MICA students interact with canvas of urban reality

By Childs Walker
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Tears welled in Tywana Reid’s eyes as she described a tumultuous week.

“Half the time I cry myself to sleep,” the 16-year-old said. “Because I say, ‘Who is there to talk to?’ ”

As Reid’s words spilled forth, a half-dozen other high school girls from across Baltimore nodded in compassion. Such an exchange might sound too raw for any setting other than a confidential support group. But in the background, three students from the Maryland Institute College of Art captured every moment on shoulder-mounted video cameras. Other art students swooped in to hug Reid. She could talk to them, they assured her.

The whole scene was part of a class on documentary filmmaking that meets at MICA Thursday evenings. For three years, the city girls have gotten into a van every week and come to learn camera skills alongside the MICA video students, to try everything from yoga to glamour photography and to share their joys and pains.

Program director Kirsten Hollander hopes that the girls’ lives will be the heart of a feature-length film, and that the class will be a model for similar community documentary efforts around the area and the country.

For Reid, the class has become a second family and an inspiration to become a MICA student so she can mentor others as she has been mentored. “Here, we can cry and laugh together,” said the Frederick Douglass High junior. “We can play with each other. When we get out there, we can’t joke like we do here. We can’t cry our hearts out, because they won’t understand. When we’re not here, we hold so much inside.”

The program, Finding Our Wings, is just one example of how MICA is running against stereotypes of art school. In this vision, art students aren’t just eccentrics in Bohemian clothing, crafting abstract images in rooms neatly cloistered from the surrounding world. They’re people who use aesthetic skills to understand and help the neighborhoods around them.

That might mean using a documentary as a way to investigate the complexities of growing up in Baltimore. Or it might mean crafting a more family-oriented image for an East Baltimore men’s home, as Ryan Clifford’s social design class is doing.

“We’re getting them out and giving them a chance to use their skills in the community,” Clifford said. “They’re realizing they can be agents of change by applying their skills, that it’s about more than just making pretty things.”

The cultural shift began in the late 1990s, and since then, more and more professors and students have imagined ways to work outside the “MICA bubble,” said Ray Allen, provost and vice president of academic affairs.

“Not too long ago, it was easy to come here as a privileged, suburban white kid and never bump up against the reality of Baltimore,” Allen said. “But these days, we have more and more students who leave feeling that they’ve made some impact on the city. More are staying as well.”

MICA was the first art school in the country to offer a master’s program in community art. This semester, MICA students are looking for solutions to climate change along North Avenue, examining themes of social justice through quilting and conceiving public art to help revitalize central Baltimore.

“In a very organic way, this has become a fundamentally distinguishing characteristic that sets us apart from our competitors,” Allen said of the community-minded efforts.

Before they even chose a project, Clifford’s students toured the rough neighborhoods near Johns Hopkins Hospital on foot, interviewed residents and hosted community leaders at a dinner (cooked by the M-
CA kids) in Bolton Hill. The students, used to working with computers to complete hypothetical assignments, never imagined that such activities could be a part of design. But Clifford believes that designers can't just descend on communities with big ideas to fix everything. They must know what people want and need before knowing how they can help.

"A lot of it's just listening instead of spewing a lot of design terms and telling people how awesome everything will be," said Claire Mueller, a junior from Chevy Chase. "There's so much more to it than you think. It's not just designing cool stuff on a computer program."

Clifford's students plan to design a new logo and outside mural for the Men and Families Center. They will create brochures to captivate micro-donors. They will refurbish bicycles to create a "bike library" for residents who need transportation to get to work.

Design is almost the corporate arm of MICA, the branch that pumps out graduates who compete for high-income jobs right out of school. But Clifford's students say they're now thinking about ways to help struggling people in addition to making money.

"I came into MICA thinking I would work with corporate clients and do all this sleek and sexy high-end design," said Aaron Fay, a junior from Newtown, Conn. "But you feel lifted after dealing with people and seeing that design can make a difference in their lives."

Fay and his peers often show up in the evenings and on the weekends to work at the Men and Families Center.

"They're a godsend," said Leon Purnell, who directs the center. "Most of the students are from affluent families. They haven't seen how people live on the other side. I tell them, 'Let this ground you.'"

The class has done exactly that, students say.

"A lot of people live in Baltimore but they hardly ever spend any time in East Baltimore," said Nick Ham, a junior from Westchester, N.Y. "Now I know the Northeastern Market, not just Lexington Market. I know that it's not just the Inner Harbor and Fells Point."

"I feel a lot more invested in Baltimore as a whole," added J.T. Holly, a junior from Florida.

MICA students speak of these community experiences as revelations. It was easy, they say, to spend four years partying and painting in Bolton Hill without ever getting to know Baltimore. But many find greater fulfillment in using art to address real problems.
self-esteem,” said McCrief’s friend Britney Backmon, a 17-year-old with a huge smile who wore purple boots, a purple belt and a purple shirt to match the purple swirl in her hair for the photo shoot. “Some people can’t express themselves at home, because parents just don’t get children.”

Frank self-examination is routine.

“I am a mean person,” McCrief said during a recent session. “I know I’m mean. But when I came here and started doing meditation and stuff, I’m trying to get my mean-ness under control. I smack first and ask questions later. But maybe I should ask questions first before I get rowdy-rowdy.”

The girls have college plans, and the simple experience of coming to MICA weekly is an important step for them. “They’re completely at ease at a college,” said Jane Cottis, a visual arts professor who runs the program with Hollander.

Devon Brown, a MICA sophomore from East Baltimore who appeared in the documentary “The Boys of Baraka,” sees himself in the girls. He yearned to transcend his circumstances and attend college. Now, he feels the class can help the girls find similar inspiration in themselves.

“I like to get involved with stuff that changes the community, so I love this class,” he said. “In order to change lives, to change a community, art is a big deal. It plays a huge role in getting people to express their feelings and share their experiences.”

Though he aspires to direct action films, Brown has high hopes for the documentary. “I think the film is going to be something different, because there are not a lot of programs that teach girls how to film their own life,” he said. “I hope that people watch it and want to get involved by creating their own films.”

At one session, the class watched a sequence cut by freshman Beku Burns that showed the girls learning yoga as a narrator read a poem by Marianne Williamson.

“It just kind of showed the girls as they are, as children of the universe being happy being themselves as they’re supposed to be,” Burns said.

“It was meant to happen,” she said of the way the footage came together. “You know how art just talks to you sometimes?”

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Cami McCrief of Edmondson High, left, and Tyvana Reid of Frederick Douglass High, foreground, do breathing exercises with other students at the start of a session at MICA.