

PhotoVoice

PhotoVoice offers a chance for marginalised groups to express themselves through photography and digital media. In 2002 this London-based organisation started working with a group of 13 unaccompanied young refugees and asylum seekers on a project to help them capture their lives and impressions of London on camera.

This project, *Transparency*, presented a starkly different view of the city and enabled their young participants to become advocates and gain confidence in their new lives. An exhibition of their work travelled the UK and internationally and prompted British audiences to reflect on their own society and culture – these young refugees, one commented: “display a greater understanding and sensitivity of Britain than Londoners”. Participants work went on to feature on BBC London and at the National Portrait Gallery, and the project won the Arts, Culture and Heritage category of The Charity Awards 2003.

This initial group became the foundation for a programme, which has gone on to help at least another 85 young refugees, and asylum seekers adapt and integrate into life in London. Seven of the original group of 13 from *Transparency* have gone on to University and retain strong links with PhotoVoice and each another. One, Tatiana, won a national scholarship to study a BA in Photography at The London College of Communication. She has also been commissioned by BBC to document National Asylum Day and had her first solo photographic exhibition in 2005. . Another, Bajram, runs his own video production company and has become a PhotoVoice facilitator and peer mentor in subsequent projects.

Key to PhotoVoice’s work with young refugees has been the strong partnership that has developed with Trinity Community Centre in East Ham, East London, which offers educational and support programmes for around 500 unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers each year. “They’ve been an incredible partner, always positive and keen to have as much creative input as possible with the young people. In partnership with Trinity, we have been able to design innovative projects which go to the heart of the young people’s needs,” explains Fairey.

Subsequent phases of the project – now known as *Moving Lives* - used digital storytelling to capture short films about the lives and experiences of 36 of Trinity’s young refugees from the ages of 13 to 18. This process also involved youngsters from local communities in building social networks, which Fairey believes has been an important departure.

Increasingly, Fairey acknowledges, participants do not want to be identified as refugees and asylum seekers but want to focus on issues of identity

and integration, on building local links and working with other young people.

The project has now evolved to become part of Trinity's educational support programme for newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, alongside language learning and other key skills. PhotoVoice have designed an eight-week module running one day a week which uses photography as a tool that enables the young people to explore issues of identity and to discuss how they are adjusting to life in the UK.

Examples of how this works in practice have included enabling young Afghan and Iraqi males to make the important transition to adulthood and sexual maturity through understanding gender issues and roles in British society. "It is really a participatory learning process which uses photography," explains PhotoVoice Co-Founder Tiffany Fairey.

An additional branch of the programme will now pair up young people with professional photographer mentors to create a body of advocacy materials telling the stories of these 'new Londoners' from their own points of view.

"For the young people themselves, screening their work at the community centre has an important impact on confidence building – they get a massive boost from seeing their work taken seriously, and from the publicity and exposure that often comes from it," says Fairey.

Among the success stories noted as a result of the project was a 16-year-old girl whose participation in the workshops, according to evaluators: "visibly boosted her self-confidence and gave her a real sense of achievement."

"One of the key impacts of this work is that it is building social networks and bonds and increasing understanding of young people from host communities," says Fairey. "Trinity has found that the methods are among the strongest they have used in terms of getting kids involved. It's fun, it's empowering and it is shifting attitudes.

Contact Details:

PhotoVoice
94 Leonard Street
London EC2A 4RH
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7254 4087
Email: info@photovoice.org
Website: www.photovoice.org