



New Voices program opens eyes, changes perceptions of Washington Park

By Cindy Kranz • ckranz@enquirer.com •
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Last fall, Sycamore High School photography students began a project in Over-the-Rhine with preconceived notions of neighborhood crime and decay.

By the time they finished, they saw the community through a different lens.

Eighteen students joined 10 residents of the Drop Inn Center to shoot photographs and write their impressions of Washington Park and the surrounding neighborhood.

Their work was spearheaded by New Voices, an arts education program produced by the nonprofit Prairie Inc. The program connects high school students to their communities through photography and words.

More than 100 of their photos will be part of the "Welcome to Washington Park" exhibit opening Saturday at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

"They wanted the title to be the antithesis of not going somewhere because you heard it was unsafe or somebody told you not to," said David Rosenthal, executive director of Prairie Inc. "There's a little bit of teen rebellion behind the title, an honest expression of how they really had positive experiences."

The photographs capture the contrasts of rich architecture and crumbling buildings. They depict people wearing smiles and expressions of sadness - not so different from the range of emotions the students would find in their own

neighborhoods.

"They learn just how easy it is to relate to people that you thought were incredibly different," Rosenthal said. "That's the biggest discovery of the whole project."

Before working on the project, Devin Choudhury, an 18-year-old senior, perceived Over-the-Rhine as a violent and dilapidated area of town.

"My perception changed quite a bit. It's a very alive, vibrant community. ... There's very much a soul to that community."

The camera helped to break the ice, but it was the students who got people talking. Students were struck by how candid people were about their lives, the abuse they suffered, their downward spiral into drugs, their loss of jobs and other tough breaks.

"All they want to do is talk to someone and have their voices heard," Devin said.

Peiter Griga, Sycamore photography teacher, said students lost the illusion of the homeless stereotype.

"Going down and just speaking to them was more beneficial to them than just going down there and giving out clothes and sandwiches,"

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Griga said. "They were giving them conversation and company."

Devin was surprised by the amount of hope and passion the homeless have for life, despite everything they've endured.

"They were not just people who were born homeless," Devin said. "Some of them were born poor. But things happened in their lives. You especially could see reflections of the state of the current economy in people who had lost their jobs."

Students visited Over-the-Rhine weekly after school for four months. They worked with Drop Inn Center residents on photo techniques and hit the streets together with cameras.

"It was nice to just joke and laugh. I feel like it was just as much about building relationships with the men in the Drop Inn Center as it was about the project," said Gabriella Chronis, a 17-year-old senior.

"I did have some reservations, initially - a couple of us did - about maybe using that area to make art. We felt sort of manipulative, but that fell away after the first couple of days. We forgot we were supposed to be making something and started just enjoying spending time with each other."

Students also toured some community agencies in Over-the-Rhine to learn more about the neighborhood, along with ongoing development efforts that have been controversial.

"I want the students to understand the complexity of all of these issues and be able to express that in words and pictures," Rosenthal said.

When Rosenthal approached Griga about the project, the Sycamore teacher said he jumped at the chance to introduce his students to another world and the power of photography as a bridge to relate to other people.

"They might not feel that this has changed them," Griga said, "but as they reflect back on it in a couple of years, I think the effect will be monumental."



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If you go

What: " Welcome to Washington Park," a photography/creative writing exhibit by Prairie Inc.'s New Voices Program.

When: Opening 2-4 p.m. Saturday, with a panel discussion on Washington Park at 3 p.m. The exhibit continues through May 1.

Where: Cincinnati Art Museum, lower level, 953 Eden Park Drive, Walnut Hills.

Cost: Free admission; \$4 for parking.

Information: www.prairiecincinnati.com.

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