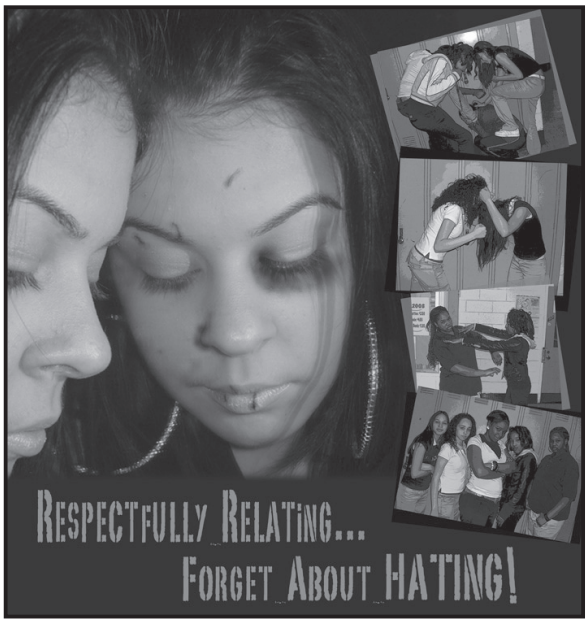
Collaboration + Relevant Content = Award-Winning Student Work

Debbie Bambino, Philadelphia

In April a national service organization, The Links, Inc., launched an art contest in Philadelphia with the theme, Respectfully Relating . . . Forget About Hating! Students were asked to design posters that illustrated how courage, hope, and compassion could be used to address violence. It was suggested that students focus on youth violence, gang violence or domestic/family violence. In addition to prize monies, the winners of the contest were told they would have their work displayed inside city buses and on a billboard.



A group of graphic design students at Jules E. Mastbaum, Area Vocational-Technical High School, in inner-city Philadelphia, has been winning art contests lately. In late May, I visited their classroom to see if they would unpack their success with me. Here's a summary of what they shared with me.

Katie Newnam, the graphic design teacher at Mastbaum, shared the contest specifications with her students, and encouraged them to think about what the theme meant to them. She stressed their empowerment by telling them repeatedly, You own this. Using a Chalk Talk, the students began to generate their ideas about hatred and their feelings about the current epidemic of violence in our city.

In addition, Katie asked the students to think about the ways people roll their eyes at them on the streets, or clutch their bags when they approach. She cited this contest as a way to push back against the assumptions that get made about teenagers and violence, especially when those teenagers are young people of color.

At the start, participation in this contest was assigned for a grade; however, what began as a teacher-initiated effort soon became a collectively owned project. Once the students received the contest specifications, what they call the "specs," they were free to create and collaborate.

Students were quick to tell me:

"They didn't tell us exactly what had to be on the poster. I liked being able to play into it creatively."

"We set our own deadlines and we meet them!"

When asked why they were so successful in their efforts the young women had this to say:

"I got a lot from the slogan and liked developing my own pictures."

"The topic was a positive one . . . It's real events."

It goes on every day.

When they talked about the ways they work together as a group, using a rubric to give each

other feedback, I wanted to know more. They said,

"We put our ideas up on the white board and then we all share our ideas and questions about the work. It's not like a disagreement, it's about being skilled in working as a group. We go into detail, we don't just say, I like it or I don't. It's not a put-down. It's important to have a group environment to do our work."

"We have fun with our work. It's not a drag. We enjoy doing it and Ms. Newnam breaks it down for us. It's not easy, we work hard, but it's easier to understand when it's explained with an easy-to-follow rubric. You can follow the rubric like a checklist to make sure you have everything you need."

I asked the students if they thought the way they learned and worked in graphic arts could be used in other classes and they said:

"Definitely, we learn more in groups! You don't feel alone, you get help with your ideas."

"Any class can work as a group, it's a group effort to learn together. When you work as an individual, it can make you pull your hair out!"

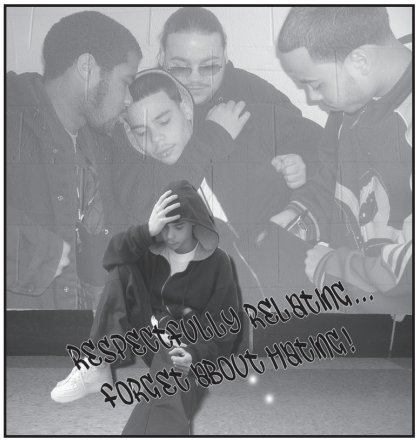
"I like it because if you know something and they (another student) know something else, then together you know twice as much!"

"It's projects without pressure."

"It's important that we have some choice, that we don't all have to work the same way, or else . . . we fail."

At the end of our conversation, I thanked the students for their time and asked them how they felt about winning. One young woman, a senior, said, I've never had anything displayed outside school before, it's cool! She went on to quote her grandma as saying, "I get to see my baby on the bus!"

Over 250 Philadelphians have been murdered as of press time- a young Latino from Mastbaum was one of the most recent victims.



After the students left, I spoke to their teacher, Katie Newnam. Katie is in her fourth year of teaching; she was a graphic artist in industry before coming to Mastbaum. Katie makes assignments the way jobs are given in industry. She talks about clients and audience, skills and responsibility, practice and proficiency, and she talks a lot about community.

In this classroom, students move about purposively. It's not unusual to see students with headsets on, listening to music while they complete their work. The steady hum of talk in the room is mostly on task and when it isn't, gentle reminders from the teacher refocus the group. During this visit, one student was taking digital pictures, while a small group gave feedback to a student who was making up some work for her digital portfolio. When the bell rang at the end of the period, some additional students came in from lunch to work on their work. The seamless movement of students in and out of the room spoke volumes.

When Katie's students won this most recent contest, she was quick to thank Wendy Shapiro, her former principal, and me, her former CFG coach, for introducing her to ideas and tools in support of student-centered classrooms, but we both know that while we have supported Katie's instincts, it's her own respect for her students, as demonstrated in her expectations for their abilities, that has made the difference in this classroom. ■

Debbie Bambino can be reached at dbambino@earthlink.net