



First-year theater graduate student Panela Leung landed a set design internship on ABC's hit drama, *Desperate Housewives*, last summer.

PRIMETIME

From interning on the set of *Desperate Housewives* to making television appearances, UMKC alumni and students are in the spotlight.

By Kara Petrovic

As little girls do, Panela Leung's days of make believe involved imagining what she'd be when she grew up.

But it wasn't until an opportunity found her hundreds of miles away from home at age 26 that Leung learned what her future would entail.

"Growing up, I always wanted to be a teacher, lawyer or doctor," says Leung, a first-year graduate student in UMKC's Theatre Department. "I never imagined myself working in L.A., especially working on the set of a popular TV show."

But Leung's quick to admit that the three-week internship she spent amid ABC's most popular housewives from Wisteria Lane and the working relationship she built with *Desperate Housewives* production director

Tom Walsh last summer was a chance of a lifetime.

In the short time she was there, Leung says she had the perfect L.A. experience. She saw celebrities, experienced a mini earthquake and her Universal Studios office window faced across the street toward director Steven Spielberg and actor Harrison Ford, who were filming the *Indiana Jones* movie sequel to premiere in May.

"It was amazing," she says. "I saw [Spielberg] every day, and I tried my hardest to get an autograph but ended up having a nice conversation with his bodyguard instead. I finally decided that I'll have to wait and meet him when I work for him."

Leung took advantage of the internship and conversed daily with as many people in

the industry as she could. Her eagerness paid off, because she quickly went from making copies of technical plans to helping Walsh build a scale model for an upcoming episode.

The crew's welders based their mammoth, metal sculpture off the model. The fountain appeared in episode three of season four, when life partners Bob and Lee tell the gawking housewives that their so-called "eyesore" from Finland cost \$24,000, and that it wouldn't be leaving their front yard.

Still, Leung says she has a lot to learn about the business.

"The experience was amazing," she says. "I learned the most about myself and what I really want to do, and why I really want to do it. I learned that by throwing yourself in the deep waters, you'll learn how you're

really going to swim. And as for a job, I learned what it really takes to be a successful production director and saw where I wanted to be, where I need to go and how much more work I need to do.”

Leung’s quick to give credit where credit is due. Had it not been for a weeklong workshop at UMKC hosted by Walsh and one particular professor, Leung says her internship would not have been possible.

“None of this would have happened without John Ezell,” she says. “I’ve never met such a selfless, giving teacher in my life. Everything he does is 100 percent for his students. I will be forever grateful to him because none of this would have happened without him, none of it at all.”

Altering circumstances welcomed

Third-year graduate student Toccarra Cash knows firsthand the role faculty play in shaping students’ careers. Mid-year into her junior year at Spelman College in Atlanta, Cash made a life-changing decision as her professor droned on about constitutional law. At that moment, Cash decided to toss the political science books and future law career away and turn her attention toward something she knew deep down she’d always wanted.

“The professor kept talking and I didn’t even want to pretend I understood what she was saying,” says Cash, a third-year graduate student. “I was bored. I knew that I didn’t have any passion, fire, desire to pursue this intended degree.”

Later that day, Cash met with her academic adviser who pointed out that she had more drama classes on her schedule than her intended major courses. Less than 12 hours later, Cash changed her major.

The magic for Cash began early. She first caught the acting bug at age 13 after appearing on stage as Mrs. Luce in *Little Shop of Horrors*. It was a small role, but a part Cash remembers vividly.

“It didn’t matter if I had one line or a thousand, I was just exhilarated to be on stage,” Cash says. “And looking back at that experience at 13 all way up until today, I’ve learned the magic is in the work, the magic is in the craft, the art form, and that the magic is in learning and growing with each

artistic experience, and that’s what keeps me coming back for more.”

Cash chose to attend graduate school to sharpen her acting techniques. She initially thought she’d study on the East or West Coast, but a mentor advised her to check out UMKC.

“When she said the University of Missouri-Kansas City, I laughed,” Cash says. “I kept asking ‘why would I want to end up in Kansas City?’ It’s like Nowhereville, U.S.A. But my audition with UMKC was the best I had ... the faculty made me feel like my audition was about me, unlike the other schools who made it about their school and ‘what can you do for us.’”

But the road to success hasn’t come easy for Cash. In the fall of 2006, she was cast in the play *Cold Nine* at UMKC. On the way to her second week of rehearsal, Cash received a call that changed everything.

The emotional rush of her role faded after a mind-blowing meeting with the head of acting and the theater department’s chair who unexpectedly pulled Cash from the production.

Previously diagnosed with vocal nodes – blisters that form on the vocal cords – Cash was ordered on vocal rest, which meant complete silence for a month and half. The vow of silence worked, and Cash was healed after doctors rechecked her nodes. Cash says



Welders used Panela Leung’s model to create a large fountain for *Desperate Housewives*.

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she grew not only as a person but as an artist during the experience and is thankful for the lessons she learned.

The faculty took note of her perseverance and nominated Cash for the prestigious \$10,000 Princess Grace Award. On July 3, Cash learned she was one of 24 national scholarship recipients. She received the award at a black-tie gala hosted by CNN’s Larry King in October in New York.

“When I got that call, I had fireworks a day early,” she says. “It’s still so surreal that they chose me, a girl from Dayton, Ohio. And I know I wouldn’t be where I am today without the education I’ve received. My experience at UMKC has been a golden

one. I’ve grown as an actress, as a woman, an artist and a person, and when I look back at the foundation elements of my career, UMKC will have played a major role.”

Successful training

Alumni Donnie Keshawarz (M.F.A. ’98) and Caren Browning (M.F.A. ’89) also credit their success to UMKC. He has had television roles on *The Sopranos* and *24*, as well as recent performances on Broadway in the musical *Tarzan* and on FX Network’s *Damages*.

Browning also experienced the thrill of television and is best known for playing Capt. Judith Siper on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

Keshawarz discovered theater his junior year in high school after a soccer injury sidelined him for the season. Needing a hobby, Keshawarz replaced his beloved sport with drama and never looked back.

For Browning, however, theater was a family affair. It was in her blood.

“For the longest time I wasn’t allowed to be an actress aside for a couple of things I did as a very young girl since my parents were both so involved with the theater,” Browning says. “I never really worked in theater until my sophomore year in college when I first started being in plays. It wasn’t until I came to UMKC for graduate school that I seriously started studying the craft of acting and committing my life to it.”

The initial interview and the theater facility sealed the deal for Browning, whereas Keshawarz selected UMKC based on professionalism and location.

“As far as I was concerned, I was getting just as good, if not a better education than

students who opted for Juilliard, NYU and Yale,” he says. “And the fact that I was in the Midwest was better for me because the competitiveness wasn’t there. Instead, I was truly learning the nuts and bolts of acting, whereas a lot of these programs are teaching you how to sell yourself.”

To sustain an acting career, Keshawarz says performers must focus more on learning how to act than dreams of instant stardom.

“You have to find a way to enjoy the work and figure out through your homework who your character really is,” he says. “The easy part comes in front of the camera. The hard stuff comes beforehand.” ■