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Last fall, when thousands of Hurricane Katrina evacuees headed to Austin, Texas, for shelter from the storm, Karen LaShelle had one simple thought: What will the children do?

Only days after the Austin Convention Center filled up with thousands of New Orleans' refugees, LaShelle, the 30-year-old executive and artistic director for the Austin-based Theatre Action Project, assembled a diverse group of creative talent to answer that very question.

The team spent hours every week at the convention center volunteering their time, telling stories, singing songs and playing theater games with the children housed there.

"Theater, and the kinds of activities we do, brought these kids joy and a release," LaShelle says. "It took their minds off what was going on every day and gave them time for imaginary play."

Theatre Action Project is a nonprofit group that brings interactive theater to public schools all over the Austin area. Programs are designed to draw young people into a creative and safe place where they can express themselves, particularly about difficult social issues such as bullying, conflict resolution, abusive relationships and stereotyping.

"They learn how to be activists, and how to be allies," LaShelle explains. She estimates that between the daytime and after-school programs, Theatre Action reached about 11,000 students in the past year. Plus, all programs are fully subsidized by donations.

"I see myself as someone who has a vision as an activist through the arts," LaShelle says. "My real goal is to bring more and more people together in the community to ultimately fight racism, homophobia, poverty, abuse; and to do that through theater."