

Picturing a Better Future

Students focus on what is and what could be

By Lori Russell

If a picture is worth a thousand words, local high school students have created a tome.

Through PhotoVoice—a project sponsored by YouthThink and the Gorge Photography Club—nearly 60 students from The Dalles Wahtonka High School focused cameras on their school and community, documenting what they believe needs to change and signs positive change is occurring.

Images reflecting the themes of depression, isolation, graffiti and litter appeared in the students' work, as did the smiling faces of young and old, laughter shared during a baking class and a quiet moment with a good book.

The project—which began as an after-school program

“I liked this picture because it shows character and experience, learning from those older than you.”

—Zach Adams

this winter—expanded to include students in the high school's photography classes taught by Paula Long.

“Photographs offer a different way to tell a story,” says Debby Jones of YouthThink. “We had athletes, academics, drama kids—the project brought them all together.”

Members of the Gorge Photography Club met with students, encouraging them to work as photojournalists, creating stories with photographs and capturing the daily struggles and achievements of their community rather than setting up posed shots.

Students also wrote captions for their pictures.

“I thoroughly enjoyed working with the kids,” says Ray Whitmire, president of the Gorge Photography Club. “I became really enthused as we talked with them and saw how the images came out.”

Debby notes that “the biggest thing with young people is to let them know we value them. The adults in the photography club do not talk down to the kids. They share a passion. When they get together, it is just two individuals talking about what they are interested in.”

At the end of the project, students submitted snapshots of their five best photos for evaluation. Photography club members selected the final images for a show at The Dalles Art Center in April.

Many students saw their photograph—enlarged and professionally matted—for the first time at the show's opening reception.

“I was really impressed with these kids' photos, says Ray. “Some of them really have a good eye and lots of enthusiasm.”

Sophomore George Zenker, who shot dozens of photos with a point-and-shoot camera during the course of three weeks, says he did not have a theme in mind when he began the PhotoVoice project.

His final image was shot looking up a flight of stairs at a pair of friends exchanging a hug. His caption read, “Even when what we want seems out of sight, it is only a few steps away.”

While his primary way of expressing his ideas is through writing, George says he has been exploring other forms of self-expression this year in art classes at school and through the PhotoVoice project.



Ray Whitmire, left, president of the Gorge Photography Club, deferred to George Zenker when deciding how to set up this shot of the two of them reviewing student photos featured in the exhibit.



Zach Adams, a freshman from The Dalles Wahtonka High School, beside his photo of his grandmother Betty Wulf.



George's photo of two friends hugging at the top of the stairs at school.

"If you had asked me before, I would have said I like art, but I wouldn't have had strong feelings about it because I hadn't experienced it," he explains.

George says photography not only has given him another source of expression, it has impacted his writing.

"Because I have more than

one way to express myself, I can go back to the original way and have more to say," he explains.

Freshman Zach Adams did not have to look farther than his living room for the inspiration for his final photo.

"My grandmother was visiting from Montana, and I took her picture while she was

"Even when what we want seems out of sight, it is only a few steps away."

—George Zenker

talking," he says.

His caption for Betty Wulf's photo reads, "I liked this picture because it shows character and experience, learning from those older than you."

Debbly hopes YouthThink can partner with other community organizations to coordinate programs allowing students to work one on one with the photography club and other groups of adults.

"These are little connections that when they happen, can bring change," she says. ■

YouthThink

Today's teens and their parents face a world with different choices and challenges than a few decades ago. YouthThink provides a unified community force promoting healthy lifestyle choices, focusing on the prevention and reduction of youth substance use and other negative risk behaviors.

The PhotoVoice project is just one of the opportunities YouthThink offers for local youth and their families.

In partnership with The Dalles Wahtonka High School, the group presents "Challenge Day" for local high school youth each fall, encouraging them to "be the change" they want to see in their community.

Twice a year, YouthThink produces its Reality Tour—a dramatic presentation for youth and their parents about the consequences of underage alcohol and drug use.

Community members are invited to attend a YouthThink meeting the second Wednesday of each month at 5 p.m. at The Dalles Middle School.

For more information and resources for local youth and their families, go to www.youththink.net.