

Posted on Mon, Jul. 25, 2011

Key West teens find new path with cameras

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A young homeless woman brushes her teeth in the woods, her temporary makeshift home.

The photograph shows a young woman seated on the bare floor of a freight train, her face glowing as wind blows through her hair. By her side is her dog, providing companionship and protection.

In the corner: a crumpled bag of Gravy Train.

The irony is powerful, said Jay Scott, executive director of The Studios of Key West.

"This challenges us to gain further understanding of homeless youth," he said. "She's certainly not on the Gravy Train."

The photograph is part of an exhibit called who i am and what i know, which runs through Wednesday at The Studios of Key West.

The 17 framed works, which include several photographs and poetry, are by homeless youth ages 18 to 21 who had traveled to the island at the end of the road. The show also features three oil portraits of these kids painted by Lura Smedstad.

In October, Smedstad handed out single-use cameras to 10 of the youth who had dropped in at Project Lighthouse, a nonprofit center operated by the Florida Keys Children's Shelter.

"The deal was I asked them to take photos of their lives — how they were living, what interested them," said Smedstad, who began as a volunteer at Project Lighthouse and later received compensation through the AmeriCorps service program

"I let them know the photography is about them looking into their world and giving us a glimpse of their lives. I told them: 'Don't hold back.'"

Because the homeless youth are transient, Smedstad also provided self-addressed, stamped, padded envelopes in which they could

return the cameras when finished.

She received five back, including one camera that had only one usable picture because the film was not advanced properly. But the results with the limited photographs were stunning.

"Some are a little rough, rugged and raw," said Elena Devers, deputy director for The Studios of Key West. "Some are pretty developed for kids who don't have a practiced eye. But they all have an honesty about them."

One photograph shows a cardboard sign that says "New Orleans," with a smiley face. Another shows two travelers walking on a beach with backpacks containing everything they own.

There are images of hotdogs cooking on a grill, a teenager playing guitar around a campfire in the woods, a plane taking off and a sign on a telephone pole that says; "Think that you might be wrong."

One poignant photograph showed a girl brushing her teeth in the woods, with her dachshund on her shoulder. In another, a young woman washes her dog in the surf.

"Quite a few pictures had dogs in them," Smedstad said. "The kids travel with them, especially the girls. And they really take good care of them."

One of the dogs, Titus, was part of a litter of eight puppies born in a back closet at Project Lighthouse. "All were adopted out by travelers," Smedstad said.

Recycled frames, also symbolic of the youth trying to recycle their lives, were used. Some of the pieces featured poetry, including some found on crumpled wads of paper on the floor of Project Lighthouse.

“Lonely girl, who is this lonely girl

lying on my floor. Intoxicating the way she fades me

right down to my core. I can see through darkened decorum.

Her spirits shaken & her souls escaping.”

The photographs and poetry were not signed. The artists and authors are anonymous to protect their privacy.

All those whose work appears in the exhibit have long left Key West, most likely for other stops on the homeless youth circuit.

But their art has left an imprint on a community that is divided over the best way to deal with the many homeless of all ages who end up in Key West, some for just days and others for years and even until they die.

More than 100 people attended the show's open house last week. Six of the pieces, \$60 each, were sold.

“The project is an eye-opener all around,” said Jai Somers, program director for Project Lighthouse. “The public gets to glimpse into their lives and for our kids it's a glimpse at what they can accomplish in a professional gallery setting.”

The first work that sold was to a man affiliated with a museum in Miami.

“I don't know if it was for his personal collection or the museum, but how great is that?” Somers said.

Smedstad cited data that puts the runaway and castaway youth population aged 15 to 21 in the United States and Canada at about 1.7 million.

Scott, executive director of the art studio, said a lot of people in Key West, including himself, get “annoyed” with the homeless and the problems — vagrancy, public intoxication and crime — that come with some of them.

“A lot of people think the kids are all dirty, rotten troublemakers who don't want to do anything,” Somers said. “They are all incredibly wrong.”

Project Lighthouse provides the youth with many services, including laundry facilities, Internet, haircuts, art supplies, donated clothing, a listening ear and help connecting with family when appropriate. Many of the youth have run away from abusive homes. The goal is to empower.

Somers said she's not sure why, but most of the youth she deals with have creative talent, whether it's in photography, music, painting or writing.

Smedstad said at least two of the young photographers in the art exhibit should get real cameras in their hands, because they have talent that could get them off the streets.

Smedstad, who is pursuing a master's degree in art therapy, already has learned a valuable lesson from this project. Next time she hands out cameras, she will offer an incentive to return them, as they do with a similar project in San Francisco.

“They get \$5 for every returned camera,” she said, smiling.

The Studios of Key West donated space for the exhibit and is cutting its usual commission price of 40 percent in half for all the pieces sold. The remainder goes to Project Lighthouse.