Acclaimed actress and singer Eisa Davis talks to East of the River about her up-and-coming projects and her views on celebrity, arts education in the DC area and her father, Sam Jordan, executive director of Health Care Now and former Ward 7 councilmember candidate.

**EOR: Are you a native of DC?**

ED: My father is a longtime resident of DC, but I have never lived there. I was born in Berkeley, California, and raised in the Bay Area. I live in Brooklyn, New York.

**EOR: What was your inspiration to enter the field of the arts?**

ED: I can't locate one single inspiration. I can't remember when I wasn't immersed in music and drama and film. My grandmother and mother were always taking me to dance classes or piano lessons, reciting poetry, encouraging me to write stories...The arts have always been a way of life for me. And this early appreciation has enriched every experience I've ever had.

**EOR: Has DC had an impact on your current success as an artist? How?**

ED: Last year, I created a play at Imagination Stage with deaf choreographer and performer Fred Beam, director Patrick Crowley, and an amazing half-deaf, half-hearing cast. Janet Stanford, the artistic director of Imagination Stage, brought us all together. The piece, “Hip Hop Anansi,” was my very first professional production as a playwright, so I can thank DC for that.

**EOR: What productions have you been a part of in the DC area?**

ED: Besides “Hip Hop Anansi,” my play “Bulrusher,” a Pulitzer Prize finalist this year, was given a reading by the theater company Musefire.

**EOR: What is your biggest aspiration as an artist?**

ED: To create more compassion and freedom and joy in all of our lives.

**EOR: Your father seems to be your biggest cheerleader... what has his role been in your success?**

ED: He and I recently became friends. My father has many irons in the fire. Davis is someone who may not be well-known but is destined for legacy status soon. This multi-talented woman has many irons in the fire. Davis has appeared on the cable TV dramas “Soul Food” and “The Wire” and most recently seen on NBC’s “Law and Order SVU.” She has, in the past, brought us all together. The piece, “Hip Hop Anansi,” was my very first professional production as a playwright, so I can thank DC for that.

**EOR: What are upcoming projects you are working on or will be working on?**

ED: I am currently performing in the Public Theater’s production of Passing Strange in New York City. I also just released an album of my original music. And my play “Bulrusher” is going to be produced in my hometown of Berkeley this September.

**EOR: What have been your most enjoyable collaborations?**

ED: In my work, I am always trying to reach the caliber of the many gifted teachers and collaborators I’ve had the opportunity to work with. And some of those people will never be celebrities nor do they want to be. We spend too much public and private time in our culture focusing on celebrity, and it hurts us in ways we don’t even realize. Some of the most important people to my growth as an artist are the playwrights Anna Deavere Smith and Adrienne Kennedy and the black poetics’ organization Cave Canem. Their innovation and trailblazing has made a lasting impact on my work.

**EOR: If you could advise your father on ways to improve arts education in DC, what would be some suggestions?**

ED: Arts education is absolutely essential to creating the human being. Arts aren’t just fun things to do when you’re done with science and math, they’re serious tools that allow you to understand yourself and the world. How else can we foster a citizenry that can thrive in a global society without studying the arts that form our many cultures?

Visit Davis’ site at www.myspace.com/eisadavis

**Annual Poetry Slam at Ballou High School**

Words flew and audience members applauded as Ballou student and staff poets battled it out on May 15 during the school day. The annual poetry slam, sponsored by the DC Creative Writing Workshop, judges included Mary Brown, the executive director of the youth art group LifePieces to Masterpieces, Veronica Nolan, executive director of the college prep program Urban Alliance, Juanita Wade, a DC Grants Initiative officer and yours truly.
The event was enjoyable. I was impressed by the intensity of many of the poems while the enthusiasm and charisma of the Ballou staff poets was energizing. The audience was allowed to boo the judges when we gave our scores, so we faced a lot of boo-ing and criticism when we gave low scores to those who were clearly crowd favorites. First place winner student Rambo Everett made an impact on the audience as his poem dealt with loneliness and depression.

James Saunders, a Larry Neal Award winner and a 2006 Parkmont Poetry Contest winner kicked off the event with one of his poems from “Voice of the Knight,” Ballou's literary magazine.

Special education teacher Ms. Chen was one of the highlights of the event, performing a well-received poem called “My People.” The poem spoke to the stereotypes people have about Asian people – dispelling the image of the Korean vendor who asks do you want salt, pepper and ketchup on your French fries or who doesn't speak English.

Stage presence was highly judged, and staff members wowed the crowds with their stage charisma. Sage Morgan-Hubbard -- National Slam Poet and writer-in-residence for DCCWW -- performed her ode to poetry as she raised the bar to new levels. Her lyrical flow reverberated through the room as an a cappella hip hop melody.

Nancy Schwab, founder and artistic director of DCCWW, participated historically and continue to face.

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Meet Ward 7 Artists: James Stephen Terrell and Tracy-Lynne Toles

by Deidre R. Gantt, Ward 7 Arts Collaborative Inc.

Anyone who has lived in Ward 7 knows that talent runs deep within our community, although it is seldom reflected in the media or among the wider Washington arts scene. For three years, the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative has partnered with city administrators and private developers to ensure that the arts have a prominent place in projects like the Great Streets Initiative, the Benning Library reconstruction and the Eastgate/Hope VI redevelopment.

The Collaborative has also helped emerging and established artists to secure teaching, presentation and funding opportunities around the city. This summer’s exhibit at the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum, “A Creative Profile: Artists of the East Bank,” is the largest exhibit the Arts Collaborative has been affiliated with to date. More than two-thirds of the 21 featured artists live in Ward 7. Two of these artists, James Stephen Terrell and Tracy-Lynne Toles, exemplify the diverse range of artists the Collaborative has engaged.

Terrell is a professionally trained painter and guitarist. Born and raised in Anacostia, he has received fine arts degrees from Howard University and Parsons School of Design (New York), and a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary (New York) with a focus on theology and the arts. After returning to DC, Terrell became an ordained minister and began exhibiting locally at Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, the Graham Collection Gallery, the Sumner School Museum and several other locations. He has also played at venues such as the Lincoln Theatre, Bar Nun and the Martini Lounge on H Street.

Toles, a Michigan native who currently resides in Ward 7, is an ordained minister and began exhibiting locally at Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, the Graham Collection Gallery, the Sumner School Museum and several other locations. He has also played at venues such as the Lincoln Theatre, Bar Nun and the Martini Lounge on H Street.

Both Terrell and Toles believe deeply in the power of the arts to transform lives, particularly young lives. Since 1999, Toles has run GIRLALK, a mentoring program for young women ages 11-18, now based in the Riverside Center in Marvin Gaye Park. Terrell spent a year teaching art in DC Public Schools. He is currently designing the art and music curriculum for the Colin L. Powell Public Charter School, which will open in 2008. “Art gives our youth an outlet which helps [them] stay out of the streets and out of the prison system,” says Terrell. “It brings a person into a meditative state where one is forced to sit in contemplation.

If more of our youth sat in contemplation, we would not see so much violence, early incarceration, early teen pregnancy, early addiction to drugs and alcohol.”

The Arts Collaborative has a growing slate of programs for both emerging and established artists as it works to create Washington’s next arts district right here in Ward 7. Terrell, who also attended a Collaborative-sponsored framing workshop in January with painter Henry Ferrand, says, “They do a great job in keeping me informed on the art-involved activities in DC.”

Meet Terrell, Toles and other East of the River artists at a free public reception on June 10, 4 p.m., at the Anacostia Community Museum. Also see “A Creative Profile: Artists of the East Bank,” on display through Aug. 12 at the Museum, 1901 Fort St., SE. For more information, contact the museum at 202-633-4820 or the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative at 202-396-1201 x107.