

Sundance Inspires Video Workshop

BY CARISSA KATZ

Three days after returning from the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, Willie Jenkins, a Bridgehampton High School student who attended a youth portion of the festival along with Clarence Sheppard of the Black Media Foundation and his classmate Johnelle Crews, had great ideas for a video he wants to do on a rap music phenomenon called battle rap.

Battle rap, Willie explained, is when two rappers get together and try to outdo each other. Willie, a rapper himself, has interviewed some rap M.C.s about battle rap, and asked people who don't listen to that kind of music what they think about it.

"It's called 'High Noon,' because that's when you showdown," Willie explained on a recent afternoon at the Bridgehampton Child Care Center, sounding inspired and excited about his project.

Video Workshop

That was just the spark that Mr. Sheppard was hoping to see in the students who participated in the foundation's eight-week video production workshop at the Bridgehampton Child Care Center last fall and into the winter.

The Black Media Foundation is based in Mastic Beach, where Mr. Sheppard and his wife, Natalie Byfield, a former photographer and reporter for the Daily News, live. The foundation works in schools and community centers throughout the

New York area helping young people produce newspapers and videos, and also runs a three-week newspaper program each summer at Fordham University for high school students.

The workshop in Bridgehampton aimed to give students the basics of video production and to help them understand how they can use the medium to express their ideas or bring attention to issues that are important to them. The Wednesday afternoon class came together in fits and starts, with a handful of regulars attending each week and others dropping by now and then to add their thoughts to an ongoing video project.

Shifting Focus

Johnelle, who was one of the regulars, explained the video that developed in the workshop. The project began by examining the work Mr. Sheppard and Ms. Byfield do with the Black Media Foundation, then morphed into an examination of the election. They focused on the history of the child care center for a time. In the end, the students decided to look at how women are portrayed in music videos.

"We really wanted to do something that got us in the heart," Johnelle explained. The workshop participants talked with and interviewed each other.

"They started to think of this video as more about personal issues,"

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observed Anna Gerschman, the director of the child care center. The edited video will probably be a "kind of slice of life in Bridgehampton," Ms. Gerschman said.

Off To Sundance

A few weeks before the Sundance Film Festival, Mr. Sheppard got a call from the festival about the Gen Y Studio, a youth program during the festival.

Sundance was working to bring kids from "at-risk communities" who are interested in film and video production to the festival to share ideas about film and media with teenagers from around the country and the world. With some shuffling of school-work and a generous donation from one of the supporters of the child care center, Willie and Johnelle signed on.

Gen Y brought young people from Washington, New Orleans, California, New York City, Atlanta, Seattle, North Dakota, and as far away as Israel and Pakistan to the festival. The students watched selected feature and documentary films in the festival lineup, met directors and cast members, and also showed some of their own films to each other.

Bigger Problems

Speaking about the trip last week, Willie and Johnelle seemed energized. They had met other young people from points near and far and seen how they told the stories they wanted to tell on video.

"It was good to see how other kids made films and showed their emotions through films," Willie said. "Kids from Israel have it way worse than kids in this country, bombs going off every day."

Talking with kids who have such large problems in their country can make you feel kind of little, Willie said, but the Sundance program's overall message was that "everybody's problems are important. We talked about film as a way to get the message out."

Don't Get Noticed

The students participating in the Gen Y Studio also discussed problems in their various communities. "I'm from the Hamptons; everybody automatically assumes I'm rich and I've got a big house. We don't get noticed," Willie said of the black community in Bridgehampton. "Peo-

ple are poor, they don't have proper heat."

When it was suggested that the students make a documentary about the contradictions of living in the Hamptons, Mr. Sheppard said they were talking about that.

Johnelle and Willie critiqued some of the films they'd seen at Sundance last week. They had different takes on Zhang Yimou's "The Road Home." Willie loved it. Johnelle couldn't stand the way the woman was portrayed. "Being in 2001, being a strong woman and all, I thought she was being a little obsessive," she said.

Key Question

They both loved Vanessa Middleton's "30 Years to Life," about a group of friends reflecting on what it means to turn 30. "The Green Dragon," a film about the Vietnamese camps in America during the Vietnam War, was "really beautiful," Willie said.

Johnelle especially liked "Lalee's Kin" by Susan Fromeick, Deborah Dickson, and Albert Maysles, a documentary about a poor family's struggles in a Mississippi Delta school. The students met the filmmakers at the Gen Y Studio.

One of the key questions students had was: Were the filmmakers manipulating their subjects for their own purposes and what kind of responsibility do they have to the people they film? "We should have a responsibility to the person that they're living because we're taking their lives and showing it to the whole world," Johnelle said.

Respect For Everyone

The Bridgehampton students were also deeply moved by Eder Belzberg's documentary about Romanian street children, called "Children Underground."

Johnelle and Willie filmed the trip, including their reactions to all the films they saw, and will edit it in the coming weeks. By the end of the weekend, Willie had also composed a rap with clever lyrics about their experiences.

"There were some weird videos," Willie said. "But you end up respecting everyone. You have to give a person credit."

The video produced during Mr. Sheppard's workshop and the one Johnelle and Willie made at Sundance are likely to be shown at an opening reception for the Bridgehampton Child Care Center's soon-to-be-completed youth building.

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WILLIE JENKINS, Johnelle Crews, and Clarence Sheppard shared their thoughts on the Sundance Film Festival last week at the Bridgehampton Child Care Center. Carissa Katz