

## Kids can teach adults, in life and film



**BARB GUY**

The other night in a darkened room, I met two groups of young people with very different stories.

The first teenagers were from Bedford-Stuyvesant, a notoriously dangerous and hopeless neighborhood in Brooklyn, N.Y. Kids from the low-income, government-subsidized housing projects there told a story about facing gun violence every day.

One teenager, Terrence Fisher, told of losing several of his friends to bullets. His friend Daniel Howard documented the story with a camera provided by Downtown Community Television Center, a non-profit organization in New York that teaches kids to chronicle their lives through PRO-TV, a two-year intensive training and mentorship program for inner-city youth.

Terrence and Daniel showed the hopelessness and brutality that kids face in their neighborhood. They demonstrated the prevalence and popularity of guns among their peer group and then courageously questioned what good ever comes from guns.

They told the story of a friend, Timothy Stansbury, who was shot by a police officer. Terrence was with Timothy when he was killed. The city's police commissioner characterized the shooting as completely unjustified, yet the officer was acquitted.

These passionate young people reacted with pain but with impressive restraint and pacifism in the face of race and class bias and glaring injustice. They chose advocacy and education over revenge.

The other group of young people, from Lubbock, Texas, rotates around the gravitational pull of its stellar center, Shelby Knox.

It's shocking to see Shelby's safe, pink, suburban world soon after leaving Terrence and Daniel's milieu. Shelby's got everything she needs to succeed - her daddy is a successful Cadillac dealer and she has a safe home, two loving parents and the expectation that she will become someone valuable.

This earnest, bubbly teen's story begins when, in high school, she simultaneously pledged True Love Waits and began working for sex education in Lubbock's public schools. In her church's True Love Waits ceremony, parents give their children a ring to commemorate the teen's pledge of abstinence until marriage and "sexual purity."

A product of her devout Southern Baptist upbringing, Shelby was happy to pledge and get her TLW ring. But at the same time, she noticed the hypocrisy of local educators who were teaching "abstinence only" sex education in the face of Lubbock's staggeringly high rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

True Love Waits was right for her, she reasoned, but what about kids who, for whatever cause, make a different choice. Shelby and her group went about lobbying the school district to provide students with more comprehensive sex education.

Meanwhile, Shelby noticed that her gay peers, no matter what, can't participate in TLW, because there's no "until marriage" for them, and ultimately, in Lubbock's prevailing culture, if you're gay, you're not considered to be sexually pure. The injustice that her gay fellow students faced tugged at Shelby's heart and she

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bravely joined their battle for fair treatment.

It's an interesting exercise to draw parallels between these two stories of young people. That's what the Sundance Film Festival effectively encouraged us to do by scheduling films about them to screen together this week.

Terrence and Daniel's film, called "Bullets in the Hood – A Bed-Stuy Story," and the film about Shelby, "The Education of Shelby Knox," made by Marion Lipschutz and Rose Rosenblatt, call into question what it means when young people are a lot smarter than some adults.

In both stories, desperately flawed grown-ups serve in positions of authority over the kids: an unapologetic white police officer who gunned down an unarmed African American teenager, and a school district official who refused students' pleas for more realistic sex education and then was caught conducting a sexual affair in his office, on district time, with an employee.

In Brooklyn and in Lubbock, something within the kids themselves made them become the role models they lacked.

These kids can't go back to their pre-movie lives, and I doubt they would want to. They're all on new paths because of having their stories told. Against all odds, Terrence and Daniel have survived the brutality of their environment and are learning

and working in the film world, garnering awards.

Shelby is a sophomore in college, studying political science. She says she wants to run for president of the United States.

I think Shelby's trying to tell us that high school sex education is necessary to prevent pregnancy and disease and that, gay or straight, we're all God's children. I think Terrence and Daniel are trying to show us that our culture glorifies guns, and real kids die as a consequence.

At the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, as in life, sometimes the kids are teaching the adults, if only the adults would learn.

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*Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages.* © Salt Lake Tribune.