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Program encourages youth to turn lens on local health issues

Posted by [Tom Price](#) on Saturday, May 26, 2012 · [Leave a Comment](#)

Education doesn't always happen in the classroom and as Roger Wyan is proving with his Venice Arts Documentary Photography program, real life education is sometimes best delivered through the lens of a camera.

Venice Arts is non-profit arts organization whose mission is collaborating with and training youth, to effectively use documentary photography and multimedia to raise awareness about community health issues. Funded by the California Endowment, Venice Arts is one of dozens Building Healthy Communities organizations working within 14 California communities to bring about policy and system changes.

In all, 12 students from Golden Valley and Le Grand high school enrolled in the inaugural session. The students were trained to use their Canon T3i cameras and were asked to document a health-related issue in Merced.



Photo by Giovanna Carrillo

“The (Golden Valley) class brainstormed and came up with a whole list of things they thought were issues in our community,” says Wyan. “Ideas ranged from homelessness, to gangs, to clean air and safety, everything was on the board. In the end it was homelessness that was No. 1.”

For Alyssa Castro, a graduate of Golden Valley who worked with Wyan in a similar Venice Arts program in the summer after her junior year and now serves as a mentor in the program, homelessness was an obvious choice.

“It was the most visible thing in Merced,” says Castro. “It’s something that people notice everyday.”

The students visited the Rescue Mission and the “D” Street shelter and met with local homeless people and attempted to capture their stories through photography. The results were nothing short of astonishing.

The images captured ranged from portraits of smiling faces weathered by a rough life, to somber moments of solitude. It’s no easy task to ask a handful of high school students to walk into a homeless shelter filled with strangers and have them gather enough courage to not only take their picture but to talk to them and hear their story.

“I think from my perspective as an instructor, the biggest challenge we had wasn’t the lessons about learning to use your camera, but the lessons at rescue mission and “D” Street shelter where you learn to deal with the people. The camera is almost secondary,” says Wyan. “Once a person says it’s okay to photograph them you have to go for it, you are the author, you are the director. I teach that you don’t look at somebody as different than you. You look into their eyes and see yourself. We are all human. It’s pushing through our own preconceptions and that’s a huge part of this kind of art.”

Toby Osborne, a Golden Valley Student who discovered a passion for photography through this program,

says the experience changed how he viewed homelessness.

“I had a very narrow idea of homelessness, I just thought that if you are walking on the street with a shopping car then you were homeless,” says Osborne. “But this opened up my idea of homelessness. People say that they should get off the streets and go find a job, but they are trying.”

Osborne talks about meeting a woman named Annette at the shelter. She was 60-something, in a wheel chair and had been living out of her car along Bear Creek for three years.

She was recently disabled after being hit by a car, but she says it was the best thing to ever happen to her because she was able to receive disability money that allowed her to pay for a place to live.

“She was it by a car and it was an improvement,” says Osborne. “And it shouldn’t be that way.”

During her conversations with the students Annette told them, “It’s not all peaches and cream out there.”

The group borrowed her phrase and used it as the title of their show, which will have a reception from 5 to 7 p.m. on Tuesday at the Roger J. Wyan Photography Gallery (1812 Canal Street on the second floor).

INFORMATION ON HOW TO GET INVOLVED WITH THE VENICE ARTS PHOTO CLASSES:

June 18 – June 29 or July 9 – July 20

Mon – Fri.

9:30AM – 12PM

MCOE Room E-1

To Enroll in Summer Photo Class Please Contact:

Roger Wyan

(209) 720-4834

Roger@venice-arts.org



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