

WAMC's Youth Media Project: Student Town Meetings

“Stereotypes of Urban Youth” focus of August program

“It’s hard to visualize something better when all you see is negativity.”

So commented an urban high school student regarding her desire to overcome perceptions and environment in her quest for positive images and role models. The same quote can just as easily apply to older members of society when it comes to their own views of young people. Stereotypes and perceptions affect both the perceived and perceiver. What are the stereotypes of city kids? Where do they come from? Do the stereotypes and perceptions reflect reality? And - how can negative stereotypes, perceptions and images be overcome or changed?

On August 16th, WAMC Northeast Public Radio hosted a dynamic discussion on “Stereotypes of Urban Youth” as part of its **Youth Media Project: Student Town Meetings**. This special WAMC project forms a unique partnership with rural and urban high schools and educational programs within the Capital District area to engage students and community members in critically analyzing current issues and the media’s role in shaping public opinion. August’s Student Town Meeting was moderated by WAMC’s President and CEO Alan Chartock, and involved the young men and women from Liberty Partnership’s Summer Public Policy Internship Program at the Center for Women in Government & Civil Society. Dan Bazile, Anchor/Capitol Reporter, NewsChannel 13, Albany, and William G. Husson, Professor in the Department of Communications, UAlbany, were guest panelists. The students selected and researched the issue during July and August with LPP’s coordinators Brendan O’Brien and Osei Agyeman, and WAMC’s Education Director Maryanne Malecki. The show aired on WAMC’s *The Speaker’s Corner* on Thursday, August 25th.

The young participants all live and attend high schools in the city of Albany. In preparing for and taping the Student Town Meeting, they read newspaper articles, collected empirical data from television and the entertainment industry, and developed position papers. In doing so, the students personally explored the effect of public policies and perceptions, and the role of the media in shaping those policies and perceptions. A list of their resources and samples of their work are available on WAMC’s Student Town Meeting Web site, www.wamc.org/studetntownmeetings.html.

The students and the panelists all agreed that the media, notably the entertainment industry and local television and print news, are the biggest sources of public information regarding teenagers. Adults having little actual or sustained contact with young people often readily accept negative images of kids as perpetrators or aggressors, across and within racial groups. Dan Bazile generously shared his personal experiences growing up in Brooklyn and Queens, and attending college as one of few African-Americans in Plattsburgh, NY. When he emphasized the importance of strong parental guidance and influence, the young panelists countered that, when parents are either overwhelmed by earning a living or absent, powerful role models must be found elsewhere. One student identified programs such as the Liberty Partnership as being effective in helping “keep

my eyes on my goal.” Or, as another young person stated, ”There’s strength in the community – everyone needs to help.”

The issue of the profit motive vs. social responsibility was raised by both Dr. Husson and the students. Nashay W., one of the students, said the entertainment industry needs to do more with positive role models, such as the Boys Choir of Harlem and the rapper Nas. Student Rolando W., a budding rapper and lyricist himself, suggested that the real tragedy is that much of the negativity projected through mainstream music today is usually directed toward African-Americans by other African –Americans; his goal as an artist is to offer another perspective that, hopefully, will also be commercially viable. Rawaa O., a third student, encapsulated the discussion: “How are we supposed to get past the negatives if we don’t show the positives?”

If, as one student offered, “misunderstandings and fear and ignorance feed negative perceptions and stereotypes”, this discussion was one step towards reversing the process.

WAMC’s Youth Media Project: Student Town Meetings are made possible through the generous support of the Educational Foundation of America and Carl E. Touhey, and are dedicated to the memory of Dr. Stewart Ray, a devoted supporter of the education of young people and great friend of WAMC. You can find more information about this project, as well as listen to this and other previously conducted Student Town Meetings, on the Web at www.wamc.org/studenttownmeetings.html, or by contacting Maryanne Malecki at (518) 465-5233 ext. 135.

Our next Student Town Meeting discusses “Reforming the Budget Process: the Proposed Constitutional Amendment - Yea or Nay?” It is scheduled to air on *The Speaker’s Corner* in late October.