Walking the Walk

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Teen participants in the CHA + DePaul Youth Partnership program used iPads to make documentary films.

Through the veins of DePaul runs its Vincentian mission as the university community asks itself our essential question: What must be done? Three youth outreach programs designed to teach skills and build interest in computing and creative careers are CDM’s response.

**CHA + DePaul Youth Partnership**

What would happen if kids from underresourced areas of Chicago were surrounded with tools to help them amplify their voices to tell their own stories?

That’s the question that led Liliane Calfee, an instructor in the School of Cinematic Arts (SCA), to forge a partnership between DePaul University and the Chicago Housing Authority and devise an intensive program focused on art and media education. The **CHA + DePaul Youth Partnership** is a part of the city’s One Summer Chicago initiative, which offers employment (participants are paid $14 per hour) and internship opportunities to Chicago youth.

The six-week summer program trains 12 to 16 young people between the ages of 15 to 20 who live in public housing. In 2020, the three tracks offered included documentary filmmaking for girls, movie and TV scripts, and photography. Computers, iPads and still cameras were distributed to the students so they could learn safely in the midst of COVID-19. DePaul faculty and/or industry leaders and DePaul graduate students mentor participants in projects of their own choosing.

“It’s a seed we plant,” says Calfee, who is the program’s director. “It provides them with this confidence and belief that their stories should be told.”

Since the program’s launch in 2016, projects have touched on themes such as gun violence, bullying, female empowerment, the culture around Black hair and homelessness.

Program administrator Michael Flores, who is an SCA assistant professor and a documentary filmmaker, says the students make him want to work harder. “I get inspired by what the students make. It makes me want to go out and make more powerful films,” he says.

**DeSports**

With COVID-19 canceling in-person classes and activities at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) this fall, the timing lent itself to a new after-school pilot program that, by its nature, meets kids where they are: playing video games.

The DeSports program is a new initiative funded by a grant from CME Group Foundation that involves CDM, DePaul’s Department of Psychology, and Orr Academy High School and George Washington High School, both in the CPS system.

E-sports, in which individuals or teams compete on the video field of battle, may seem like all fun and games. However, Associate Dean Lucia Dettori, an
associate professor in the School of Computing, says e-sports foster important skills, such as collaboration, communication and critical thinking.

“We’re really trying to say, ‘Hey, this is a passion that you have. We’re helping you develop some skills that are critical for you generally, and we want you to start thinking about possible careers that might be related to this passion, and majors in college that will get you there,’” says Dettori.

Students meet after school (virtually, for now) and develop strategies, resolve conflicts and work together toward a common goal. DePaul’s gaming and computer science students serve as mentors, and faculty arrange for speakers from the gaming community and local technology companies to connect with the students and talk about career options. A group in the Department of Psychology that studies online gaming communities will conduct research associated with this initiative.

Kevin Ryan, who designed the framework of the DeSports curriculum and teaches English and drama at Orr Academy High School, is excited to see the ways that students learn through the program. When Ryan was growing up, his generation’s parents saw video games as a waste of time. He’s thrilled to see that attitude change and to partner with DePaul to be a part of the new endeavor.

“A lot of the program is sort of a meta conversation about what makes a good gamer, but also what makes a good and successful person,” he says.

Digital Youth Divas

Whether they’re designing bracelets with LED lights or learning to code, the middle-school girls participating in the Digital Youth Divas program are getting a taste of how fun science, math, engineering and technology (STEM) can be at a crucial age. “We focus on the middle-school grades because we know that’s where identities are forming,” says Denise Nacu. Digital Youth Divas is organized by Sheena Erete and Nacu, who are School of Design associate professors and co-directors of CDM’s Technology for Social Good Research and Design Lab, in collaboration with Northwestern University’s Office of Community Education Partnerships.

The program is designed to encourage more girls from traditionally underrepresented communities to consider STEM careers. Since its launch in 2013, around 500 girls have participated in the program. College student mentors and STEM program providers contribute to the program and actively encourage the girls’ parents and family members to participate. The program is funded by a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation to help researchers determine how STEM learning ecologies work.

“An ultimate goal for us is to understand what it takes to encourage girls so they can see themselves as scientists, as technologists, as engineers, as designers. What would propel them to make decisions in high school and college that would encourage them toward those fields?” says Nacu.

As the participants are learning, students at DePaul, who conduct research and interact with the girls and their families, are working to answer those questions. What they learn could ultimately help draw more girls—and their families—into STEM studies over time.

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–Liliane Calfee, SCA instructor