

BIG TOWN BIG HEART

CELEBRATING NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY JOSH MAX

A CLASSMATE AT NYU once asked Karla Cheatham-Mosley, "Karla, why are you here? You know you're just going to end up doing community service for a nickel an hour!"

Though the question was just a friendly tease, the 24-year-old's answer now is the same as it was then: "If that's what I'm put on this Earth to do, fine."

Fortunately, as one of five actors on the twice-Emmy-nominated Discovery Kids show "Hi-5," Cheatham-Mosley's making more than 5 cents every 60 minutes. She brings song, dance, action and an extra-large helping of buzzing energy to children, both on the tube and with live appearances.

"We go around to malls, do live shows and meet the fans," says Cheatham-Mosley. "We spend time talking to each and every child — we don't leave until everyone has a chance."

The vivacious performer, who grew up in Westchester, sits on the wooden floor of the Queens apartment where she has lived for three years. Dressed simply in a black sleeveless top and gray skirt, one of her two cats winding around her outstretched arm, she says, "This will sound cheesy, but when I was 12, I wanted to go to South Africa, meet a prince, and go around the countryside with kids, Von Trapp style, and help people using art. When I went to school, it became true, except for the prince part, because I became involved in community art."

On display are various testaments to her continued commitment to helping others, like a plaque given to her on a tour in Texas bearing the inscription, "From the Commanding General of Task Force Ironhorse, Operation Iraqi Freedom: Thanks for your support to our soldiers and families steadfast and loyal!"

Flipping through letters in a scrapbook sent to her from children across America reveals messages like, "Thanks for making us SMILE every morning, Karla!" and, "Dear Karla, thanks for making me feel so special."

Although "Hi-5" is Cheatham-Mosley's most visible project, she often finds other ways to use her talents to help and inspire young people.

"Over the past few weeks I've been working with sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders at an after-school program in the Bronx, [giving] 'tween' and teen girls a space to ... learn about people in different parts of the country and the world." The goal, she says, is to give them a sense of belonging to a larger community and to enhance open-mindedness.

"Our sessions have included a social worker for situations when difficult issues come up," she adds. "The discussions have been more honest than I would have ever imagined, and, in some cases, have even moved into group mediation and conflict resolution."

One would think a young, attractive actress would want to use a television show as a steppingstone to the more adult aspects of show business. There are more



Karla Cheatham-Mosley

SUSANA BATES

SHOW OF LOVE

'Hi-5' star Karla helps kids onscreen and off

than a few examples of children's-TV performers who showed off natural assets when a high-profile opportunity came up.

No way, says Cheatham-Mosley: "It's amazing to me just how much of an impact 'Hi-5' has on young girls, how much they look up to us and listen to what we have to say. I take my role as a young woman on television very seriously, and have

turned down some opportunities in the industry I didn't think were appropriate."

Last year was particularly busy for "Hi-5," but they still made time to visit the kids at Target House, a facility servicing St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis and run entirely on donations.

"We spent an entire day on the site last August with the kids in the house and their families, playing with the

children," Cheatham-Mosley says. "I took two things away from it: One is the benefit of creating a space where chronically ill kids can feel normal. The second thing I learned was how much better hospitals seem when they are warm and filled with love rather than tiling and pea-soup-green concrete."

Some of Cheatham-Mosley's projects away from "Hi-5" stem from a desire to do service and have fun at the same time. A few years ago, she and two female friends went to Amsterdam to study street theater. When they returned, they decided to use their talents to improve their home turf.

"We call ourselves the Random Actors Of Kindness, or RAK," she says with a smile. "Two summers ago we did a trash pickup in Tompkins Square Park. We put on music and invited strangers to join us. Everyone from babies to grandpas to the homeless to a lawyer participated."

Instead of dumping the trash directly into a trash receptacle, the troupe made the refuse into a piece of art.

"At the end of the day, when the park was clean," she continues, "We ceremoniously lifted the artwork, carried it over to a Dumpster and threw it away. In the true spirit of street theater, we created something that was there for a moment and then gone, to live on in the memories of the people who happened to be passing by that day."

Last October, after hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated parts of the South, Cheatham-Mosley got in touch with her former high school, Fox Lane in Bedford, enlisting the help of her social-studies teacher, Dennis Maika.

Teacher and former student brainstormed, and Cheatham-Mosley enlisted the help of "Hi-5."

"I heard about a guy who had been sending trucks full of relief goods to New Orleans," she says, "and I decided to start a drive and use 'Hi-5' to promote it. I got my cast mates to do a concert, we raised over \$1,000 and got enough stuff to fill a Mack truck. We also sent school supplies, pet supplies — and Halloween costumes!"

Contacted by phone, Maika overflows with pride for his former student: "I always knew it was going to work because Karla is serious and committed to helping people. She motivated our kids and was incredibly generous and dedicated throughout the whole process, and it was inspirational."

Cheatham-Mosley picks up the story: "The most touching thing about that drive was that there were kids giving away their own toys. One boy had gotten \$100 for his birthday and just dropped it on the table. Doing work like that helps people understand at a young age that we do have the power to help people, even with small actions."

"Hi-5" was a natural progression of doing service for Cheatham-Mosley: a chance to act, earn a living and help kids all at once. At the same time, her work on the show has also been a source of unexpected blessings.

"The show has been a lot to me in a lot of different ways," she says. "My father passed away a year ago, and seeing the kids smiling helped me through it. Or, sometimes, we'll be on the road and traveling through a heavy snowstorm and I'll think, 'How are we going to get through this?' But if you have 100 to 1,000 4-year-olds in your face, you have to smile."

Do you know a New Yorker who's making a difference? E-mail Big Town Editor Dawn Eden: bigtown@nydailynews.com.