

Queens Ledger

Dateline : Thursday, February 28, 2008

On the Air and Self-Aware



THREE QUEENS KIDS LIVING AWAY FROM HOME JOIN NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO'S CADRE OF TALENT

By Phil Guie

It's the story of their lives, both in content as well as accomplishment.

Last Friday, a trio of Queens' residents officially graduated from the youth journalism program Radio Rookies, which teaches teenagers how to produce, edit, and record their own radio documentaries for National Public Radio.

Along with discovering the power of the microphone, the rookies got access to station resources at WNYC. But they were also in charge of fact-checking, honing their stories, and performing other duties common among real radio journalists - all on a deadline. The end result was "Out On My Own: Stories of Living Away from One's Parents," which as the title indicates pertains to subjects who, for one reason or another, have found themselves separated from their birth parents at a relatively young age.

They include Jordan Teklav, a 17-year-old who had been legally emancipated from his parents since the age of 15; Shirley "Star" Diaz, a young woman trying to break away from a tragic childhood; and Krystle Monclova, a 14-year-old currently living in a group home due to friction with her mother.

Once the final seconds tick away from their recorded segments, their futures remain open-ended questions. But as the graduates celebrated their accomplishments at The Door - a Manhattan youth center that has long-partnered with and provided space for Radio Rookies - last Friday, they expressed a sense of pride and hope towards the future.

"Words can't express how happy I am," said Teklav, who in 2004 petitioned the California court system to grant him independence from the emotional ups and downs of his relationship with his mother.

In his feature "Emancipation Proclamation," he talks about his early struggles being an adult in a world that views him as a minor, moving from Sacramento to New York City, and his struggles with credit cards and balancing high school and a full-time job.

But things eventually worked out. Teklav now works at a Starbucks in Manhattan's Upper West Side, lives in Sunnyside, and his segment premiered this past Monday during WNYC's "Morning Edition." His relationship with his mother has also improved considerably, he said.

An avid radio fan, especially of author and radio host Wendy Williams, he hopes to have his own successful radio show, and is currently working on launching a podcast.

"I've gotten where I am through dedication," Teklav said. "If you really want something and are willing to do anything to get it, you'll get it eventually."

Kaari Pitkin, one of the show's producers, said their youth journalists are not all

necessarily looking for radio careers. Nevertheless, the chance for creative expression tends to pique interest.

She said completing their features brings a huge sense of accomplishment to the rookies. "Working that hard, and taking so many brave steps, they each come out with a great sense of something they can be proud of," Pitkin said, noting the process of emerging with a polished, radio-ready segment takes students five to six months.

While Teklay aims to become a major media figure, one of his fellow subjects/producers has more modest ambitions. Diaz, who bounced around the foster care system after her father murdered her mother when she was 13 years old, needs to get a job and support herself, especially since her 21st birthday is fast approaching. Unfortunately, her inability to break away from childhood experiences paralyzes her, even in the face of potential homelessness.

After being presented with a plaque by the Radio Rookies producers, Diaz, who currently lives in Astoria, said the segment did more than just allow her a sounding board; it also gave her direction towards a future career path.

"You don't want to pick [the microphone] up sometimes, but that's when I realized, 'This is what I want to do, I want to reach youth,'" said the Astoria resident. "This took a lot of courage just to get out there and admit a lot of the things we're holding inside. I'm just glad I got the chance to express my world and hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed doing it."

When asked about the relationship with her father, a sensitive subject touched upon in her feature, Diaz said they have exchanged letters, but she is not ready to visit him in prison. She claims he has avoided discussing the night her mother was killed.

"The wound is still open and deep down I feel trapped," she said.

Finally, in the documentary "My Not So Sweet Home," Monclova explores being separated from her mother since last summer, and how she needs to change before family court will allow her back.

Although she described their relationship as still troubled, the pair shared an embrace as her feature was played for attendees.

"My Not So Sweet Home" will air during "Morning Edition," on WNYC 93.9 FM and AM 820 from 5 to 9:30 a.m. this Friday, February 29th. All three stories will also be available for listening and downloading at www.radiorookies.org.

PHOTO CAPTION: Radio Rookies (left to right) Krystle Monclova, Jordan Teklay, and Shirley "Star" Diaz.