

NATIONAL

YOUTHS, from page 9

group. "Homeless youth are often invisible to policy makers and to the public. One of the many survival strategies that homeless youth utilize is to 'blend in.' So the public will not see most homeless youths downtown panhandling (or 'spanging,' as the youth call it), holding a sign that says, 'Will work for food.' Homeless youths are far less vulnerable to predators when they look like any other youths walking down the street.

"Just like any other youth, most take pride in their appearances and express themselves via a personal style, so they don't look like the homeless stereotype. Also, just like other youth, they tend to hang out in groups," Holcomb said. "Relationships on the street can become very intense and serve as both substitute families and bodyguards (I would compare this to the bonding with one another that many soldiers experience while under fire).

Sarah Lu of Vocalo.org has been working with HELLO over the past few months. Her goal was to record the youths' stories on certain topics, such as their experience with police abuse, lack of shelters, employment barriers (and how they acquire money when they can't find a job), educational barriers, etc. She hopes to edit these stories and send them to lawmakers to make them aware of the homeless youth community's issues.

"The idea behind the project is pretty simple: we believe that storytelling is powerful. We want to create a space for street-based youth to share their experiences and insights with each other, and we want the community at large to recognize their experiences and insights.

"I hope that the problem of ignorance about the lack of resources for homeless youths will be overcome," Lu said. "I hope that the problem of media editorializing the experiences of street-based folks, of youth, of people of color, and of LGBTQ people in a way that is not accountable to these

communities will be overcome. The stories you'll hear as part of the (Vocalo) project don't sound like normal news stories. They are not editorialized at all. I'd like to show journalists and other people who make media that it is a lot more compelling to hear people tell their own story in their own authentic voice."

On June 9, the 24 gathered youths of HELLO shared their stories and experiences with StreetWise.

One girl said, "The first time that I became homeless I was 13 ... My homelessness was a choice. My family is Nigerian and Puerto Rican, and in my family, girls are worthless even though we are the breadwinners. I was the black sheep in my family and I wasn't going to go along with that. Me being a lesbian was definitely something I had to battle ... my family [about]. When I was 13, my brother, who was 16 at the time, left, so I thought that there was no point in me being (there either). So I gathered up my chump change — a little over two bills — and I got on the bus. ... I had a lot of friends, so I had people to turn to. I graduated high school even though I went through all that out on the streets. I still went to prom, I still went to homecoming."

Another girl shared her story: "The first time that I became homeless, I was 17 and it was my senior year of high school ... The reason why I became homeless was that my mother passed away from a brain aneurysm. I hopped between several different family members and friends, but no one wanted to deal with my grieving and acting out. So I thought I would take on the world myself. I guess I was happy that I had the motivation and pride to graduate despite everything. It was the most crucial time in my life. It's hard — you barely get any sleep. It helps that we youth stick together, though."

One older male talked about how he was kicked out of his home for being gay.

"I was in my junior year of high school and I had lived with my aunt and uncle prior

to that. I had told them that I was gay, and them being older and from a generation where homosexuality wasn't tolerated, they gave me \$40 and told me to have a good life. So that's what I did."

"At that time I decided that I was going to do every activity that I never could before, so I joined every school club available. I used to sleep in the school dugout at my

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high school until I got caught. Sometimes I had to sit in the office because I smelled really bad, but I still graduated 10th in my class. So, I came up north where there are homeless youth programs, and now I'm back in school utilizing the programs ... I'm studying nursing. I'm still homeless and staying in a shelter, but I'm making it happen."

"It's hard to go day-to-day," said one young man who grew up in gangs on the West Side, and who talked about his life as if it was loosely held together with duct tape. "I don't have financial etiquette. We don't have any clue about how to be responsible with money ... Even if you have a little money you're stuck in the middle between being homeless and trying to make it in the world."

"It's like people coming out of prison — they're stuck trying to decide whether to keep doing what they were doing or try and


make it right. There's no one to show you how to make the step-by-step to put it all together and make it all the way. The system is incomplete. Right now I don't have the luxury of bettering myself ... I'm trying not to become homeless again ... I had a job for two years, but I was laid off because of the economy. I wouldn't have had a job if it weren't for programs like this — they sent off for my ID. They sent off for my birth certificate. They helped me get my sanitation license. It helps keep your hopes up, and now I've had a place (to live) for three years."

The youths of HELLO are emotionally sensitive, displaying a mix of street smarts and vulnerability. Rather than focusing exclusively on their own problems, many are concerned about the well-being of their fellow citizens and the state of our nation as a whole. And instead of dwelling on personal pain, discussion at HELLO is focused on voting, advocacy walks, demonstrating, and meeting with other members of their unmoored community.

One has plans for a master's degree after she finishes at Columbia College. Several are pursuing their GEDs, and the majority of the rest have some sort of continued education in their goals for the future. Some youths just want to learn a trade like carpentry or auto mechanics, while others want to be forensic scientists, firemen, caseworkers for the LGBT community, graphic designers, paralegals, chefs, or dancers.

One youth declared, "People always say that 'young people are the future,' but why can't they help us out when we and the programs we utilize are suffering?" Another youth said, "Cops see us every day, but people don't. Invisible nothing. People make me sick, because they say they want to help, but they don't help. People need to reach out to us and help us, call 311 or something. Be one of us for a day."

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PDC urges citizens to help restore Portland's iconic sign by purchasing a commemorative Hung Far Low t-shirt available at Ping restaurant in Old Town/Chinatown.

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