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Hard-knock lives: Stimulus-funded project immerses youth in life lessons

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NORTHAMPTON - Dakota Fry said if it weren't for a video project funded by stimulus dollars, he likely wouldn't have accomplished much this summer.

"I probably would have hung out at home and not done anything," said Fry, 17, a Northampton High School senior.

Instead, Fry joined four other area youth in the making of a video that tells the stories of local people's triumphs and challenges. Over five weeks, the students, between the ages of 15 and 20, completed a workshop at Northampton Community Access Television, worked with multimedia professionals and interviewed people about sensitive, personal issues.

"It helped me meet new people, make connections and learn a lot of valuable information that I could use later in life," said Fry, who landed an internship at Northampton Community Access Television through the experience.

Distributed by the Franklin Hampshire Summer Youth Employment Program in Northampton, an \$8,700 grant enabled the group to learn the ins and outs of television production at Northampton Community Access Television as well as to hire Tom Adams, consultant for Reelife Documentary Productions in Williamsburg.

Students devoted 20 hours a week for five weeks to plan, shoot and edit the 35-minute video.

"They had a passion for their work," said Al Williams, executive director for NCTV. The project is consistent with the station's mission because it's an educational resource and it empowers voices, he added.

"It's different in that it's produced by youth and the stories being heard aren't normally covered by media of any kind," Williams said.

The project is the brainchild of Janet Gary, outreach and services coordinator for the Northampton Community Education Consortium, who works with people who walk the non-traditional path, many of whom speak English as a second language. Gary said she had always been struck by the pursuit of higher education and career success.

"They're stories I hear because I work in this office but I don't hear them around the community much," Gary said. "My idea was to take these stories and let them be heard."

Gary approached city resident Colleen Harris to share her story about alcoholism. Harris grew up in an alcoholic home and became an alcoholic herself, but she quit because she wanted to make a

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CAROL LOLLIS PHOTOS

From back left are students Gurleen Kaur, 15, Ariana Baez, 20, with her daughter, Iyana Cooper-Baez, 18 months, Tom Adams, consultant, and Janet Gary, project supervisor. Front left, Dakota Fry, 17, and Kaya O'Connell of Williamsburg, edit a video the group produced this summer.



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better childhood for her 13-year-old daughter than she had. November marks her fourth year of sobriety.

Harris agreed to an interview. She sat in the hot seat at NCTV studio, with the lights shining on her and the questions coming at her.

"It was very emotional," Harris said. "After the first interview I slept for like three hours. It was exhausting. They were some tough cookies, man. Some of the questions they had, those kids really worked hard."

Harris gave an "amazing" interview in part because the students were so well prepared, according to Gary. They planned the questions and paid mind to the interview environment, listening attentively and offering Harris juice and water.

"They're all really thoughtful young adults," said Gary, a former high school English teacher. "But I felt like they went over and above my expectations in terms of welcoming her into the studio and making her feel really comfortable."

"They were very supportive and friendly," Harris added. "To think some of their backgrounds are similar to mine, maybe they'll get a head start. If it helps at least one other person I'm grateful for that."

Two students had compelling stories and were also featured in the video. Victor Torres, 20, of Northampton, shared what it's like to live on his own after he lost both of his parents and all three of his siblings. Ariana Baez, 20, of Amherst, shared the challenges she faces as a teen parent.

"Society makes assumptions that young parents can't do it very well, but I think she's got the right ideas and the right support," said Gary. "She's a good parent."

It has not been determined if NCTV will air the video, though Gary said she supports the idea.

Fry says the effort taught him that he likes working in a television studio. People's stories gave him peace of mind that other people struggle as well, he said.

"I felt honored that people would open up to us that much and tell us their stories even though they hardly knew us," he said.

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