performers, instrumentalists and band members can apply. There are no fees charged.

The program is divided into three phases, each lasting for three months. Participants are selected to move through each phase depending on their progress at the workshops.

Workshops run from this August through to June 2023. Applications close on May 27. To apply, go to talentdevelopmentproject.org.au/apply-now.



Confidence can come and go but self-belief needs to be robust, it needs to be optimistic, it needs to be resilient. (That's) what we try to instil



19 MAY, 2022

Keys to success

Mosman Daily, Sydney



Talent Development Project artistic director Peter Cousens and chief executive Anne Fitzgerald.