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Students in BOCES media program in Centereach: Left, Shaquan Samuels; center, Jacob Gutierrez, Cynthia Harris and Randy Smith; right, coordinator Clarence Sheppard.

# Lights, Camera, Learning

By Karla Schuster  
STAFF WRITER

The first take, the cell phone didn't ring on cue. The third take, the sound guy lost it, yielding to an attack of giggles. The fifth take, the cell phone rang, but so did the bell for fifth period. Finally, on the seventh take — more than 40 minutes after the film crew first set up for the shot — it was a print.

"This is exactly what happens in production," Clarence Sheppard, artistic and technical director of the Black Media Foundation, told the actors and crew that day. "You have to expect the unexpected, to roll with things."

The delays were typical, but this was no ordinary film set and crew. It was a classroom at the Eastern Suffolk BOCES Centereach Learning Center, where eight students have spent three hours every Wednesday creating their own short films — from storyboards to acting to filming and production.

The 10-week program is a first for the Board of Cooperative Educational Services and the Black Media Foundation, a nonprofit organization that runs student newspaper and film projects to encourage more minority kids to pursue media careers. The foundation has worked with New York City schools, but only began working with Long Island schools last summer. The Eastern Suffolk BOCES program is the group's second in Long Island public schools.

Previous foundation student projects have been entered in youth film categories at the Sundance and Hamptons International film festivals, and the organization has taken students to the Sundance festival in Utah.

"A lot of times, kids really feel disconnected from the whole academic experience," said Natalie Byfield, the foundation's executive director. "The whole idea of creating a video just

## Movie course gets kids involved

captures their attention."

The small, hands-on program is expensive — about \$7,500 — but has become a powerful incentive for the often disaffected students at the Centereach center, officials there say. They hope to continue the program with a new class next year.

"It's really cool because I get to show my talent with the cameras," said Shaquan Samuels, 15, of Bay Shore. "And I'm pretty good with the cameras."

Besides the nuts and bolts of how to use cameras and sound equipment, the project has helped the students, who landed at the center because of academic and disciplinary problems in their home districts, internalize lessons they've struggled with for years:

- The value of patience, especially when it's 25 degrees outside and you have to shoot a scene 10 times to get it right.
- How to listen, so a brainstorming session doesn't disintegrate into a shouting match.
- The art of compromise, like cutting a scene you wrote because it makes the film too long.

"One of the biggest issues for our kids is that they don't work well together in groups, so this is a huge thing for them," said Brian McCarroll, one of the BOCES teachers overseeing the project. "They've taken complete ownership."

For some of the students, it is the only thing that keeps them coming to school and going to class, as good attendance and grades are required to participate. Take Cynthia Harris, 14, from Mastic, who

was placed in the Centereach program by the William Floyd School District in September.

In December, she almost lost her spot in the film program when she stopped showing up for school. Now, as the project wraps up, the quiet girl with the high-pitched voice turned enforcer one day last week when the group had trouble settling down to work.

"OK, listen," she said. "We don't have much time so I wish everyone would just stop playing around so we could get this done."

The students have shot anti-drug and anti-violence public service shorts and are wrapping up production of a takeoff on "The Red Violin," a film about a violin that changed owners several times and the effect it had on the lives of each one. In their story, the violin is a compact disc that plays a different song every time it changes hands, inspiring each new owner to overcome an obstacle.

As the group hashed out a final version of the script, the challenges of making a 10-minute short film emerged. One student thought the dialogue in the opening scene (a guy walks up to a girl and offers to sell her a magic CD) sounded "kind of cheesy." No one would just walk up to a person and say that. And how could you tell the CD was magic anyway?

Someone suggested using special effects to make the CD glow, another filming a new opening scene that sets up how the CD acquired its magical powers. In the end, though, the group decided to stick largely to the original script — there wasn't enough time to squeeze an extra scene into the film.

"This has opened up a lot of things for us," said Krystal Coleman, 18, from Middle Island, who has bounced around different BOCES programs for five years. "This is my last year and I wasn't looking forward to being back in BOCES again but then I got picked for this and it made all the difference for me."