

## **A New Lens on Youth Leadership**

By Gin Ferrara

*It is late afternoon. A group of youth, ages 12-15, stand on the corner of North and Pennsylvania Avenues, their hoodie sweatshirts covering their heads. Pedestrians look over at them, and walk quickly away. The youth surround an older man, who gestures energetically. Moving closer, one young man points an object towards the gentleman. He leans forward and speaks. A teenage girl yells "Cut!"*

Based on the above scenario, what is your perception? Is this a gang of urban youth, terrorizing the neighborhood? Or is it a production crew, shooting their first video documentary?

*The young man with the microphone shakes the gentleman's hand. The girl who yelled "Cut!" looks over towards two adults with who are leaning against a wall, observing the action. "I think we've got it!" she joyfully yells. The youth walk slowly back to the library across the street, helping each other carry the camera and tripod while the adults watch for traffic.*

This miracle on North Avenue didn't just happen on its own. These kids are part of Baltimore Speaks Out! – an after-school program run by Wide Angle Community Media that teaches children how to think critically and tell their own stories.

For several weeks, these young people have been learning how to recognize the message of a video, identify the target audience of a film, make a public presentation, and operate a video camera, microphone, and light kit. They have conducted research, written a script, arranged interviews with community members, and developed a shooting schedule.

Their goal: to create a documentary about their community, present and future.

When their video is complete, they will invite their family, friends, and community members to the premiere, where they will assist with the screening, teach the audience some video concepts, and receive awards for their achievement.

This Baltimore Speaks Out! workshop is an example of the opportunities Wide Angle Community Media provides for Baltimore youth to learn, create, and share their talents. Since 2000, Wide Angle has trained more than 700 young people in these skills, helping them to create public service announcements, documentaries, and narrative stories that share their challenges, hopes, and dreams.

Kids from Cherry Hill to Pikesville have taken part in Wide Angle's programs, many of which are held at Enoch Pratt Free Library branches and are accessible by public transportation. Since all of Wide Angle Community Media's classes are open to the

public and free of charge, kids from many different backgrounds, schools and neighborhoods sign up. As they learn technical skills, they also figure out how to work together as a team.

It turns out that Wide Angle's process -- taking students on a wild ride through broadcast media production, from camera operator to interviewer to video editor -- transforms young people into leaders. Some of the students become active in their community council, speak at national conferences, go to college to study film, and even become video teachers themselves.

The videos that the students produce make an impact, as well. The documentary, "Schooling Baltimore Street," tells the story of students fighting for their education in the public schools. It captured the attention of the national school reform movement, and will appear at the Chicago International Film Festival this fall. Other videos have been shown on PBS and public access channels as far away as New York and Colorado. When funds allow, the youth producers travel to present their video themselves, and see their work promoted in a national -- and sometimes international -- context.

In order to make more opportunities for youth here in Baltimore, Wide Angle has created the "Who Are You?" Youth Media Festival. Held in CENTERSTAGE's Pearlstone Theatre, this event showcased the photography, videos, poetry, fine art, performances, and stories of Baltimore's youth. Hosted by local celebrity Anthony McCarthy, and curated by a team of youth, the 2005 festival represented the talents of more than 100 children from 30 Baltimore City public schools. Wide Angle plans to make this an annual event, with the next festival scheduled for April 2007.

The real measure of success for after-school programming is the richness of opportunities that we can provide for our young people. Supporting these experiences is a way that we can all help young people grow into leaders and become more responsible for their community -- to everyone's benefit. Wide Angle Community Media is committed to that mission.

So think carefully the next time you see a group of young people standing on the street. Are they looking for trouble? Or waiting for an opportunity?

For more information about Wide Angle Community Media, go to [www.wideanglemedia.org](http://www.wideanglemedia.org).