

Youth Work Snapshots

Heads On Fire

(May 1, 2005)

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Objective: Help youth use technology for social change.

In a Nutshell: Partners with social service agencies and community technology companies to provide technology access and education, primarily for youth, in underserved areas. Activities are divided into three areas: The [i]-Team provides digital literacy instruction; ECHOES helps youth use digital technology to document stories of community interest, which are produced on a CD-Rom magazine; and the SunScreens series features the digital work of youth in a two-month gallery exhibit, based on an annual theme. Last year's theme was artistic statements by or about California youth in crisis.

When and Where: The program began in 2003. It is based in San Diego, although partnership projects extend beyond the city limits. In a project last year, youths worked with Afghan war orphans who were in an Austrian refugee camp. Most of the work takes place after school and in the summer, at sites around the city.

Who Started and Runs It: Xavier Leonard, a designer and media artist, who says he was inspired by production work he did for youth in the West African country of Ivory Coast. The agency has a shifting part-time staff of 20 to 25, including project directors, interns, instructors and production assistants.

Obstacles: "There was really no infrastructure for this kind of work in San Diego, or core means of support," Leonard says. He overcame that with "a lot of meetings, a lot of introducing ourselves."

Cost: Just under \$100,000, up from under \$5,000 the first year.

Who Pays: The foundation of the organization's funding is fees for services from community partners, such as the Center for Parent Involvement in Education, San Diego Youth and Community Services, Nativity Prep Academy and Young Audiences of San Diego. Other contributions come from the Jacobs Foundation, the International Community Foundation, the Waitt Family Foundation and the Community Technology Foundation of California.

Youth Served: "We work with any community that is unlikely to benefit from access to technology, or has the greatest need to use media production tools to tell their stories," Leonard

says. He estimates that more than 500 young people, ages 12 to 24, have worked with Heads On Fire since its inception.

Many participants are minorities, refugees and children of families affected by incarceration.

Youth Turn-On: Working with media, using methods and modes they're attracted to. "It's part and parcel of the cool things they consume," Leonard says.

Youth Turn-Off: "We require a lot of self-sufficiency, and kids have to take real ownership in their work for progress to happen with us," Leonard says. "The freedom that we give them [with projects] sometimes creates the biggest challenge."

What Still Gets in the Way: As a program designed to bring the services to communities, Leonard and staff struggle with adapting to fit the needs at various sites. For example, he says, "We work with youth who have fallen into the role of caretaker for both their parent and younger siblings. In after-school situations, we have to be prepared to accommodate those younger siblings if we want our participant to show up."