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Just another video

By Patrick T. Reardon on Tue., 11/17/2009 –11:54 am.

For Shani Edmond, it started out as just another video.

Although she's only 17, Edmond, a senior at the Woodlawn campus of the University of Chicago Charter High School, is a veteran videographer.

As part of the Digital Youth Network, she has been writing and directing short movies since she was a seventh-grader. Indeed, for the past two years, she has been a paid employee of the network, serving as a teacher's assistant.

"I cannot count how many videos I've done," she says. "Probably up in the 50s."

So, when she and a friend Shannon Jackson (left, below) decided to take part in the Digital City Planners program through the Chicago Public Library's YOUmedia center, she thought she knew what she was getting into.



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This blog is about history, planning and the future. It's rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

“A lot more”

YOUmedia is an innovative library-within-a-library in the first floor of the Harold Washington Library Center at 400 S. State St. A collaboration between the Chicago Public Library and the Digital Youth Network, YOUmedia offers teens a place to hang out and learn the latest in storytelling technology. In addition to 1,000s of books, the YOUmedia space has more than 100 laptop and desktop computers as well as an array of media creation tools.

Some 60 teens took part in the Digital City Planners program, looking closely at their neighborhoods, coming up with ideas on how to improve them and then creating a digital presentation of their plan. The program was part of the city’s celebration this year of the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Plan of Chicago in 1909, also called the Burnham Plan after its primary author Daniel Burnham.

“At first, it was just another video, but, when we got into it, it became a lot more than that,” says Shani.

What she discovered is something that generations of planners have realized. The more you look around at your world, the more you’re able to see how it might be better. And the more you realize that you have a role to play in making it better.

Like missing teeth

The focus of Shani and Shannon’s video was the problem of vacant lots along 71st Street. “There’s about one on every block, both sides,” Shani says.

Like missing teeth in a smile, these vacant lots make the neighborhood look ugly, and they’re dangerous magnets for crime and violence.

Why not, asked the two teens, put works of art in these empty lots?

The artworks would inspire the people of the neighborhood, and the project would be exciting for the community to plan and carry out.

“I’ve witnessed the excitement that residents have when they see a public art piece going up in their community,” says mosaic artist Carolyn Elaine during the six-minute video “Art Inspires” that Shani and Shannon produced.

“Not only does it beautify the community, but it allows residents of the community to take ownership and really feel like they are a part of something greater than themselves.”



Another artist interviewed by Shani and Shannon, famed sculptor Richard Hunt says in the video that public art “can serve as a marker, a signpost, an introduction to a community area. It can tell the story of the community.”

“Kind of a shock”

As the two teens traveled up and down 71st Street filming vacant lots, “people would ask what we were doing. We’d tell them, and they’d be ecstatic,” says Shani. “It was kind of a shock to us. We could see that people really did want change.”

Because of that interest, she says, “we got deep into the problem, and it inspired us to do more with our movie.”

And to do more beyond the movie.

In fact, Shani is going to try to find a way to have an artwork created in at least one of the empty lots. Elaine and Hunt have told her they’ll help.

“I feel I got a lot of people excited,” she says, “and I don’t want to let them down.”

“Ownership of my community”

Looking at South Shore and thinking of how to make it better changed Shani. “It made me feel ownership of my community, responsibility for the community.”

She also learned an important life lesson.

“Nothing is written in stone,” she says. “The craziness in the world right now --- nothing is permanent.

“Change can happen.”