

Young students see surroundings in new light

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The catch-phrase is, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

But for the Venice Arts program returning to Merced as part of the Building Healthy Communities project, their students contributed a picture and a thousand words. And the good news is, Venice Arts is returning to Merced as part of a two-year grant, providing training opportunities for even more young people and adults in Le Grand, Planada, South Merced and the Beachwood Franklin area.

Last fall, the Venice Arts photography program spent a week with eight students from the Boys & Girls Club of Merced County. These young people received not only technical training on how to use a digital SLR camera; they also learned how to identify serious issues in their communities and share their thoughts and feelings about these issues through their photos and then written reflections on these photos.

Tony Slaton, Executive Director of The Boys & Girls Club of Merced County, saw the impact of this program first-hand. The students gathered at his location and then went out from there to shoot about issues that they felt truly impacted them. The issues the students chose to shoot about came from a round-table discussion that the teaching photographers/mentors had with the group.

"The issues elevated were jobs, safety, violence, food, nutrition, obesity, and the availability of food and where it's sold," said Slaton. "One young lady had joined the military and so the students visited a recruitment station. There was also discussion about

the lack of opportunity in Merced."

For Slaton, one of the most interesting things that the young people discussed was, in their words,



BY KATIE THOMPSON

Merced's "transition from agriculture and rural to something different," explained Slaton. And then, because of this, the students talked about "feeling lost about where they fit in."

A local photographer, Roger Wyan, worked as a teaching mentor for the Venice Art's week-long program last fall. He and other instructors initially met with the students to figure out what they would want to shoot. "We posed the question, what is health in your community?" he said. "The kids came up with a variety of different ideas [that] ran the whole gamut of health. The idea was to document those issues with photographs." One of the locations the students decided to shoot was the Merced Farmer's Market. "They had decided that was access to good wholesome produce at a reasonable price," Wyan explained. "Then they went into little corner grocery stores and took photos of a bunch of junk food on the shelves, to compare and contrast."

The students were getting a grasp on health in Merced, the good and the bad. Wyan feels that the next steps after the students take the photos are probably the most important. "When you make photographs, it goes beyond seeing; it goes into understanding," he said. "You have to think about what you're photographing, and it goes into the realm of understanding not just the picture but what the implications are and what the meaning is behind [the photo]."

Former Golden Valley High School student, Alyssa Castro, now 18, participated in the program last fall. For her, it truly opened up her view of Merced. She is very excited to see its return, especially since she will most likely be returning to the program as both a student and a teacher's aide. For her, the training was "definitely intimidating at first," she explained. "But [Venice Arts] helped me get more comfortable being able to go around and shoot out in public, asking people questions, and approaching people with the camera."

Castro also feels that this program is "one more thing to give people an outlet, an alternative option,



ABOVE: Alyssa Castro shot this picture at the Merced Flea Market as part of the Venice Arts program.

TOP RIGHT: Another photo produced by Merced youth during the Venice Arts photojournalism training here in Merced, contrasting junk food with healthy food.

BOTTOM RIGHT: This photo is part of an online gallery titled Southwest Merced — Picturing Health Foreclosures, Unemployment, & The Military.

PHOTOS BY ALYSSA CASTRO



something else for the youth to do," in a town where she used to feel there were no opportunities for her and her friends.

It's important to remember that this is not just a photography course. Jerri Allyn, Director of Programs for Venice Arts, stated, "The philosophy and the mission behind Venice Arts is to really train underrepresented people and young people in the tools for communication so that they can tell their own story and begin to break down the stereotypes of how they are often misrepresented in the news."

Venice Arts coming to Merced is also about building capacity, training a few photographers in what they call in the field of photogra-

phy "participatory photography" and having those people train other youth and then other future trainers. Alyssa Castro is a perfect example of building capacity; she is truly a resource now in Merced County, soon to be sharing her newfound photography and story-telling skills with others.

Allyn stressed that sharing stories about issues is not just about technical camera work. She wants their students to know "how to shoot a really visually compelling photo essay and [tell an] arresting story, make it stand out. That's why we feel it's really important to train youth in arts and aesthetics and have them understand what does make a photo-

graph stand out, what does make a narrative stand out."

Venice Arts is currently seeking applications for a full-time Program Manager/Teaching Photographer and a contract Teaching Photographer position for the Merced program. For more job details or if you know a young person who lives in the BHC area who would be interested in participating in the Venice Arts program as a student, please call Katie Thompson, BHC Media Coordinator, at 209-580-6746.

Web site:

<http://www.venicearts.org/index.php?view=projects&id=20364>