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**MULTI-FACETED ACCESSIBLE BROADWAY THEATRE EXPERIENCE FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED YOUTH FUNDED BY
PHILANTHROPIST MICHELE SPITZ**

Arts and disabilities advocate and philanthropist **Michele Spitz**, whose funding spans organizations from San Francisco and Los Angeles to New York, is the generous innovator behind an exciting experience for blind and low vision teens. On Wednesday, July 26, 2017, 26 people from “**Explore-Ability**,” the summer career exploration program for teens and young adults run by **Helen Keller Services for the Blind** in Brooklyn and Long Island, enjoyed an afternoon of theater and career exploration, highlighted by attending the matinee performance of “**School of Rock**” at **Broadway’s Winter Garden Theatre**.

This exceptional program kicked off at **Emmett O’Lunney’s Pub**, located in the theater district, with a dynamic “Meet the Performers” presentation by two School of Rock cast members. **Cassie Okenka** and **Nehal Joshi** shared their stories and talked about the broad range of careers in the theatre. This component of the event was coordinated through **Camp Broadway**, a Drama Desk Award-winning educational organization providing immersive theater experiences for students 10-18. Following lunch, the group experienced the high energy **School of Rock** with increased awareness of what happens on stage and behind the scenes.

The **Shubert Organization’s Broadway Inbound** team coordinated the event’s logistics and accessibility planning. They generously provided live audio description for the performance so that all attendees were ensured of maximum enjoyment and participation. This important accessibility service is available free to individuals attending performances at any Shubert theatre with adequate notice.

Russell Martello, Director of Youth Services from **Helen Keller Services for the Blind** (HKSB) enthusiastically reported following the afternoon:

“Words cannot describe how fantastic this day was for our group; but in a word, it was PERFECT! I could not have imagined it going any better and do not know how to repay such a generous gift from everyone who made it happen. This is truly a day that our students and staff will remember forever. Cassie and Nehal were incredible in their description of their work experiences and general motivation for following your dreams/overcoming adversity in life.

(At the performance) the audio description was a new experience for most of our students and staff with visual impairments and one that they really enjoyed! I tried it myself and sat next to a student and staff member who found it to be very useful in getting a full picture of the show. The seats were incredible and all 25 of the guests you so kindly invited had a blast!

This show was a perfect match for our age group and developmental level, visual and audio engagement and overall quality. It has a fantastic message that all of our students can relate to and the whole day was structured in manner that was accessible to everyone.”

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Yokasta Urena, HKSB Curriculum Director said:

“I’d like to extend my gratitude to all involved in making yesterday happen. For students with visual impairments, life is understood through direct experiences. I am so glad to be part of the ExploreAbility team and witness how these events directly impact our students. Lastly, as a parent of a teen with a visual impairment, I don’t have the words to express how grateful I am for the opportunity your efforts have provided Aolani.”

And Michele Spitz reflected:

“I am still smiling today from the tremendous joy that I experienced in witnessing the entire event unfold yesterday. I feel fortunate to have been in the wonderful company of the delightful children, staff, actors, and of course Matt (Kaplowitz), the mastermind of this event coming together so seamlessly! All the behind the scenes efforts are greatly appreciated as it wouldn't have been possible otherwise. It was my honor and sincere pleasure to participate in such a meaningful experience that I will always fondly remember with a very full heart. My only regret is that I return home to California this weekend and will not be able to attend your final day ExploreAbility program. Please know that I will surely be there in spirit!

Michele Spitz, aka “Woman of her Word” is a San Francisco based voice over artist and philanthropist, who is generously sponsoring this entire event and all its components.

Bios of performers:

Cassie Okenka <https://us.schoolofrockthemusical.com/cast/cassie-okenka/>

Nehal Joshi <https://us.schoolofrockthemusical.com/cast/john-hemphill/>

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Helen Keller Services for the Blind's Explorability teens gather en route to enjoying "School of Rock" at Broadway's Winter Garden Theatre, July 26, 2017 through an exciting program funded by philanthropist Michele Spitz.