

Oakland students make documentary films about their lives

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OAKLAND — Filmmaker Stephen Kopels was a combat photographer in the Vietnam War who has seen ambushes and death up close.

He worked in the hardscrabble world of television production for a dozen years and then branched out on his own, running a production company for more than a decade. Kopels is a no nonsense man of 63 and a parent of four children who has dealt with the struggles of parenthood and life.

Yet, when a group of Oakland high school students pitched him their ideas for short documentary films they want to make as part of a class he is teaching at his San Francisco filmmaking school, he nearly wept.

"It was all I could do not to cry," he said. "They all have tragic stories of friends, brothers, sisters, parents in prison, dead from stabbings, guns, dope, you name it. Yet here is this group (of students) who want to make a contribution to their community," said Kopels, who is the co-owner of the San Francisco School of Digital Filmmaking in the city's Dogpatch neighborhood.

What he learned from their pitches is this — the teens have not lost their hope for their lives and they were energized about using the medium of film to tell their stories.

The San Francisco School of Digital Filmmaking and ARISE Charter High School in Oakland last month began a unique collaboration which pairs lower-income, at-risk students with professional filmmakers and teachers to give the students real-world, hands-on filmmaking training, Kopels said.

Kopels, who has been a filmmaker for more than 40 years, founded the school with partner Jeremiah Birnbaum five years ago.

In its second year, the charter school is located in the Fruitvale BART Transit Village in East Oakland and serves 165 students of color in grades 9-11.

One of those students is 16-year-old Malaysia Broughton, who will share her personal story on film as part of the class.

"I like to talk about what I've been through to let other people know that they don't have to go through things that I went to. You can tell a child not to touch a hot stove, but they will do it anyway. My mom always told me not to do this and that, but I did it anyway," said Malaysia, who is one of the 33 students who is in the 4-month filmmaking class.

Classes are held at the filmmaking studio and students are working in groups of three to write, film, edit and produce a 5-to 8-minute documentary using industry-standard filmmaking equipment and practices.

Over the last few weeks, the students have learned about lighting, shooting, audio and editing using the high definition equipment, Kopels said. In the next few weeks, they will begin interviewing the subjects in their films.

Malaysia said she is looking forward to telling her story, which she said includes a pregnancy at 13, doing and dealing drugs, stints in group homes and

being a runaway. "I'm not ashamed of my story," she said. "I like to talk about what I've been through."

After going through rehabilitation at a drug-treatment center in Oakland, she said she has been clean and sober for two years and is looking forward to going to college to study psychology. She doesn't have an interest in filmmaking as a career, but said "it's good to learn new things because you never know what's going to come up in your life."

Student Jesus Ceja, 17, will also be the focus of his group's documentary.

Jesus, who is Mexican said he was hassled, jumped and judged by African-American peers before he learned how to dance. "My first best friend was a black friend and I'd always get judged by his friends and I'd always feel bad," he said. But when he began dancing in middle school, things changed for the better and he was more accepted by people from different racial groups.

"My documentary is about proving people wrong and showing them that someone from my ethnicity can dance too," he said. Jesus said he plans to become a professional dancer thanks, in part, to his late grandfather, who always believed in him and his abilities. "I'm going to do it for him," he said.

This is the first time the filmmaking school has partnered with the Oakland charter school but both sides hope the partnership will be a lasting one. The school will pay the filmmaking school about \$6,000 for its services, said co-principal Laura Flaxman. Flaxman said she hopes the teens can screen their films at an Oakland theater when they are completed later this year.

"The impact of seeing your work and your story on a big screen as a moving, engrossing film can

change lives," said Kopels. "These films are inspirational and empower students to see and embrace an inner strength that they may not have known existed."

Romeo Garcia, the cofounder and a co-principal at ARISE said the school wants to make the filmmaking class an ongoing part of their curriculum. "Our students are already lining up for the next course and we are all excited to see what they can do," he said.

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