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## Cover To Cover

## 'Planet Middle School'

by Teri Schlichenmeyer  
For New Pittsburgh Courier

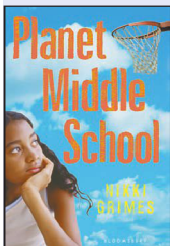
Aliens have kidnapped your best friend.

At least that's what it seems like. The two of you used to do things together all the time. You'd hang out, watch TV, shoot hoops, or climb trees. You liked the same things and you knew each other's secrets.

But now, sometimes, you feel like you barely know her any more. She never wants to do the things you used to do and everything's different. It's almost like your best friend got kidnapped and replaced with someone who just looks like her.

In the new book "Planet Middle School" by Nikki Grimes, 12-year-old Joylin knows the feeling. Both her best friends are acting weird.

Joylin really hates it when people call her a tomboy. But what else can be said? She dresses in navy and baggy jeans, she's got a killer jump shot, and she hates girly things. Her dad is secretly happy about it all. Her mother just rolls her eyes.



Yep, Joylin hates being called a tomboy but she doesn't mind when her best friend KeeLee teases her about sports and her lack of fashion sense. They've been BF's since they were nine and they've always done everything together...until middle school started.

When Joylin tried out for the basketball team, KeeLee joined the school choir. They don't have the same classes very often. Sometimes, they don't sit together in the lunchroom any more, and that makes Joylin sad.

It makes her even sadder when KeeLee starts boy-watching.

And speaking of boys, even Jake, Joylin's best male friend, is acting weird now that they're all in middle school. He treats Joylin like a girl instead of like a friend, instead of the way he used to when he didn't notice things like the bumps on her chest. Those bumps interfere with her jump shots, and she hates them.

Then a new boy shows up on the court one day. He smiles at Joylin and things change even more. How can she get Santiago to see her? Would a skirt and heels make him notice? Would make-up make a difference? And would Jake stop being such a jerk about this whole thing?

Why can't things just go back to the way they were?

Remember how hard it was to stand with one foot in childhood and one foot in Green Up Lane? Author Nikki Grimes brings all that confusion and those mixed feelings to life in this perfect little novel.

Using free-form story-poems of different lengths, Grimes gives voice to a smart young character who is also wise beyond her years. Joylin is a loyal friend, a good daughter and a thoughtful big sister but she's staring at a future that she's not sure she likes. I enjoyed how we're able to really get to know this character and it would be fun to see more books with her in them.

Though there's no reason a boy can't read this book, I think 11- to 14-year-old girls will like it much better. For them,

"Planet Middle School" is out of this world. ("Planet Middle School" by Nikki Grimes, ©2011, Bloomsbury Kids, \$15.99/\$18.50 Canada, 155 pages)

by Gene L. Webb  
For New Pittsburgh Courier

Mentoring the young and old and helping them stay in the music business is what Angelo Ellerbee has been doing successfully for 40 years as the owner and CEO of New Jersey-based Double XXposure Media Relations, a full service public relations, marketing and artist development firm.

"My company serves educate people about the dollars and cents of the music business. They need to understand what the responsibilities are," said Ellerbee, 55, who was born and raised and still, resides in New Jersey. "I observe my clients because I want to see all the various sides of the artist."

"I want to help someone from the heart and not just the pocket," Ellerbee said. "I teach survival skills and self preservation because people need to learn how to take care of themselves."

Ellerbee puts new artists through a 24-week class, where they are taught diction, how to speak, etiquette, how to dress, and royalty rights.

"It's about the relationship between the person and myself. I sell talent. I don't sell music. It's always about the relationship first," Ellerbee said. "We have a courtship and an engagement and then we decide if we want to marry. I am very straightforward. I am a connoisseur of kicking you in the pants. I don't want artists to be forever. I want them to go and grow."

He has worked with many A-list celebrities including Mary J. Blige, Michael Jackson, Nina Simone, Alicia Keys, DMX and Dionne

## Media guru Angelo Ellerbee teaches clients staying power in music biz



ANGELO ELLERBEE

Warwick.

He does not advertise for clients most come through referral by association. Many have come and gone over the years.

"What separates me from most is that I care—perhaps too much—but I sincerely feel that I am here to assist God in doing His work and that includes inspiring people to be their best, nurturing and developing their hidden attributes and stimulating and teaching them an awareness of their worth on this earth," he said.

Ellerbee's unconventional way of dealing with artists comes from his mother who taught him and his two brothers and five sisters survival techniques and from mimicking Motown founder Barry Gordy's work ethic.

"My background is in fashion, but I always

wanted to have a learning institution where people who look like me could come and get what Berry Gordy put out in the 60s—education, stimulation, knowledge of how to exist in this music business.

"My mother believed in me when no one else did and I had an appreciation for what she taught me. I never knew we were poor," Ellerbee said. "My mother did what she had to do to get the family to move forward. She did what she had to do and I am not mad at her."

He'd always had a fondness for drawing, sketching and sewing. Ellerbee began selling women's clothing during his early teenage years. At the age of 16 he began modeling and raised enough money to go to Paris where he stayed for two and a half years before re-

turning stateside and graduating from the Fashion Institute of Technology.

After graduating, Ellerbee began selling his wares, which consisted of prom dresses and one-of-a-kind clothing, in high-end department stores like Lord and Taylor.

Ellerbee's foray into music began when he was blessed with the opportunity to meet four-time Grammy winner James Mtume who wrote the hits "Juicy Fruit," "Never Knew Love Like This Before" and "Killing Me Softly." Ellerbee met Mtume through his wife who was a designer and would frequently attend Ellerbee's fashion shows.

He ended up working for the couple, designing Mtume's album cover and ultimately managing him.

Mtume had a production deal with Sony Music and

Ellerbee got the chance to manage some of Mtume's artists. That led to Ellerbee scoring the major motion picture, "Native Son" which had Oprah Winfrey in it.

Ellerbee has noticed a lot of changes in the entertainment business during his 40 years in its trenches.

"I've seen the demise of the industry. We had numerous record companies and we had a Black music division and we don't have all of that anymore," Ellerbee said. "Now there are a lot of independent record companies out there for young people trying to get record deals. African-American music is heading back to real music with real singers. There's a whole lot of money to be made in this business, you just need to know how to play the game."

Ellerbee is currently working on a reality television show for VH1 which will tell the ins and outs of the often fickle music business.

"It will be an entertaining show that will serve as an educational tool to show people what happens in the music business and what it takes to stay in this business," Ellerbee said.

When he's not talking about the new reality show, Ellerbee can be found working at Double XXposure.

"I work seven days a week. I do everything at Double XXposure. I don't have a business manager. I write my own checks. I sign my own checks. I wind up doing everything from marketing to crisis management. My company is like a supermarket where you can go down the aisle and select the information and the expertise that you want," Ellerbee said.

(For more information on Ellerbee or Double XXposure visit www.doublexxposure.com.)

Brittney Johnson  
Helping 'Les Miserables' celebrate 25 yearsby Gene L. Webb  
For New Pittsburgh Courier

When Brittney Johnson played Fantine in Les Misérables during her junior year of high school, the experience forever changed her.

"Being in the production made me want to do musical theater," explained Johnson, 23. "You can't see 'Les Miz' or hear the music without it moving you. It impacts you on every level, at every age. It's magical."

"Les Misérables," tells the story of Jean Valjean a French peasant of abnormal strength and a potentially violent nature and his search for redemption after serving 19 years in prison for stealing bread for starving family members. Valjean decides to break his parole and start a new life but is hunted relentlessly by police inspector Javert. "Les Misérables" is a sung-through musical played based on the novel of the same name by the award-winning playwright Victor Hugo.

Pittsburgh is one of numerous stops on the musical's 25th anniversary production tour. "Les Misérables" has become the world's longest running show. It features new staging and re-imagined staging and scenery, which was inspired by Hugo's paintings.

"I am delighted that 25 years after 'Les Miz' originally opened in London, the audience for this marvelous show is bigger and younger than ever before," said producer Cameron Mackin-

tosh. "Over the years I have seen many successful but visually different productions so it has been exciting to draw inspiration from the brilliant drawings and paintings of Victor Hugo himself, integrated with spectacular projections. The new 'Les Miz' is a magnificent mix of dazzling images and epic storytelling, driving one of the greatest musical stories ever told."

The Pittsburgh production is part of the PNC Broadway Across America Series. It is presented by the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, Pittsburgh Symphony and Broadway Across America. It will run at the Benedum Center from Jan. 15-27. For tickets visit www.pgharts.org.

The Broadway production of "Les Misérables" opened at the Broadway Theatre in March of 1987 and transferred to the Imperial Theatre in 1990 running for 6,800 performances. The



BRITNEY JOHNSON

U.S. National Tour began in November 1987 and visited over 150 cities before closing in St. Louis in 2006. Broadway welcomed "Les Miz" back to New York in 2006 where the show played the Broadhurst Theatre until its final performance on January 2008. To date, the musical remains the third longest running Broadway production of all time. It has been seen by nearly 60 million people in

42 countries and in 21 languages.

Johnson is honored to be a member of the ensemble for this milestone production. She will also serve as the understudy for Eponine when needed.

"I'm much more connected with Eponine with the place she is in life. Fantine had a child, but Eponine is connected with her heart, break and sacrificing. Her story is more tangible for me at my age. I play the young whore and am also in the ensemble. In the ensemble I get to play a lot of different characters. Every time I change my hair it's a different character, it's fun."

Johnson graduated from New York University School of the Arts with a degree in Drama in May of 2012. Prior to graduation she had performed in college and regional theater productions in New York, including "Hair." She joined the cast of "Les Misérables" after auditioning five or six

times.

"Les Miz had been on tour for two years before I could get it," Johnson said. "Someone had to leave before I could get in. When I got the call that I got the part I was really excited! It's like being a part of history. I am so honored to be a part of the musical phenomenon that has touched and continues to touch people's lives."

Not only is "Les Misérables" known for its epic story of hope and redemption, the show is known for amazing songs including "Castle on a Cloud," "Bring Him Home" and "One Day More," which Johnson loves to sing.

"I love it because of the staging and the emotions that are running through you at the time. I feel so connected to the audience. That's why I do this. I do this musical theater thing because I want to touch people," Johnson said.

When she isn't performing Johnson enjoys knitting, watching "Superman" movies and reading.

Following her time in "Les Misérables," Johnson plans on auditioning for more shows. But "Les Miz" will always have a special place in her heart.

"This is my first big show. It's come completely full circle for me," she said. "This role is catapulting me into the next phase of my career. I tell people to work hard and not slack off. You will get a lot of rejection, and you have to keep your eyes on the goal and fight. Out of all of those no's there will be a yes. It's definitely worth it."