

# Connecting youth to human rights

BY MELODIE CARUSO

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It was not the words of a politician or a prominent member of the community.

It was the spoken word of poetry delivered by musicians that engaged the National Capital Region's youth in an intimate discussion about human rights and civic participation.

The Barbershop Show, a program that imitates the atmosphere of a barbershop, and uses music and skits to introduce human rights issues to youth, recently passed through schools in Ottawa, Stittsville, Dunrobin and Gatineau.

"The 411 Initiative For Change has only been running for two years and on this tour The Barbershop Show has reached 60 schools," says Tamara Dawit, executive director of the 411 Initiative For Change, which produced the Barbershop Show and other programs to reach out and educate youth.

Instead of using traditional instruction, the Initiative uses art to raise awareness of human rights issues among youth.

Several artists – including Shohn Boothe, better known as "Rikoshay," a Toronto writer, producer and MC; Dwayne Morgan, a writer, poet and spoken-word artist; and Melanie Durrant, an up-and-coming R&B singer/songwriter – delivered messages about armed violence, poverty, violence against women and anti-racism.

Using artists, says Dawit, creates a bond with the young audiences, making students more open to internalizing the messages of the initiative.

"We look for artists who are recognizable," says Dawit. "Melanie's music video is in heavy rotation and kids are interested in what she has to say."

The program is designed to be interactive. Following the artists' performances, an intimate question-and-answer period allows students to speak to the artists about the content of the performance.

Dawit says students have positive feedback about the shows.

A new online survey and Internet message boards allow the Initiative to gauge how successful the shows are in educating and empowering youth.

"We enjoyed the fact that the performers were not condescending toward us. We felt like we were part of the show," said an Ottawa-Carleton District School Board student.

A need for such an organization comes at a time when many older human rights programs do not directly target youth. The Canadian Human Rights Commission, for example, does not have outreach programs specifically targeted to youth.

"Our current discrimination prevention efforts are focused on federally regulated employers and service providers, working with them to reduce discrimination in the workplace," says Jane Morrison, communications advisor for the Canadian Human Rights Commission. "Youth are not a primary target audience for the Commission."

But even if making young people active citizens is a difficult feat, the 411 Initiative For Change national tour, which promoted its message by balancing information, pertinent discussion and meaningful art, was a success.

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