

Community Service at Center Court

By DAVID ROHDE

The chance to meet LL Cool J, the rap singer, might make another 15-year-old girl shout, shriek or even squeal. The chance to meet Tyra Banks, the supermodel, might make another 16-year-old boy brag, boast or even blush. But to Heidi Lopez and Japheth Youmans, meeting those celebrities is an afterthought.

Heidi and Japheth, both of Washington Heights, will spend part of this week under the bright lights of one of the largest spectacles of the year in New York — the 1998 N.B.A. All-Star Game, which is to take place on Sunday at Madison Square Garden. On Saturday, the two teen-agers will be honored on national television by Ms. Banks, LL Cool J and a flock of other celebrities and basketball stars for their volunteer work in a neighborhood better known for violence than virtue.

"It will help the reputation of Washington Heights," Heidi said. "I only see the TV crews running up here when there's a murder."

The ceremony, which also honors two other teen-agers, from San Antonio and Coquitlam, British Columbia, will be broadcast live on NBC, TNT, Black Entertainment Television, Nickelodeon, Telemundo and the Madison Square Garden Network in the United States and on YTV in Canada. More than 10,000 high school and junior high students from New York received tickets to the event from the N.B.A. as a reward for their community service.

The two Washington Heights youths seemed unfazed by their impending celebrity. "My mom is more excited than I am," Japheth said. "She wants to meet Patrick Ewing."

Last Wednesday afternoon, there was little glory for Japheth, Heidi, 17-year-old Melissa Garner, 12-year-old Camillo Garcia, 12-year-old Jessica Scott and 11-year-old Sheana Ewers. Standing in a fiercely cold, man-made wind tunnel beneath the Interstate 95 overpass near 179th Street in Washington Heights, the youths shivered as they distributed free clothes from a rickety metal table. At least a dozen passers-by searched for thermal socks, warm shirts and thick sweaters and thanked them for their generosity.

Each Wednesday, Japheth and his team set up shop near the rear entrance of the Port Authority Bus Terminal at Fort Washington Avenue and 179th Street. The project is the brainchild of Japheth, who began volunteering at Fresh Youth Initia-



George M. Gutierrez for The New York Times

Japheth Youmans, 16, and Heidi Lopez, 15, have volunteered for years, and every week they distribute free clothing in Washington Heights.

The N.B.A. honors two local youths at its All-Star Game.

tives, a Washington Heights community group, as a sixth grader, when he saw members painting a mural near his family's apartment. Last year, he noticed that people going to a Washington Heights food bank where he volunteered also needed clothing. Unable to find a space to house his clothing bank, he decided to take the clothes to the people.

"It's fun," said Japheth, the soft-spoken son of a security guard and a secretary. "It's something productive and something positive."

Heidi, whose parents are teachers, started volunteering with local community groups in the eighth grade as part of a school requirement and has not stopped. She serves on the board of Fresh Youth Initiatives and helped

produce several projects, including the "Youth Yellow Pages," a guide to activities, recreation and drug and alcohol counseling for teen-agers.

The awards the two will receive are being presented by the N.B.A.'s Team Up Program, a public service campaign that encourages youths to volunteer in their communities.

"When kids really care about making a difference, it's not about the celebrating," said Bob Lanier, the program's national chairman and a member of the Basketball Hall of Fame. "The celebration just comes as a carrot, to say to the kids, 'You know, we all appreciate what you're doing.'"

When asked which celebrity he looked forward to meeting the most, Japheth shrugged, thought about it and nonchalantly said, "Brandy." Heidi was stumped. "I forgot who's going to be there," she said. "I think it will be fun, but the best thing is that it will increase the image of community service."