

Summary/Background

“Snapshots of the Often Overlooked” is a pioneering attempt by the Delaware State Housing Authority (DSHA), in partnership with Friendship House Inc., to showcase the reality of homelessness on the streets of Wilmington, Delaware. The project is based on the Photovoice methodology. Photovoice is a grassroots approach to creating social and policy change. Photovoice is a participatory action research strategy that seeks to engage participants and facilitate their development of a level of critical consciousness to help them identify life issues and communicate effectively with the community and with policy makers. The methodology has its origins in a combination of the works of Paulo Freire, feminist literature, and documentary photography.

“Snapshots of the Often Overlooked” includes eight male participants who are all residents of Andrew’s Place, a homeless shelter for men over the age of 55, operated by Friendship House. Participants were taught how to use a camera and basic photography skills. As a group they selected the issues they feel are most pertinent to their daily lives. These issues were then captured through images taken by the participants. Weekly group meetings were held over a period of two months. During the meetings, participants were given new, disposable cameras, which they used to take photos of local sites representing issues affecting their lives. Used cameras were collected by DSHA staff, and the previous week’s pictures were discussed. The participants, as a group, selected the photos, wrote the accompanying captions, and assisted with the installation of their work in a local gallery facility. Many of the participants attended the showing, where they discussed their work and answered questions posed by attendees. The event included a slide show, produced by the director of Friendship House, of additional photos taken by participants. Relying on free publicity prior to the exhibit opening, everyone was overjoyed with the number of television cameras and reporters who attended the event. Reporters remained for the duration, interviewing the homeless photographers, the attendees, community representatives, and DSHA staff.

Innovation

Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1994) originally developed the Photovoice methodology. Wang and Burris worked with rural Chinese women from the Yunnan province in China. The female participants’ efforts resulted in the establishment of a daycare program, a training program for midwives, and a scholarship program for girls in the Yunnan province. Since then, the method has been replicated across the world. However, the method had never been tried in Delaware.

What makes “Snapshots of the Often Overlooked” so innovative is its consideration for the participants. The Photovoice method is a unique mechanism because it can replace a needs assessment. Photovoice allows participants to identify the problems they believe most affect their local environment. Photovoice builds on Freire’s concepts of empowerment education by working with marginalized populations and helping them develop levels of critical consciousness. The purpose is for people to become educated and empowered to create social change. Photovoice allows for community members to portray themselves through their own eyes.

Partnerships

“Snapshots of the Often Overlooked” used a variety of community partnerships. The first and most important was with Friendship House. Friendship House is a nonprofit Christian corporation committed to making a difference in the lives of the homeless people of New Castle County, Delaware through the traditional spiritual ministries of hospitality, education, empowerment and community. Friendship House

operates solely on donations; they receive no federal or state funding. DSHA was thoughtful in first approaching a shelter that might be open to the idea of such a project. After the initial meeting with their executive director, it quickly became apparent that both sides saw the potential.

In addition, DSHA needed other partners to complete their project goals. This time assistance came from the for-profit world, in the name of Buccini/Pollin Group, Inc. Buccini/Pollin Group, Inc. is a privately-held, full-service real estate acquisition, development and management company with over \$3 billion in assets. Buccini/Pollin freely granted permission for DSHA to host two showings of the exhibit in one of their downtown Wilmington properties. Their staff even assisted in the hanging of the photos and the lights.

Currently, DSHA has joined forces with two other state agencies, the Delaware Division of Arts and the Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs, to reprint the exhibit photos for a month-long showing in the Carvel State Office Building in Wilmington, in an effort to reach more elected officials.

Replicability

One of the aspects of the Photovoice methodology is that it can easily be replicated anywhere in the world with any marginalized population with very little cost to the organizers. Through partnerships, the total cost of the project was around \$900, not including the cost of light refreshments at the exhibits.

Reaching Target Audiences

The marketing of “Snapshots of the Often Overlooked” consisted of mailings, personal letters to all elected state officials - from DSHA’s cabinet level director, frequent email blasts, and mass outreach to the media. The opening exhibit was well attended with over 200 people coming to the exhibit, including elected officials. The second exhibit was also well attended, with over 100 people. In addition, the event was covered by the local paper, the local television news, and the Associated Press picked up the story. A DVD was made of the project and disseminated to any of those interested who could not attend the exhibits. (The DVD is attached.)

DSHA staff continues to share the results of the project with Delaware officials and residents. Likewise, the participants do monthly presentations to area churches about the project. DSHA remains committed to showing this unique glimpse into the lives of Wilmington’s homeless to the people of Delaware, as evidenced by the upcoming August showing in the Carvel State Office Building. After this showing, DSHA plans to install the exhibit at Legislative Hall, the State Capitol building in Dover.

Achieving Measureable Results

DSHA developed a logic model and a series of evaluation criteria to measure the results of the project. The goals of the project included: 1. Enable DSHA, community members, policy makers to better understand the needs of Delaware’s homeless; 2. Institutionalize a planning process so that the needs of the homeless participants are reflected in subsequent policy changes; 3. Empower previously marginalized populations to understand that they can be agents of change; 4. Create an institutional structure where needs of the homeless population are identified at a local level and then communicated with policy makers; and 5. Build better coordination and help reduce the bureaucratic divide in helping to address the needs of Delaware’s homeless. Some of these are long-term outcomes that cannot be determined unless the outreach and legislative monitoring has been complete. Nevertheless, in regards to the individual level change predicted in participants, measureable results have been shown to exist.

Based on previous Photovoice projects, it can be assumed that participants will experience a sense of empowerment and increased self-esteem from their participation in the project. These results have already been measured through surveys.

Conclusion

Almost since the invention of the camera, pictures have been used to document the lives of groups of people who have been denied access to social power. Images are so powerful because the visual experience cannot be denied. Images have been effectively used to start critical dialogue about injustices. The creative part in everyone not only connects people, but it also defines who we are as human beings. The Photovoice methodology rests on this premise that it can create social change, for only the participants understand fully the deep issues that affect their community. In a world where fewer and fewer people are speaking up for the ‘little guy’, “Snapshots of the Often Overlooked” offers a unique opportunity to help the homeless participants become agents of change for their own lives. For the participants, it has been an experience that cannot be measured through numbers.