

# Making Youth Known



## Behind the Video Camera

Student Filmmakers Learn New Role as Agents of Social Change

WHAT  
**Kids**  
CAN DO

**Powerful learning  
with public purpose**

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## **Who we are**

What Kids Can Do, Inc. promotes the value of young people, working with teachers and other adults, on projects that combine powerful learning with public purpose. We collect and share feature stories, student work and voices, research and resources that expand current views of what constitutes challenging learning and achievement, particularly for adolescent students. We believe deeply in the contributions of youth as citizens. We put youth voices and work at the forefront of all we produce.

## **What we value**

Powerful learning in which young people:

- Engage in issues that have meaning to them and their communities, in work that inspires their commitment and effort.
- Conduct work that crosses disciplines, connects academics to the real world, requires the application of new information.
- Encounter high expectations, plentiful opportunities to gain new skills, substantial support, clear goals and rules.
- Experience give-and-take with adults that is truly reciprocal and mutually respectful.
- Develop initiative, persistence, flexibility, risk-taking, curiosity, a social conscience.
- Have their work assessed as it unfolds and receive opportunities for ongoing feedback and reflection.
- Share their results publicly.

## Behind the Video Camera: Student Filmmakers Learn New Role as Agents of Change

*Young people are learning media literacy and video production at EVC workshops. At the same time, the program nurtures their idealism, intellectual development, and commitment to social justice.*

This past June in a New York City public library, a young videographer presented “Youth vs. Media,” a documentary she and several other teen filmmakers had made about media misrepresentations of youth. In the question-and-answer session that followed, she asserted: “I’m a teen. I want to prove to the whole world that what the media is saying about me is really wrong. They judge me by who I am and the way I look. If they say youth are useless and bad, we can be smarter by doing this kind of work. By showing this kind of video, it is like we are fighting back for our rights.”

Sparking such attitudes was exactly what journalist Steven Goodman had in mind when he founded the Educational Video Center (EVC) in 1984. The non-profit organization aims to help adolescents develop media literacy and technical filmmaking skills while nurturing their idealism, intellectual development, and commitment to social justice.

Four afternoons per week, 30 students from resource-poor schools throughout New York City spend three hours at EVC in its High School Documentary Workshop. During the for-credit, semester-long program, students work together to produce short video documentaries on subjects like race relations, drug abuse, schooling, or criminal justice.

A model of synergy between school and community, EVC also has its students interacting with neighborhood adults in various roles—police officers, judges, shopkeepers, social workers. “The kids get out and do interviews on the streets,” Goodman said. “They are working on serious issues, asking good questions, being treated as adults and connecting to adults in the community in positive and authentic ways.”

The more they get out of the school building in such ways, he added, the more they learn. One student’s beliefs and perspectives on capital punishment notably shifted, Goodman recalled, after interviewing a former prisoner who was falsely accused of a crime. On the flip side, Goodman noted, “community people get a better picture of what kids have to say, which they need in their own work.”

In turn, students’ films prompt new questions about important community issues and help stir, as hoped, local civic action.

*Students' sense of themselves and their place in society evolves along with their work in making documentaries. Teachers and advisers report growth, change, and increased maturity in students after the video workshops.*

### **The Power of Video for Learning and Change**

As contemporary media become the chief means of communication and entertainment among young people everywhere, growing numbers of educators use television and film to stimulate learning. They may ask students, for example, to examine a news program or a sitcom for subtle bias, or to break down a soundtrack or visual sequence to explore how it manipulates an audience. Once they gain the critical thinking habits required for such nuanced viewing, teachers report, students are able to transfer them from new media into more traditional academic fields.

Steve Goodman learned all this from personal experience in the early 1980s. While studying at Columbia University and its graduate school of journalism, he produced a documentary on a South Bronx youth gang. When he screened it for community audiences in the Bronx and teenagers in alternative high schools, the vital discussions that followed made him recognize the power of video—not only to capture the social conditions of inner-city life but to raise the possibility of changing them. Convinced that the next step should be for teenagers to explore and document their own communities, Goodman began teaching a video workshop at Satellite Academy, a small alternative high school.

Satellite proved fertile ground for exploring Goodman's interest in a more active, student-centered, and community-based curriculum and pedagogy. Simultaneously, community media centers such as DCTV and Young Filmmakers—with a real emphasis on community—had become established institutions in the city, encouraging activists to use their newly available portable cameras and editing facilities to achieve political as well as artistic goals.

When EVC opened in 1984, it quickly staked its ground and stood out from other youth media programs for its powerful linking of videography with issues of social justice. Early on, Goodman also incorporated innovative techniques of assessing student performance using rubrics that rated both products and process against explicit, professional criteria for excellence.

Such active and experiential learning won high praise from the city's growing network of alternative schools—City as School, Vanguard High School, Central Park East Secondary School, and others like them. "Teachers and advisers who have worked with us over time say what happens here is productive and positive," Goodman said. "They see the growth and change as kids mature in the process."

Other EVC programs grew from these early successes with the high school documentary workshops. Students who upon completion wanted to continue their work suggested creating YO-TV (Youth Organizers TV) as a means. Each semester, six of the workshop students will stay on for an additional paid year of pre-professional

work as the crew of YO-TV, which produces short documentaries for outside clients like museums, human rights organizations, or public broadcasters.

EVC also reaches into both school and community. Its Teacher Development program offers workshops, seminars, summer institutes, and consultations in 25 schools around the city for teachers who may never have held a camera but see the possibilities for introducing filmmaking into other academic areas. And its Community Organizers TV (CO-TV) programs train parents and community organizers to use video as a tool for achieving social changes like equity in education, housing for the homeless, rights for immigrants, and funding for youth services.

### **Galvanizing Citizen Action, Prompting Student Growth**

In 17 years, young people at EVC have created over 75 short video documentaries about difficult and contentious issues. They include “Young Gunz,” about why teenagers carry guns; “Unequal Education,” an expose of the uneven allocation of resources in two neighboring schools; and “Blacks and Jews: Are They Really Sworn Enemies?” about the Crown Heights riots. EVC student films have won some 100 national and international awards. They have been shown nationwide on ABC, NBC, and PBS, and one appeared in Bill Moyers’s public television series, “Listening to America.”

Such national exposure, as is so often the case, is what sparks local debate and change. The 1991 student film “Unequal Education,” for instance, exposed deep class- and race-based inequities between two middle schools in widely disparate Bronx neighborhoods. Its screening on national television sent shock waves through the more privileged neighborhood, dividing its local school board and community and galvanizing African-American activists to challenge the status quo. Neighbors gathered in living rooms to watch the film. After seeing it at a conference on education law, the Bronx Legal Services took up the issue of school equity and parent/student advocacy.

Another student documentary, “2371 Second Avenue: An East Harlem Story,” also prodded community action. Made by Central Park East High School student Millie Reyes, the video documents the tough conditions in the building where she lived with no heat or hot water. The EVC crew researched the code violations on file against the landlord and filmed the substandard conditions, including one shot of Millie’s cousin washing her baby in an empty bathtub with water heated in pots on the stove. Throughout the process, Millie became a leader of her building, organizing residents to sign a petition to withhold rent until all 90-some violations were addressed. When Millie and her neighbors presented the petition, they were thrown out of the landlord’s office. But the EVC crew on hand captured the scene on

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camera. Millie eventually showed her tape and was interviewed on NBC’s Today Show. Shortly after, the landlord sold the building and conditions improved.

Most EVC videos, though, are not broadcast nationally but used locally by grassroots organizing groups to inform and galvanize citizens. Systemic changes that might result from such screenings are often slow to take shape and difficult to identify. But the connection made between the youth and adult organizers in a community is immediate. And so EVC students contribute their artistry, ideas, and passion to the incremental work of social change.

Not surprisingly, the students’ sense of themselves and their place in society evolves with their work. Many EVC students come from communities where they face poverty, racism, and trouble with the police on a daily basis. Because “video defamiliarizes the familiar,” Goodman said in an interview with the New York Times, the act of making films can transform students’ perceptions of their familiar urban setting. “Video documentary enables students to bear witness to their social conditions and look for solutions,” he said. “We tend to go through life almost being lulled into accepting our conditions,” he continued, “but there’s something about video that captures life, reframes it, positions it.” That new perspective leads both to powerful learning and to further community action, he has found.

As if to prove his point, Samuel Delgado, a young EVC filmmaker, recently said after making a short documentary about the International Criminal Court, “I like telling stories that matter. Not idiotic stories about asteroids hitting the earth [or] a woman running away from a serial killer. I like telling stories that you can watch and you can learn something from—like, ‘I can’t believe that’s going on, I should do something about it.’ [They’re] really social change media, things that you watch that make you want to act.”

EVC affects its young producers in other ways, too. Students learn to examine objectively the slew of media that permeates their lives, whether print, video, audio, film, television, the Internet, or CD-ROMs. Media educator Mary Megee said recently in the New York Times that such skills are important, because “to be effective participants in the public dialogue, young people have to learn to be critical receivers and capable senders of messages themselves.”

By working together in groups, students also learn new habits of collaboration, problem solving, decision making, and revision. Just as important, EVC’s young videographers practice a particularly personal brand of accountability. They may go out in the field with professional mentors, but the mistakes they make—and what they learn from them—are entirely their own.

### **Building Persistence, Collaboration, Critical Thinking**

**Awareness and Motivation.** EVC's students are a diverse group, usually coming from alternative high schools and often struggling with academic skills, family troubles, or worse. "We aim to serve kids who do not normally have opportunities for these kinds of experiences," said Goodman. Their interest and willingness to participate fully are the Documentary Workshop's chief entry criteria.

Because students attend EVC voluntarily and choose film topics of their own interests—with direct bearing on their own lives—motivation is usually internally driven and not an issue. Meeting the looming deadline of a public screening keeps students focused, as does working together in teams. As former EVC student Ray Ballanger explained, "Once everyone could start to see [the video] actually materializing, everyone wanted to make it the best possible."

At the same time, the inherent demands of filmmaking and EVC's rigorous revision processes inevitably produce moments requiring patience and persistence. "There are times I just wanted to walk away," acknowledged Sam Delgado, who intends to pursue a career in filmmaking. "But you can't do that if you want to see your message get out."

**Capacities and Supports.** Students come to EVC's high school workshops with little knowledge about what a documentary is or what it takes to produce one, though they often come with strong feelings about the social issues and conditions their films aim to capture. During the semester, EVC's two full-time filmmaker-teachers guide students through the steep learning curve as they develop skills in research, writing, interviewing, critical viewing, technical arts, editing, and collaborative work.

The intergenerational aspects of EVC's work—students' interactions with the community members they interview as well as their adult instructors—offer additional support. "Young people do not get opportunities at school or at home to really work alongside an adult on a challenging project," Goodman said. Although supportive adults are also "there for the kids" in alternative education and youth development settings, he noted, their effectiveness can be limited without a strong enough intellectual focus.

To help keep that focus, EVC maintains a steady emphasis on teaching students to craft well-supported arguments through the narrative of their films. Working together in teams, students gather regularly to decide the "line of inquiry" they will follow, keeping a firm sight on the impact they want their films to create. They brainstorm questions that will both guide their next interviews and determine the location and purpose of their shooting sessions. (See pages 10–11 for a sample of wall chart notes from such a session.)

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To further track and enhance an individual's learning and development, EVC asks all participating students to keep work portfolios. These include resumes, demonstration reels of their documentaries, and examples of both growth over time and their best work. Portfolios might contain interview protocols students have developed that show different styles of questioning or journal writings about what they are learning and experiencing. Students eventually present their portfolios at "roundtables" attended by outsiders as well as EVC staff. "It's a way to assess each person's individual learning, not just the success of the group project," Goodman noted.

**Opportunities.** In addition to the daily activities involved in video production, EVC's assessment process offers students valuable "real-world" experience. It begins with early screenings of rough cuts that allow young filmmakers to test out the impact of their work on their intended audiences. After showing his International Criminal Court video to other high school students, César Guerra noted, "It's very much a good way to do it, to have other people criticize it. Because once you get involved in a project you get used to what you get. But after you bring in someone new, it's like, 'Okay, you're wrong on that.' So it's kind of good."

After revisions based on their rough-cut showings, students present their work at a public screening followed by an intense question-and-answer session. Attended by film and other professionals in related fields, peers, teachers, and family members, such screenings celebrate and recognize the young people's efforts and contributions to the community. They also apply real-world standards to students' work.

When Delgado and Guerra, for example, screened "ICC: A Call for Justice" for officials of Human Rights Watch International, it met with high praise—but candid suggestions also tumbled forth. One audience member advised setting the historical context more effectively. "You talk about the idea starting in the nineteenth century, but then you fast forward to Nuremberg—it was confusing." Another pointed out that Guerra and Delgado needed to support their claim that the twentieth century is the "most murderous," by presenting graphics that explain the numbers of people arrested, disappeared, or victimized by torture.

Besides improving the final product, these public screenings also bestow a practical benefit: they help students build a network of professionals to support them in future career and education choices.

The Center's staff and alumni association also serve as a continuing resource for the former workshop participants who often solicit advice, contacts, and references. "One called recently after five years, to get recommendations on equipment for a piece he is producing with an uncle," Goodman said. Center staff connects former students with job opportunities and invite them back to present their work. A YO-TV crew that had completed a documentary on hip hop culture, for example,



showed the video at the Brooklyn Museum two years later. Another group exhibited its work at Brooklyn College. And in July 2001, EVC students from the previous semester's workshop, as well as alumni from 10 years earlier, came together to a screen and discuss their work at an Open Society Institute meeting on youth media and community organizing.

### **More than an After-School Program, Not Quite a School**

**Base of Action.** EVC's unique combination of student learning, community action, and teacher professional development makes the organization difficult to categorize neatly. "We're not quite an after-school program," explained Goodman, "because kids are served during the school day and they get school credit for their work. Are we a technical program, a jobs program, an arts program, a literacy program, a social change program? Should we become a school ourselves?"

Given the restrictions and constraints on New York schools, Goodman considers operating outside the school system to have more advantages than not. Chief among them is a degree of flexibility not available to schools. On a practical level, EVC's three-hour sessions represent a block of time necessary for filming, interviewing, or screenings but virtually impossible to secure within a school's daily schedule.

Capitalizing on unexpected opportunities is another advantage. EVC recently has begun discussions with the Urban League about working with parents in the community to use media as an organizing strategy to affect school funding and other equity issues. This project grew out of its Community Organizers TV (CO-TV) branch, but only recently did it turn away from broader community issues to school reform and parent groups—a focus that might see better success if pursued from outside schools.

Perhaps most important, though, is the curricular freedom EVC enjoys as an independent non-profit. The social issues at the core of EVC's mission—those of poverty, racism, violence, teen pregnancy, or drug abuse—are generally off limits to a public school system funded primarily by taxpayers. Schools may address these as personal issues in advisory groups, Goodman observed, but they rarely make such matters part of the academic curriculum. At EVC, by contrast, students research and document them as social and cultural phenomena. The process of portraying that information on film, Goodman noted, "empowers kids to see themselves in context, to communicate to others how that feels."

At the same time, EVC shares some of the same concerns as schools and other non-profits. Funding remains a constant struggle. Though the New York City Board of Education provides EVC with rent-free space in a midtown Manhattan alternative school and salaries for the two filmmaker-teachers on staff, "some foundations don't

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—From the student manual of  
*Youth Organizers-TV (YO-TV)*

quite know what to make of us,” Goodman said. With a \$650,000 annual budget in 2001, EVC pays its part-time media educators less than what the city does its teachers for comparable work. Keeping committed staff at such low salaries is one of EVC’s chief worries.

Finding the time and the tools to help its professional videographers become better teachers is another ongoing challenge. The entire staff now meets in study groups for three hours bi-weekly to develop their understanding of the teaching and learning process. Staff members keep journals, watch and critique tapes of each other’s workshops, and read and discuss relevant articles. “We’ve recently been looking for professional development ideas from the work of other outside groups that compare to ours, such as the National Writing Project or Foxfire,” Goodman noted. “It’s difficult to find the time, but well worth it.”

For now, Goodman concluded, EVC remains “an independent nonprofit organization with strong connections to the alternative school infrastructure.”

**Target of Action.** From the start, EVC’s special niche has been its dual focus on both education and social activism. “If you take away the community change part, the kids could be making music videos,” Goodman observed. “If you disregard the developmental learning part, they could be documentaries about social justice but essentially directed, shot, and edited by the adults in charge.”

The idealism of young people makes them ideally suited to carrying out EVC’s mission. Their passion for their chosen causes is palpable. “We believe that when you pick up a camera you are arming yourself,” YO-TV students wrote in a manual for their peers. “Video can give you the potential to bring people together, to make people understand one another, or to kill whatever silence hovers over any issue(s) you are interested in.”

And the often stressful experiences of EVC’s urban students yield films topics of undeniable relevance to these young lives and the communities around them. In 2001, for example, students chose to investigate policing and efforts to reform it; in previous years, themes have included drug abuse, housing and homelessness, teen parents, poverty, and death and bereavement.

From the beginning, EVC planned on students learning something from their exposure to community members. But young people have something to teach their elders as well. When a student with a camera asks intelligent questions about important issues, adults in the community take notice. The passion and idealism of youth can help dissolve the cynicism and indifference—about the motivations of younger generations and the possibilities for meaningful change—that grip too many more experienced citizens.

An ironic measure of adults' growing respect for EVC's students is the resistance young filmmakers face in the field as they pursue their interviews. "They had a really hard time getting interviews with the police," Goodman said. "Even when it's for high school kids, police don't want to be on videotape." New York City's Board of Education and various school district personnel were also suspicious of "kids with cameras asking questions," when students made an earlier documentary about inequities in school funding and resources.

Whatever the context, Goodman remarked, "the kids get treated like any other journalists." As much as any other, that fact points to EVC's strikingly successful double mission: to capitalize on young people's idealism and in the process to educate several generations about things they could only learn from each other.

*When a student with a camera asks intelligent questions about important issues, adults in the community take notice.*

## Excerpts from a Wall Chart Recording Student Inquiry on a Film in Progress

### MAIN IDEA

✓ To investigate the difference in effectiveness between incarceration centers [ICs] versus alternate-to-incarceration centers [AICs] for youth in NYC area.

*Also:*

✓ To show the “truth” of what really goes on in the juvenile justice system.

✓ To show the differences between an IC person, an AIC person who has been through the system, and someone who has experienced both.

✓ To answer: how effective are AIC for youth?

✓ To compare how effective AICs versus ICs are in assisting after release and the resources each has available.

### DESIRED EFFECTS ON SOCIETY OF OUR VIDEO

✓ To show the basics of the criminal justice system, especially for juveniles, by showing how one gets into it and what happens when one enters the system.

✓ To communicate the express PURPOSE, clearly stated, of the alternate incarceration centers and incarceration centers.

✓ To make people aware of the individual control factors of the jail system (there isn't a “standard” but many individual and biased decisions).

✓ To help people understand what is REALLY going on.

✓ To get kids bothered, to see that jail isn't a cool place, to think twice about their actions, to know that prison is BAD by inference from what we show.

✓ To help people see that prison is not good but is necessary.

✓ To help people see that many laws are too harsh.

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

✓ What is the purpose of alternative incarceration centers? How did the idea start?

✓ What is it like in an AIC? An IC? What is the everyday schedule in each? What programs does each have?

✓ Who can be sentenced to an AIC vs. an IC?

✓ Who are in these places? (ethnicity)

✓ What is the per client cost of AIC vs IC?

✓ Do these centers rehabilitate? Why or why not?

✓ What are the recidivism rates for each?

✓ How have these programs changed since they first began?

✓ What worked and didn't work in each?

✓ What problems do AIC's and IC's run into?

*[Of clients:]*

✓ How did you get here?

✓ What will it take to keep you straight (out of trouble)?

### Excerpts from Interviews with Former EVC Students

“When we started, we didn’t know each other. Everyone was quiet. I thought to myself a lot, ‘How I am going to get through this?’ I sometimes wondered what I was doing there. We really came together by the end . . . . Once everyone could see it to see it actually materializing, everyone wanted to make it the best as possible. . . . I remember working together over the Christmas break. We would all hang out, outside of EVC. At the end of the process we were almost like a family.”

— *Former EVC student Ray Ballanger*

“The single most satisfying moment [of the EVC experience] was at the final screening at EVC. . . . I had my mother there, and my girlfriend at the time, and her mother. Her mother didn’t know I could speak that well. She had her perceptions about me based on maybe the way I looked, or my appearance. She never got a chance to speak with me or find out how I felt. But when she saw me speaking about the project and how proud I was of it, it touched her. Also, seeing my mother in the audience and looking at how proud she was—that stayed with me. It gave me self-confidence. Just having that understanding, ‘Yes, I can do this. I am capable,’ went a long way to helping me. No one can ever take that away from me.”

—*Former EVC student*

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## Key Principles of Assessment at the Educational Video Center

*Assessment is for students.*

- Has personal relevance for students (e.g., provides a tangible product they can use).
- Students become more confident and articulate about what they know.
- Students feel ownership over the process as well as the product of their work.

*Assessment is faithful to the work students actually do.*

- Notebooks, works-in-progress, and routine presentations are basis of assessment.
- Occasions for reflection and discussion are integrated into ongoing project work.
- Students are assessed on what they know and do, not what they don't.

*Assessment is public.*

- Students' goals are solicited and become part of those assessed.
- Criteria for judgment remain visible and accessible to students from the beginning.
- Performances are viewed and judged by a broad group of people.

*Assessment promotes ongoing self-reflection and critical inquiry.*

- Teachers and students both speak of the qualities of good work, and how to attain it.
- Standards used reflect those of adult practitioners in the field.
- Categories and criteria of assessment remain open-ended, subject to challenge and revision.