

# Hard focus

Homeless youth tell their side with Project Viewfinder

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About four months ago, approximately a dozen people who were homeless or transitioning out of homelessness got together in a room to discuss what sort of film they wanted to make.

The conversation wasn't easy.

Their mismatched personalities were more pronounced when contrasted against each other. But it also became evident that their variety of experiences were what would make their film great.

The Northwest Film Center started Project Viewfinder in January with the support of New Avenues for Youth, P:ear, Outside In, and BCC TV. There will be a free screening of the film on May 1 in the Northwest Film Center's Whitsell Auditorium inside the Portland Art Museum at 6 p.m.

"I think the project will work because all of us have different voices," said John Pinney, one of the participants. "I don't think any of us really thought we were going to get along. Because I'm grumpy. And Rex is dark. David is too happy. Kayla is constantly writing. Antwoine is really deep. But, I think in the end, it will be a really provocative movie."

They were working together on Project Viewfinder — a concept conceived by the Northwest Film Center and inspired by the story of Hazel Malone, an animator whose early years living on the streets in Portland played a strong role in her working in film.

When Malone was 19 she worked with New Avenues for Youth and the Northwest Film Center to help make a film about two



Kayla Stone, above, says working on her film "helped me understand poverty and creativity a lot more on a level that could maybe help me get out of it."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NWFC

sisters: one dealing with homelessness and how that affected their relationship. Since then she has found a career in animation, working with Bent Image Lab and on the film *Coraline*.

For Project Viewfinder, Malone, School of Film lead faculty member Bushra Azzouz, and supporting filmmakers are guiding a new group of aspiring filmmakers to reflect upon their own experiences with homelessness.

Each of the participants who ended up in the film had a different motivation for coming into it.

Participant David Lee Boston didn't know how to read until high school. But after he gained that skill, he learned he loved literature and writing. With his experience working in a theater, he knew what sort of writing he wanted to do.

"I worked in a movie theater for half my life so I always had that interest in films," Boston said, "I started writing scripts for movies. I submitted stuff that got turned down but I still want to get into the film industry whether it be writing films or directing films. Regardless of what it may be, I want to be involved in filmmaking."

Kayla Stone, also a participant, said she sees creativity and filmmaking as a vehicle

for empowerment.

"It kind of helped me understand poverty and creativity a lot more on a level that could maybe help me get out of it," Stone said, "Teachers and students can be involved in revolutionizing their world and bringing people out of poverty."

The film documents each of their experiences with homelessness. The premise was something that they were at first uncomfortable approaching.

Participant Rex Brushwood said that the group initially wasn't excited about the focus of the film being their own homelessness.

"They got all ... of us in a room, and first of all, none of us really wanted to do the homeless documentary. We all had our own ideas," Brushwood said.

But with guidance and encouragement from Azzouz they came around to the idea of presenting not just homelessness, but their own take on it.

"We gave the students a premise to work with: How would you represent homelessness to the community?" Azzouz said. "As an insider; as someone who has experienced homelessness. Not from the outside in, but the inside out."

And the insiders, according to the participants, are from all different sorts of

backgrounds.

"Everyone is losing their homes because banks get greedy," Brushwood said, "A lot of people from all different walks of life are homeless now because of the economic crisis."

The group worked to create something that would challenge existing stereotypes about what it meant to live on the streets.

"Everyone's individual film shows how clearly wrong those stereotypes are," Malone said, "The way that each one of (the participants) ended up homeless is entirely different from the other and it shows that there are so many reasons outside of a person's control that leads to homelessness while showing how much power and agency (they) are each demonstrating in (their) own lives ... and (they're) each doing something beautiful and creative outside of prescribed economic systems."

"Hopefully we're not just another homeless youth cliché documentary. Hopefully we did something different," Brushwood said. "They weren't just filming us. We were a big part of creating the movie as well as being in it. We all co-created."

Participant Antwoine Thomas said he hopes people who come to see the film will reevaluate their ideas about homelessness.

"We are kind of capturing how we stay rich in our homelessness," Thomas said.

Thomas spoke to the idea of being "home free" instead of "homeless."

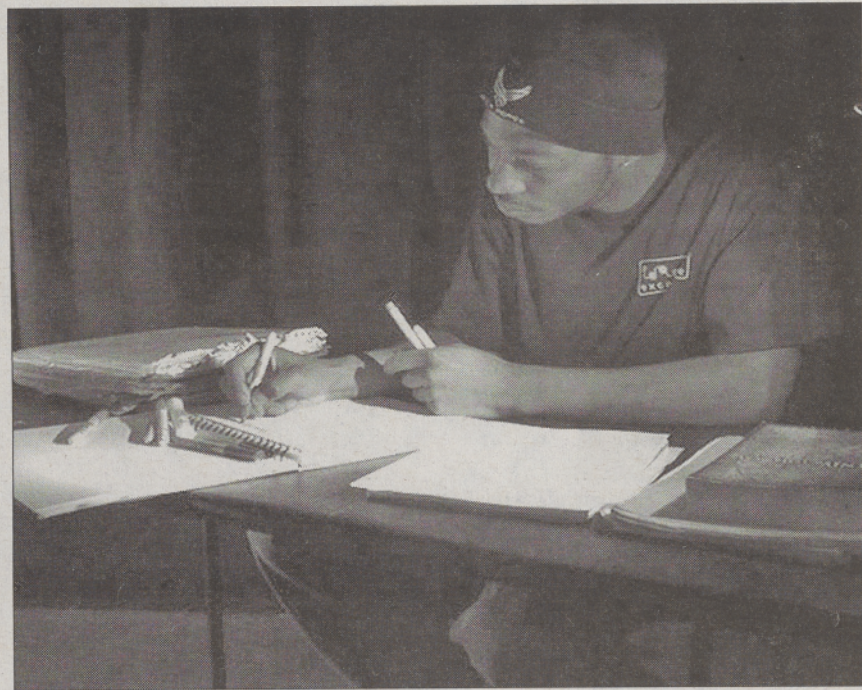
"We're free from that label that a home brings value to somebody," Thomas said. "What makes a home for us has been those things that we created in those films."

While homelessness has undoubtedly challenged each of the participants in different ways, they also said it provided them with invaluable insights.

"(Making the film) was also like therapy because it helped me realize how much I've overcome and how strong I am," Boston said, "It helped me realize ... I can keep going on and do better. I haven't given up and I'm not going to."

Stone said she hopes projects like this will continue to help people transition out of homelessness.

"We've had this economic disaster and we're trying to counteract that by not continuing to stay involved with street stuff but just getting involved with better education and opportunities that can help pull us out into communities with people who have resources," Stone said. "We don't want more people homeless. We want more people going to school."



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Rex, left, and Antwoine, right, shown in their films made with the Northwest Film Center. The films will be offered at a free showing at the Portland Art Museum May 1.



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