Democracy Through Photography
A Photo Literacy Learning Community
Since 1999, Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) has had the special privilege of building unique partnerships in the northeast neighborhoods of the city of Rochester, NY. These partnerships have developed through a network of residents and community-based organizations committed to comprehensive neighborhood development through citizen-based empowerment and ownership. A recent initiative involves RIT, the North East Block Club Alliance (NEBCA), the Greater Rochester Urban Bounty (GRUB), and the City of Rochester North Street Recreation Center (North St.). This collaboration is developing a unique youth leadership program that will encourage young people to take leadership in their own communities. This youth leadership program is an expansion of the successful Summer on the City Farm program, previously funded by the City of Rochester and administered by NEBCA and GRUB.

The Summer on the City Farm program was a summer employment program in which city youth used urban agriculture to learn about entrepreneurship, leader-
ship, work ethic, teambuilding, and community development. Building on this summer youth employment model, this collaboration is working on other projects to further engage youth within their community.

During the spring of 2007, five RIT photojournalism students and one professor, eight youths from the North Street Recreation Center, and one Americorps VISTA member collaborated to form a class called Democracy Through Photography: a Photo Literacy Learning Community. The class was designed to introduce the North Street middle and high-school youth to basic, technical photography skills, and then go on to establish photography as a tool through which to critically examine their community. The community-focused curriculum included workshops on a wide variety of topics, such as family portraiture, exploring dreams, photo as narrative, and stereotyping and media representation. The class studied the history of the northeast neighborhoods, and took field trips to explore local assets in the community: the Vineyard, a 2.6 acre farm that is central to GRUB, and the Rochester Public Market. Emphasis was placed on the contributions of local community leaders, and one of the classes that focused on specific local history was taught by long-time Rochester community activist Gloria Winston Al-Sarag. During all of these activities, students were encouraged to think critically about the way they view their neighborhood and their role as members of the next generation of its leaders. Through each lesson, students learned the meaning of participatory democracy and the many forms it can take, from speaking out against injustice to making photographs.
This class itself has been such an amazing experience. I’ve probably learned more from this class than from other classes I’ve taken—about more than books and technique, but about life in general and working with others to achieve goals. I mean really, what else is more important than kids, the future, and community?” —Valerie Sauers

Making it Happen

Valerie Sauers, Ryan Randolph, Elizabeth Brewster, Lisa Barker, and Marco Flagg, all 3rd or 4th year RIT photojournalism students, came together to work as partners in the Democracy Through Photography class. They took the course as an independent study, with RIT professor Loret Steinberg assisting as an advisor. The class met twice a week—once at RIT and once at North Street. There also were meetings for planning purposes once a week, and the students often spent time outside of class preparing lessons and workshops. The students worked closely with Dove Russo, who spent her year in the Americorps VISTA program working with the partnership as a youth development coordinator. Russo helped to coordinate the community development aspect of the course, working as a liaison between the North Street Recreation Center and the RIT students. Prior to the beginning of the class, she also worked closely with Marco Flagg, the T.A. student leader the class, and Jeanette Warner, an RIT alum who helped to foster RIT’s involvement with North Street, to develop a comprehensive curriculum.

Each of the RIT students involved had expressed interest in exploring the role of photography in community and each brought something unique to the mix, having all been involved previously in similar experiences. For example, Elizabeth had previously taught photography classes in Armenia, Marco taught a similar class through the Rochester Fatherhood Resource Initiative, Lisa was involved with several grassroots community relief organizations while volunteering in New Orleans, and Valerie helped to lead a Wednesday evening art class at North Street. Collectively, they formed a solid and committed team. Said Flagg of the Democracy Through Photography class, “The main thing I took from this is that the most amazing things can happen when people forget about age, or race, or where you’re from, or your economic background, and unite for a common goal of helping children and making sure that the future generation has the ability to question and to feel empowered.”
The final project of the class was designed to be a culmination of all of the aspects of the curriculum. Given the topic "How Can I Effect Change in My Community?" each student was to pick either an asset of their community which they felt was working positively to bring about needed change, or a negative aspect in which they felt change needed to be addressed. They had four weeks to photograph and develop their ideas. Much emphasis was placed on careful research and study of the chosen topic, and the RIT students worked closely with the youth to reach the goals outlined by their project statements.

In the last weeks of the class, as the North Street students were completing their projects, the RIT students worked on designing an interactive exhibition that would feature the final work and highlight the achievements of all of the students. The end result was celebrated by a grand opening at City Hall, where the final projects from the class were displayed. On May 20, 2007, the exhibit, entitled "Picturing Change: Our Community, Our Vision" was presented. Family, friends, and community members and leaders were invited to come and celebrate the achievements of the class participants by viewing the product of their hard work, and the youth had the opportunity to share the thoughts and drive behind their projects. Afterwards, the display traveled throughout Rochester for the rest of the summer, giving the public a chance to appreciate the youths' vision of their community. The show was exhibited at Java Joe's at the Public Market in June, Moodmakers Books in July, and the Rochester Central Library in August.

from top: Dave Russo helps the kids cut a celebratory cake; visitors enjoy the exhibition; students write ideas about how to better their neighborhoods on the interactive "Wall of Change"
"I want to change my community, but I'm just one person. I think we have to come together more to make it better."

-Rachel Burdick

Marco Flagg leads a demonstration on self-portraiture.

The class assignments took several different approaches to introduce students to concepts of photography as it relates to community. Below are several examples of work done throughout the class, and the following pages showcase the final projects from the "My Community, My Vision" exhibit.
Student Work

Elizabeth Brewster and Isaiah Evans work on editing photographs for the final exhibit. Left: Isaiah photographs during the class trip to the Vineyard.

Bottom row, left to right: Neighborhood project by Rachel Burdick; Family project by Nikki Bridges; Dream project by Isaiah Evans; Family project by Eullia Browne.
Nikki Bridges

Nikki is thirteen years old and in the eighth grade at Benjamin Franklin High School. She enjoys sports such as soccer, basketball and tennis, as well as singing, dancing, and acting. When she finishes school, she wants to be a professional soccer player, teacher, actress, choreographer, singer, nurse, model, and entrepreneur. Nikki wanted to take this class because she wanted to learn more about photography and she thought it would be a good experience.

I chose to photograph local businesses that are helpful for the people in my community; businesses that bring people together for the better. I photographed the Family Dollar, Rite-Aid, and a restaurant called Charlie Browns, all located on North Goodman Street. Family Dollar benefits my community by providing jobs for local residents. Rite-Aid is beneficial to those living in the local area because it is the only place in the neighborhood within walking distance that supplies people the prescriptions they need. Lastly, Charlie Brown's is a restaurant that brings people in the community together without there being chaos.

Samantha Burdick

Samantha is thirteen years old and in the eighth grade at Benjamin Franklin High School. Activities that she is involved with include basketball, soccer, football, her church choir, and the program Seeds for College. When she is finished with high school, she plans to continue on to college and study to become a lawyer. Samantha wanted to see what this class would give her and what she might get out of it. She likes taking pictures of both herself and her community.

With my project, I showed that you don’t have to throw things on the ground or stand on the corner doing nothing but getting in trouble when you can go to school or be involved in something in your community. I believe that you should not have to show a lot of your body, like girls do with the little clothes that they wear. Also, you don’t have to get pregnant at a young age because it’s not cute. The next part of my project shows how church can help. You can go and ask God to forgive your sins and what you have done. Finally I felt that what I took photos of for my project could show my community that it could make change and have an effect. By showing the good and the bad, we can see how the good can come over and may create change. One thing I would like to change is the people on the corner.
I photographed my girls soccer team on a field trip to a soccer tournament in Akron. I took pictures of my team having a good time in the hotel and being focused on our soccer games. I photographed because it is important that everyone knows that we are the only girls soccer traveling team in the city of Rochester and it is important that we have more girls programs so we get more girls off the streets. Also Rochester has the highest teen pregnancy rate in New York State and that is ridiculous. If we had more sports programs for girls, girls would focus on something more important. It would also help make a better bond between girls.

My name is Devin J. Young and I'm a photography student at RIT, through the connection of the North Street Recreation Center. My project is basically about the change and impact that we as young people living in the community can effect to improve our neighborhood. I've captured pictures of a city volunteer effort known as the Clean Sweep. I think if we all can come together like this more often, the people in the neighborhood could better maintain the cleanliness of our community.
In one big community there's always a small community. The smaller community that I captured in my photographs are my local barbershops. In these barber shops, people come and are welcomed with smiles and laughter.

The barber shops in my community are not just places where people can come and commune to talk about what is going on in the community and what is going on in the world, but to just get out of the house and get a haircut to look good.

What I would like you to see in my pictures is that the barber shop is more than a place where you get your hair cut, but a place where you are a part of a family and is a great asset to my community.

My project is a good one that shows how education affects my community. I photographed elements at my school, East High, as well as my teachers and classmates. Most of the pictures show their activities at the times. The activities are shown to show how serious people are about their education, and to show what happens at my school. This helps show my community the important of student education. What I hope to get out of this project is to show people how to change their attitude towards education.
In my community we have seen many changes, changed from adults. Changes from children, during Clean Sweep. The kids helped out at Clean Sweep, but we didn’t fund it; the mayor, Bob Duffy did. My project is about change in my community. My pictures show the positive and negative parts of living in Rochester. I want to make a change. A change in some of the abandoned building and houses would be nice.

What I photographed was my family and how their close relationship with each other makes up a positive community. Families like my own are a small community within the larger community, and positive relations in smaller communities will affect how the larger community functions. I love my family because they are not only my family, they are my community, and they are so supportive of me. Because my family always stays strong together no matter what, it will help the big community come together.

Rachel Burdick

Rachel is seventeen years old and in the eleventh grade at Benjamin Franklin High School (Global Media Arts). She loves working with her senior year of high school. She plans to attend college with a double major in health education and massage therapy. Rachel wanted to take this class because she thought it sounded interesting and would be a good experience.

Betti Bridges

Betti is twelve years old and in the sixth grade at school number fifty-four. Outside of school she enjoys playing soccer, going on myspace, photography class, and singing and dancing. Betti wanted to take this class because she thought it would be a good experience and she did not previously know much about photography. When she finishes school she wants to be a professional soccer player and a surgeon.
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