

Youth Media and Popular Education: Change from Within

By Samantha Calamari

"A

ll I have to say is that if you end up with a staph infection, please, please don't scratch, pick, or peel at the scabs and bumps! It's transferable to other people, so don't be a jerk and pass it on." Penguin is a San Francisco homeless youth who is trying to prevent the spread of staph infection. Health information is scarce on the streets; resources and services, even more so. Often, information from fellow homeless youth is the only way to learn about something.

Getting the word out to youth about health issues is only one aspect of several Bay Area programs that focus on providing media access to local youth and others excluded from traditional media channels. Roaddawgz concentrates on homeless youth, the First Voice Apprenticeship program at KPFA provides access for women and people of color, and Youth Radio is geared towards high school students.

Roaddawgz Takes a Bite out of Homelessness

Started in 2003 as a safe space for exploring and bringing into the public forum the stories and ideas of homeless youth through writing, art, and multimedia, Roaddawgz today is a four-day-per-week drop-in center offering training in computers, creative and news writing, and digital media, to homeless youth.

Self-published zines, youth magazines, and the Roaddawgz website are used to publish participant works. These outlets, especially the website, not only bring the stories of the struggles of homeless youth to a greater public, they also serve as a network for friends and family to reconnect with young people they have lost touch with, "if they want to be found," says Machiko Saito, Roaddawgz Program Director.

Yet, far beyond any end result, Roaddawgz's individualized education model focuses on each participant's needs in the immediate present.

"Roaddawgz is the only place I have where I feel comfortable enough to get something done. There is no time limit, no due date, and no teacher standing over me and telling me that it has to be one way or another," says one participant.

"There was a day last year that I really wanted to get high," adds Jade, another participant, "instead, I ended up sitting at a computer at Roaddawgz writing about how I felt. Halfway through writing about how much and why I wanted to get high, I felt the chaos inside me leave and I no longer felt the desire to use."

Choices like these most homeless youth don't have when living on the streets.

Sickboy, another homeless youth, writes, "[Roaddawgz is] a place where we can be comfortable enough to create all those dreams we get told to forget, all the fantasies about adventure and excitement; we can live them, make our dreams solid concrete reality with enough determination and stamina."

Empowering this population can inspire creativity, believes Saito. The creative process of articulating their stories becomes for them a way of helping themselves and changing their situations. This is confirmed by Donovan, who says: "I've been coming to Roaddawgz since I was homeless back in the winter of 2005. Since then, I've gotten a job and an apartment, but I still come here frequently for several reasons."

Roaddawgz welcomes all homeless youth, regardless of background. In other settings, this would inevitably spawn tensions but Roaddawgz has never had any problems—with violence or otherwise—within the group.

"Even though [these] people are considered to have the same identity because they're homeless youth, [in reality] we have such an eclectic group that represents



all [the] diversity in society,” says Saito. Building a grassroots community of tolerance and respect has been a main focus of the program and perhaps its most effective and tangible contribution to the young residents of the streets.

Many Find a New Voice at First Voice

The grassroots community-building process seen at Roaddawgz finds a parallel at KPFA's First Voice Apprenticeship program started in 1985 to give people of color and women a voice in the media.

Jessica Johnson, a 20-year-old program participant, says, “First Voice invites people to engage in a dialogue that is not sprinkled from the top down by the media. This is from the ground up. We are creating news and sharing experiences.”

More structured than Roaddawgz's educational model, First Voice's 18-month program encourages self-exploration and critical thinking, providing participants with the training to become strong media producers and civic journalists in their own communities. This creates a ripple effect as the consciousness and critical thinking developed by each participant is shared with the community.

Three times a year, First Voice holds an open house during its weekly program, Full Circle, at which community members are invited to join a roundtable discussion on current issues.

Beyond its effect on the greater community, First Voice also seeks to have an impact on KPFA and has challenged the internal system to ensure that the apprentices have a long-term presence at KPFA.

According to Rainjita Yang-Geesler, program co-director, “There are elders here who [should] have the ability and skills to pass down knowledge, and create space for the fresh talent and voices emerging from the apprenticeship program. After 25 years, this is not happening, so we [First Voice] are now moving in a new direction for economic self determination.”

A Teen's Best Friend

Youth Radio's Denise Tejada is only 18 but she has been producing media for four years. Last year, she won the Mission Cultural Center Film Festival's Best Youth Producer award for her video letter to the mayor from a San Francisco Mission District girl's program. When accepting the award, she spoke about the ability to share her skills with others.

“When I was 14, I was someone who had so much to say. I was lucky because I found a place I could express myself. It was almost like a weight was lifted from me. Now, I feel that I can give a voice to those who are not being heard.”

Although each youth media education program is different in terms of approach and the population served, they all do provide a space where youth are valued and their voices cultivated. Most often, the youth that enter these programs are not the youth that walk out into the world—confident, skilled, and motivated.

Says Tejada, “[Now] I really understand what the saying, ‘hard work pays off’ means. I now have so many opportunities in front of me. I am really excited about what's out there and what's next.” ■

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Roaddawgz

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