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## Ask Geo

GO columnist Georgette Braun is curious about a lot of things. She'll answer your questions, pose some of her own, and comment on everything from entertainment to life and death.



## Rockford teen, up for presidential award, meets with theater greats

*April 6th, 2009 at 03:33pm Georgette Braun*

Last week, Steven Johnson, 18, of Rockford, was at ease in New York City talking in a group (he's the one in gray on the far right) with Edward Albee, the Tony and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of such famous works as "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"



And his one-on-one in the Big Apple with three-time Tony-nominated stage actor Raul Esparza helped him decide where he'll go to college in the fall to study acting: The University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. The theater department there partners with the renowned Guthrie Theater for intensive actor training. Johnson said he was considering schools in New York because he thought the proximity to all the theaters there might help him get roles in plays. But then Esparza told him: "It doesn't matter where you are at, it is the work you do." And, Johnson said Esparza also told him: "Going to school in New York doesn't necessarily mean working in New York."

So what was Johnson doing in New York City, hobnobbing with such big names in theater?

He was one of 40 of the nation's top young artists in the performing, literary and visual arts, chosen from 140 finalists who had traveled to Miami in January for young ARTS Week as part of the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts. In Miami, he and other finalists were judged on their performances. The winners were selected from among more than 6,000 applicants. For his initial application, Johnson submitted two two-minute monologue tapes, both "heavy pieces," he said.

One featured Shakespeare's "All's Well That Ends Well." The other, Neil LaBute's "In a Dark, Dark House," about sexual abuse. The Foundation has nominated Johnson for the Presidential Scholar in the Arts award. Twenty of the 60 nominees will be honored at the White House. They also will perform at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and will show their artwork at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. in June.

Johnson is a senior at the Interlochen Arts Academy, a boarding school, in Interlochen, Mich. A Rockford native, he attended Boylan Catholic High School in Rockford his first two high school years. His parents are Darrell and Candy Johnson of Rockford. He is owner of Johnson Personnel Company; she is a teacher.

Johnson said that while in Rockford he received "incredible" training in theater from Richard Raether, artistic director of Artists' Ensemble Theater and formerly of the now-closed New American Theater; Mike Webb at Starlight Theatre; and Vicki Sleger at Boylan. "But I just wanted to take the next step," he said. "I was ready for a new experience."

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