

HighLow: Reflections in Photography Inspired by Vermont Youth

by Robyn Estabrook

The trials and triumphs of Vermont youth are on display in Montpelier. In the month of February, there will be an art exhibit at the Vermont Supreme Court building. The Vermont Coalition for Runaway & Homeless Youth Programs and the Washington County Youth Service Bureau (YSB) present this exhibit, called *HighLow*.

YSB has been serving the area for more than 30 years. They provide support and services to youth and families. With their 40 staff members, they're able to offer a variety of programs to youth, including counseling, support and prevention services. The programs include substance-abuse treatment, the Teen Parent Program, the Transitional Living Program and the Basement Teen Center. "Youth and youth issues are real. In amidst all of this, they have strength," said Kreig Pinkham, the executive director of YSB.

Located in the basement of Montpelier's city hall, the Basement Teen Center is a place for teens to gather. About 25 teens participate in this supervised and substance-free environment. The teens attend workshops and learn important lessons, including leadership skills. "It's the cornerstone of our organization," said Pinkham.

In addition to the services offered, YSB also works with statewide coalitions. The various coalitions include the Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs, Vermont Coalition of Teen Centers, Vermont Youth Tomorrow, AmeriCorps VISTA Program and Vermont Youth Development Corps.

The Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs is a statewide coalition. It includes 13 different agencies throughout Vermont that work with at-risk youth. The coalition decided to embark on a project about Vermont youth when it was recognized that more community events needed to be developed. The staff was on board, and a planning committee was formed. The ideas grew into the *HighLow* project.

The project was able to move forward due to the participation of Vermont teenagers and photographer Ned Castle. A native Vermonter, Castle has a wide range of photography experience. He has done documentary, conceptual art and ethnographic photography. He graduated from Williams College, in Massachusetts, and has also attended photography schools in Florence, Italy, and New York City.

The *HighLow* project, on display at the Vermont Supreme Court building, features 12 young Vermonters. Two different photographs are taken of each subject. One depicts a positive, or high, moment in their life, and one a negative, or low, moment. Castle spent more than 40 hours with the subjects prior to the photos being taken. The photographs capture important reenacted moments in the lives of the



The *HighLow* project documents pivotal high and low moments in the lives of youth across the state. Photos by Ned Castle.

teenagers. "There were a series of meetings with the participants and a handful was spent figuring out the high and low moments," Castle explained, "Some people knew right off and others shifted to different ideas. We then talked about the logistics of the photographs and what they felt comfortable with."

The pictures do not stand alone, however; they are accompanied by audio narration by the participants. The subjects describe how the photographs represent what was going on in their lives and how they were feeling. They discuss how they got to their low moment and then what helped them get to their high moment. "The high point usually represents a moment after they sought help," Pinkham said.

About 30 youth were originally interested in *HighLow*. People left throughout the project, but 12 teenagers from across Vermont remained. Participants were involved in the entire process. "I shot the photos. Together we would go through the negatives and the participants would pick the frames," Castle said.

The topics depicted are diverse. "Various elements in the challenges that youth face are present," said Pinkham. Subjects tackled include homelessness, drug addiction, teen parenting, bullying and mental-health issues.

In Castle's previous projects, too, he has worked with people to tell their stories. The *HighLow* project is no different. "We made sure that the participants were in control and that it was from their perspective. We gave the participants the control to choose their own images," Castle said.

"We made sure the project was empowering rather than being exploitative."

The kickoff for the *HighLow* project took place in Burlington back in May. This showing of the exhibit was a memorable moment for Castle. Not only did he get to see the reaction of the public, but also of the participants. "I was curious to see who would come. I was curious to see if participants would come. All but three came," Castle said.

This is the first year of the *HighLow* project, but it won't be the last. The coalitions are aiming to make this an annual event, with different youth featured each year. Currently, the exhibit is traveling throughout the state. It will be in different towns for a month while in the hands of various coalitions. Prior to coming to Montpelier, the exhibit was in Middlebury. The next stop will be in Rutland.

The Washington County Youth Bureau is recognizing youth through the exhibit and also in different ways throughout the community. Various events include special movie nights at the Savoy Theater. "We're looking for ways to provide fun events for families to do in February," Pinkham said.

Pinkham also says that they are planning a youth appreciation day on February 22. The Washington County Youth Bureau is in the process of coordinating with local businesses for discounts for youth. "Young people will get a sense that the community recognizes them," Pinkham said.

The *HighLow* exhibit opens on Thursday, February 3 in the lobby of the Vermont Supreme Court building, 111 State Street in Montpelier, with a public opening ceremony from 5 to 7:30 p.m. The exhibit will be on display from February 3 to February 25, Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Arts

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