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Date: 2007/04/05 Thursday

Love of dance pays off

Roman Cruz wins annual Star-Ledger [Scholarship](#) contest

By ALLISON [FREEMAN](#)
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

A dancer who used to attend special education classes, but worked so hard that he is now ranked seventh in his senior class at [Arts](#) High School in Newark, is the 2007 winner of The Star-Ledger [Scholarship](#) for the [Performing Arts](#).

Roman Cruz, 17, was named the winner at an awards reception last night at the New Jersey [Performing Arts](#) Center in Newark. He will receive \$10,000 a year over the next four years, for a total of \$40,000.

Cruz laid his head on the table before his name was announced. He stood up, wiped the tears pouring from his eyes and hugged his mother, the other winners, and [Arts](#) High School dance teacher Ronnie D. Carney.

Roman's mother, Maria Torres, was standing in the back of the theater filming the ceremony. "Oh, my God," she cried when her son's name was announced.

"I feel excited and relieved," Cruz said. "I have the opportunity to go to college without having to worry about the money."

Cruz says he plans to study dance at SUNY-Purchase.

"He moves from inside – he's a natural dancer," his mother said.

Two runners-up will receive \$5,000 a year, for a total of \$20,000. They are classical singer Kenneth Ellerbee, 18, and actress Al-Nisa Petty, 17. Both are seniors at [Arts](#) High School.

The audience of 45, including students and parents, gave the winners a standing ovation at the black box theater at The Lucent Technologies Center for [Arts](#) Education. The trio were chosen from among 30 students who auditioned before judges on March 24.

Faye Competello, associate director for [arts](#) training at NJPAC, announced the winners last night.

"We are here tonight to honor not only their creative and academic gifts but also their professionalism, poise and incredible potential," said Competello, who oversees the [scholarship](#) program. "We can and should expect great things from each of these impressive young people now and in the future."

In his interview and winning essay, Cruz recounted for the judges how he and his mother and older brother sometimes had to sleep in the streets because of trouble at home. Despite it all, Cruz focused his energy on his studies and his love – dance.

Cruz began dancing salsa and merengue at age 3. He studies ballet and modern dance as a dance major at [Arts](#) High School and one day hopes to become a professional dancer.

"A day that I don't dance – it destroys me," Cruz said during auditions week. "When I dance, I tell a story."

Runner-up Kenneth Ellerbee plans to study music education and vocal performance at Westminster Choir College in the fall. He attended the Newark Boy's Chorus School.

"I am happy it's all over," Ellerbee said. "I was not going to audition, but (choral director) Dr. Jerry Forderhouse told me he had confidence in me."

Ellerbee's mother, Saundra McQueen, said she's looking forward to the June recital featuring the winners' performances, because she has never heard her son sing an operatic solo.

Runner-up Al-nisa Petty hopes to become an actress and has studied theater at NJPAC's Young Artist Institute and Summer Youth Performance Workshop.

She was still in shock after the awards ceremony. "When I go home and go to sleep, maybe I will wake up and realize that I am a Star-Ledger scholar. I have been working for this since I was 12 years old."

The winner and runners-up were selected from among seven finalists following interviews with judges on March 28. The four other finalists were: jazz singer Stephen McLean, modern dancer Titilayo Derricotte, snare drummer Jose Ferreira and pianist Kenny Benavides. All are seniors at [Arts](#) High.

"The level of talent of this year's Star-Ledger scholars is the closest to professional in understanding command and delivery that I have ever seen collectively from students," said Desiree Urquhart, vice president of [arts](#) education at NJPAC. "This was the first time ever that the judges chose seven semi-finalists for these [scholarships](#), a testament to these young artists' skill and perseverance."

This is the ninth year for The Star-Ledger [Scholarship](#) for the [Performing Arts](#), which is open to Newark high school seniors. During their auditions, 30 students sang, played a musical instrument, danced or performed monologues before three judges in their discipline. On March 25, 12 semi-finalists were invited to come back to audition before a panel of all 12 judges. The seven finalists were then asked to return for interviews.

The judges include Paul McCrae of Montclair, assistant artistic director of the New Jersey Ballet in Livingston, who has served as a judge for the [scholarship](#) program since its inception.

This is the third year in a row that a dancer has been selected as the top [scholarship](#) winner.

"I think Roman is a very talented young man," McCrae said. "He gave a very moving audition, was very much into both pieces that he danced, and technically he was very clean, clear and strong."

For his audition, Cruz performed a modern piece he choreographed showing his frustration with a failed relationship with a girlfriend set to Lifehouse's "Storm," and his difficulty in getting back into dating with "This." "This" was choreographed by [Arts](#) High dance teacher Carney to the music of Daniel Bedingfield.

However, McCrae said, he thinks it was Cruz's interview that won over the judges. "His interview was very moving," McCrae said. "I think he made us feel that he was deserving of the [scholarship](#) and, if he was the winner, he would do the most with it. He started out in special education classes and he is now seventh in his class. Roman is decided and he works hard."

For his audition, Ellerbee sang "Where'er you walk" from the Handel opera "Semele," and two arias by Donizetti: "Una furtive lagrima," from "L'Eliser d'amour," and "Spirito gentil," from "La Favorita."

"Kenneth has a beautiful voice and decided to do the competition at the last moment and not because he had not heard about it – he did not have the confidence," McCrae said. "He had never sung as a solo operatic singer before the competition and he was phenomenal. He has a powerful voice, a strong solid voice and is technically very secure. He understands the language that he was singing and the characters he was portraying."

The judges were impressed by Ellerbee's ambition – to become a music teacher and giving back to the community, McCrae said.

In her winning audition, Petty performed monologues from Lee Blessing's "Eleemosynary" and Lanie Robertson's "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar & Grill," based on the life of jazz singer Billie Holiday.

"She has a great understanding of her craft," McCrae said. "She is probably one of the best theater candidates or drama candidates that we have seen in the audition process. I think she really moved the judges with her ability to really get inside her pieces and become the character, not just try to emulate a character but really absorb a character."

Petty was "very moving and sincere" during the interview, McCrae said. "She is a young lady with a lot of determination and I think she will do well."

Petty told the judges she first heard about the Star-Ledger [Scholarship](#) for the [Performing Arts](#) on a television show she saw when she was 12 years old. "And she made up her mind that she wanted to go for it," McCrae said.

In addition to talent, the [scholarship](#) requires students to have a 2.5 grade point average to participate in the program. Cruz has a 3.8 GPA, Ellerbee a 3.4, and Petty a 2.9.

The [scholarships](#), funded by The Star-Ledger and administered by NJPAC, are based on talent, academic potential and need. Winners can use the money to attend college anywhere in the country. The program allows them to major in whatever they like, as long as they continue to take courses in their [performing](#) discipline.

The three winners, as well as winners from previous years, will perform at a [scholarship](#) recital at NJPAC's Victoria Theater June 13 at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$13; \$8 children 13 and under. Call (888) 466-5722 or visit www.njpac.org.

Newark high school juniors who are interested in auditioning for the [scholarships](#) may call Faye Competello at (973) 642-8989 ext. 3315.

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- PHOTO CAPTION:**
1. Roman Cruz receives a hug from his mother, Maria Torres, after getting the news that he had won The Star-Ledger [Scholarship](#) for the [Performing Arts](#), worth \$40,000.
 2. Roman Cruz soars during his audition last month for The Star-Ledger [Scholarship](#) for the [Performing Arts](#). The dancer won the top award, worth \$40,000 over four years.
 3. Al-nisa Petty strikes a pose during one of her monologues at the audition.
 4. Singer Kenneth Ellerbee focuses before his interview. All three winners and the other four finalists are seniors at [Arts](#) High School.
- CREDIT:**
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