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Program allows teens to tell their story - and heal - via radio broadcasts

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4 Islanders share their experiences through 'Radio Rookies' initiative Four Staten Island teenagers facing seemingly insurmountable odds got the opportunity to turn their hardships into intriguing radio broadcasts as part of **WNYC's** "Radio Rookies" program.

Marie Stephen, 18, of Sea View shared her experience of losing weight in an attempt to boost her low self-esteem. Despite reaching her weight-loss goals, Miss Stephen still experienced the depression she believed would subside after her transformation. "I go right back to feeling like a hippopotamus," she said.

At the conclusion of her broadcast premiere yesterday in St. Paul's R.C. Church, New Brighton, Miss Stephen could not hold back her tears, as the entire audience rose to its feet in overwhelming applause.

For 15 year-old Christian, who withheld his last name because he is an illegal Mexican immigrant, his research helped him face the uncertain future that awaits him as an undocumented boy living in the United States. "I would risk my life to be an American citizen," said Christian, whose broadcast explored the possibility of serving in the military as a path to citizenship.

Sonia Ponce, 18, of Port Richmond, learned about evolution in junior high school and hasn't looked back since.

Now she is an atheist and practitioner of witchcraft who faces the challenge of explaining to her deeply religious parents and 12 siblings why she doesn't believe in God. Her situation became so dire she left home and moved in with her boyfriend, to which her mother responded, "For me she is dead." Through her documentary, Miss Ponce re-established her relationship with her parents.

"I still believe there is no God, but now we agree to disagree," she said.

Sara Martinez, 17, of Port Richmond, often found herself angry about the responsibilities inadvertently placed on her by her family. Living in a home with an autistic brother and parents who don't speak English, Miss Martinez is forced to act as a "second mother."

Through interviews with her family and autism experts, she was able to establish a deeper appreciation for the huge responsibilities she carries. At the conclusion of her premiere, Miss Martinez and her mother engaged in a deep embrace that signified the newfound respect each had for the other.

A new broadcast will be aired every Tuesday through July 10, on **WNYC** Radio, 93.9 FM and AM 820 at 6:40 a.m. and 9:40 a.m. The broadcast can also be heard on the program's Web site www.radiorookies.org.