

Finding A Voice: Teen Reporters Take On Their World

By Siobhan Skye Rohde

It was not until a WNYC Radio Rookies producer replayed a radio diary piece about a teenager with Tourette syndrome last year that Janesse Nieves began to realize the power and possibilities of creating her own radio piece.

"I've never heard public radio like that. I didn't even know what that was," said Nesse (NEE-see), 17, who goes by her nickname. "I'm like, 'You're saying our stories can sound like that?'"

The director of the Rosedale Achievement Center for Girls, a nonprofit organization that helps young people achieve their academic and personal goals, called Nesse one morning in her South Bronx apartment inviting her to learn more about Radio Rookies. Run by the public radio station, the program trains teenagers to become radio journalists.

Like several city newspaper and broadcast opportunities for teen journalists, the WNYC concept focuses on letting youth learn the art of news gathering first by telling their own personal, and often powerful, stories. Kids are in the news, but they don't often have a voice. "You can read all these stories about kids and they're never quoted," said Rachel Blustain, an editor of Foster Care Youth United, a bi-monthly publication written by and for kids in foster care.

Nesse went to the meeting, applied to be a Rookie and was accepted. Once she had her own Marantz tape recorder, microphone, and headphones, she wanted to catch some sound. She spent the weekend taping her family and even brought the recorder to her dentist appointment.

Nesse chose to do her story on her father's heroin addiction, which had left him homeless, collecting cans and cleaning buildings to make money. Her hope was to help him beat his addiction by telling their story. Nesse interviewed her mother, brother, and cousin. She spoke with a doctor from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine who specialized in substance abuse. And she confronted her father on tape, asking him why he was hurting himself.

The radio piece is raw and honest. In it, Nesse jokes with her brother, loses patience with her father and cries after realizing her father cares more about heroin than he does about her. Listeners can hear pain and longing in Nesse's voice when she reminisces about being daddy's little girl, but her resilience is just as apparent.

Nesse received accolades for her piece on her father in the last year. It won second place in the Third Coast Audio Festival, beating the work of many professional producers and giving Nesse a \$5,000 award that she will put toward her education. Nesse also received a 2002 Hispanic Heritage Youth Award for Literature and Journalism on April 29, which included a \$2,000 educational grant and a \$1,000 donation to the charity of her choice.

But amidst the publicity surrounding her success, nobody has asked Nesse how working as a journalist tackling issues important to her family and her community has changed her view of the media and her role in it.

Kids from lower-income areas of New York City who have participated in youth journalism programs tend to view the media positively through the lens of their experiences. They learn the power of their own words too: rather than portray teens as perpetrators or victims of crime, the media offer them a forum for self-expression, a place for their perspectives to be heard. Although this personal style of journalism breaks many conventional rules of the field, working as journalists allows these teens to gain self-confidence, recognize that their actions have consequences and give a voice to both their peers and their communities.

"It's not that the media casts them in a bad light," said Blustain. "It's more that there's no forum for them to express themselves."

At a 1985 national symposium on media and children's issues, the then-editor of The (Raleigh) News & Observer said in his speech that the media tended to adore children as individuals and ignore them as a group.

"Oh, we build schools and we publish children's books and we fill Saturday morning with kids' cartoons, but beyond that, we mostly ignore children," said Claude Sitton. "Yet no other group is more vulnerable to misfortune, and no other is more critical to our future." Sitton said that although the media deal daily with issues that affect children, they often fail to connect the issues to the children. "We deny Americans the information, the perspective and the initiative to solve the problems that affect children."

Seventeen years later, the national media focus overwhelmingly on youth-related violence at a time when youth crime continues to decline, according to three recent studies.

The New York City Youth Media Study found that The New York Times coverage of youth crime between January and March 2000 over-represented youth perpetrators and under-represented youth victims. It also over-represented school violence, adding to the false impression that school shootings and school violence were on the rise. The Times rarely mentioned causes and contributing factors to crimes involving youth. It only

mentioned one solution, incarceration. Reporters quoted police most frequently about youth crime. Articles portrayed teens of color less positively than white teens.

Youth Force, a coalition of youth organizations fighting against oppression, and We Interrupt This Message, a national media training and strategy center, created the study, which was conducted by teens from the South Bronx Youth Force office. Articles included in the study had to cover a domestic crime involving youth perpetrators or victims and had to discuss domestic juvenile crime trends or policies.

A 2000 Media Monitor study, "What's the Matter with Kids Today?: Images of Teenagers on Local and National TV News," found that television news portrayed youth as a social problem. The study claimed that national newscasts rarely dealt with teenagers, and while one in every 12 stories in local news dealt with youths, most were not linked to broader trends or issues. Few reports criticized youth outright, according to the study; most showed empathy toward their subject and avoided generalization.

A 2001 Children Now study, "The Local Television News Media's Picture of Children," found that in six major media markets, local TV news broadcasts under-represented the presence of children, distorted the level of crime committed by and against children and rarely focused on public policy issues affecting American families. According to the study, 45 percent of stories focused on crime, 24 percent on health, 19 percent on lifestyle issues, 9 percent on education and 3 percent on economics. Children account for over one-quarter of the United States population, said the study, but only 10 percent of the local news stories.

Many teenagers in New York City do not even have the opportunity to write for a school paper. According to Board of Education statistics, less than one third of the city's high schools had student newspapers or literary magazines during the 2001-2002 school year. Queens boasted the highest percentage of the boroughs: 18 of the 38 high schools had student newspapers. Only seven of the 32 Bronx high schools had student newspapers.

Open Society Institute launched its Youth Media and Communication Initiative in 1999 to give teenagers opportunities to express themselves inside and outside school. The organization's literature states that "actively engaging young people in media activities encourages them to be more socially conscious, to have a greater commitment to civic society, and to develop strong critical thinking and communication skills." OSI aims to help more diverse voices in the media to challenge and alter negative stereotypes of youth. Radio Rookies and Foster Care Youth United are among the program's grant recipients.

Kids should begin with personal writing, said Blustain. "Instead of saying 'go out and investigate the world,' start with your story and realize that you can tell what you've been through and that it has some usefulness to other people," she said. "And then once they realize that, they want to go out and look at other things going on."

Blustain works with 10 teenagers at any given time and says 40 to 50 kids a year write for Foster Care Youth United. Another publication from the same company, New Youth Connections, is a general interest teen magazine with 20 to 25 teen participants at any given time.

Young journalists may not be aiming directly for a greater commitment to civic society or greater critical thinking skills, but they do want to tell their stories and be heard. As the teenagers take on the responsibility and power of telling their own stories, they find their work has different impacts.

Producer Czerina Patel of Radio Rookies said the program has been good for the 31 teens that have participated. "As they win awards, they're not winning because they're young and cute. They're winning because it's journalism and good radio," she said. "I think the media is realizing the importance of youth voices in the media." And the Rookies realize the impact their work has on their lives, their families and their communities, she said.

Luis Reyes, 19, aims to inform his community about social justice issues through his work writing for and creating The Word on the Street, a quarterly newspaper for teenagers. The paper is part of the Youth Power Project at Make the Road By Walking, a community organization in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Seven teenagers work on the newspaper's editorial staff, and an additional 12 writers contribute to the paper.

Putting together the paper is a lot of work. "We work every Wednesday on the paper for two hours. We do a lot of reading too: Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, the Birmingham letter," said Reyes, a senior at Bushwick High School's alternative program. "I love to write. It's what I want to do." Luis works on his articles and poems throughout the week, even though he does not get paid for it.

"I feel like somewhere down the road it will inspire somebody," said Luis, wearing three gold chains and a pair of headphones. "It's not about numbers. It's not about statistics. It's about doing it effectively."

Luis does not hear many youth voices in the mainstream media, something he believes needs to change. "Youth have to be quoted," he said, "and youth have to be seen."

For Nesse Nieves, being a radio journalist means being a spokesperson for the South Bronx. Her stories tell outsiders what life is like in her community.

"It makes me feel like what I'm doing is right and what I'm doing makes sense," she said.
"When I go to Manhattan, it's a whole other world. It's like I want people to see two worlds."