

## **Reel Grrls—using technology to empower young women**

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### **Abstract**

Reel Grrls provides a youth media program for girls aged 13-19 years in Seattle, Washington, two thirds of whom identify as low income, and many of whom are homeless or living in foster care. The organization meets a community need as the voice of teenage females is missing in mainstream media. Data for this case study were collected in two stages: a nine-person focus group was conducted on August 20, 2007 and two staff interviews were completed on August 29, 2007. The organization is significant for the safe environment that it offers teens to explore their life stories and discover the professional, educational, and personal possibilities that media has to offer. Pairing girls with female adult mentors was highlighted as key to the program's success, as they provide positive role models while championing, supporting and challenging the girls. Program outcomes include increased confidence, development of media literacy and leadership skills, improved public speaking abilities, the reuniting of families, and the addressing of community concerns such as addiction and teenage health-related issues.

### **Introduction**

Located in Seattle, Washington, Reel Grrls is a nonprofit agency that seeks to provide teenage girls with the opportunity to gain media technology training in its after school program. With a mere 3% of Hollywood cinematographers being women, Reel Grrls goal is to empower users to change this equation by teaching them the basics of video, audio and Web production, giving them the analytic skills to critically evaluate media, and teaching them the steps involved in creating a movie. By becoming media literate, it is believed that these girls will be equipped with the necessary tools to become influential members of both their local and global societies.

Reel Grrls began as a one-year, pilot program in 2001. Within four years, the organization had gained 501 (c) (3) nonprofit status and established itself as a model program in youth media. Reel Grrls video productions have been screened at such notable film festivals as the Seattle Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival-Gen-Y studio, Hamptons International Film Festival and have also earned the Audience Choice Award at both the Youth Film Festival and Girls Film Festival. Girls are recruited from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic groups, with 65% self-identifying as low income. Program fees run from \$55-\$475; however, no girl is turned away due to lack of funds and full scholarships are given when needed.

Reel Grrls is situated in the historic Odd Fellows Temple building in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. The building was constructed in 1908 and is home to a variety of nonprofit enterprises. Reel Grrls occupy a small, two-room office on the fourth floor. When necessary, the center rents additional space by the month or by the hour. In general, the space is challenged to contain all of its occupants, equipment, and materials.

Equipment available for check out and use include eight Macintosh laptop computers and nine digital video recorder cameras. The laptops have software applications for editing film and music, such as Final Cut Pro and Soundtrack Pro. Of the nine digital recorders, three are consumer grade quality, five are prosumer quality (higher grade than consumer), and, for advanced shoots, the highest quality camera is used, a Cannon Excel One. The consumer grade cameras are employed when editing content on the computer, while the Prosumer cameras are used on film shoots. Most cameras are two and a half years old. Various other items such as cables, headsets, and microphones complete Reel Grrls equipment inventory.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected in two stages. A focus group was conducted with users on August 20, 2007 from 5:30-6:30 pm. The group was comprised of nine females, ranging in age from 15-23 years (average 18 years): seven Reel Grrl users, one intern, and one adult mentor. Two of the girls were Asian and the remainder were Caucasian. Participants have been coming to Reel Grrls from 1 – 2.5 years, with the mentor having worked at the center for nine months. Pizza was provided and each participant received \$10 to compensate for her time. The focus group followed a private Reel Grrls activity and was held in a large room owned by another nonprofit. However, because the room was reserved for a dance class at 6:00 pm, the focus group was interrupted as participants were obliged to move to a smaller room.

The second data collection stage occurred on August 29, 2007 when two staff interviews were carried out with the founder and executive director of Reel Grrls and the program manager. The executive director had worked at the organization for seven years, while the program manager has been working there for three months. Demographic information was not collected from participating staff members. The Reel Grrls space was also observed on this date.

### **Reel Grrls and the Girls who Use it**

In order for any community technology center (CTC) to help its targeted demographic, the potential users must first know that it exists. When asked how the teens learned of the program, they indicated that they had heard of Reel Grrls from disparate sources. Some learned from teachers who were familiar with the program, others participated in school events where the executive director or mentors spoke about the organization. Advertisements for Reel Grrls workshops were also seen in the local paper, and one girl went to a Reel Grrls film screening at the central Seattle Public Library. The amount of time users spent at the center was difficult to isolate, as visits varied depended on the programming. When a distinct program was running, girls came to the center on average three times per week, whereas if no program was in operation, the average visit was typically once per week. A program was in progress during our visits, wherein groups of 3-4 girls were working together to create promotional videos for nonprofit organizations.

With a multitude of options vying for young people's attention, researchers wanted to learn what drew teens to Reel Grrls. Responses suggested that interest in film was the main attraction. For 18-year old Eleanor, it was film scoring. She recognized that when she came to Reel Grrls two years ago, there was "not much call for a 16-year old to film score, but now I have something to put on my resume." Others wanted to meet people, network and have access to quality equipment.

### **Individual Outcomes**

It was evident that association with Reel Grrls provided both tangible and intangible outcomes to individual users. According to center staff, the girls were embraced in a secure non-judgmental environment in which they could learn technology. Staff stated that many schools do not offer media programs, and explained that in the few schools that do, programs are typically boy focused and can be intimidating to female students. At Reel Grrls, however, they aim to create a learning ground wherein technology is demystified, while concomitantly providing an open space for teenage girls to meet and work with other girls. Echoing this sentiment, the girls indicated that being a member of an all-female community made them feel safe and valued. According to Tarrah, who had been with the organization for one and a half years, “Learning and making things with girls is good. Other places, guys would try to take control. It’s easier not to be in that position.” Confirming this view, Brooke, a 19-year old college sophomore, stated “It’s safe working with girls. I can say anything. At school, you can’t say what you like. If you make a mistake, they judge and you can’t work with them positively again.” This community spirit built confidence and empowered the girls to take on challenging projects that they may otherwise have avoided.

Reel Grrls takes special care to nurture the girls’ professional and personal development by providing them with positive female role models and supportive mentors. A networking outcome results from this mentorship program. Users build long-term relationships with one another, but they also connect with other women in the film industry. These connections may provide girls with future training or job opportunities.

Teens also learn important life skills such as responsibility, public speaking, interviewing, and teamwork skills. Reel Grrls users operate in an atmosphere of trust, where they are made responsible for their actions. The girls are allowed to check out equipment, and trusted to care for it and return it when they are finished using it. Maddie, a 23-year old mentor, pointed out that when films are screened before large audiences, they are usually followed by a question and answer session, which requires the girls to speak publicly about their movies. Users also get experience interviewing people for their documentaries. Eleanor stated that she appreciated learning to interview, and testified that this ability helped her in her activities with Teen Link, an organization that works with teens contemplating suicide. She emphasized, “I have worked at Teen Link for three years now. I can interview better because I try to see from their perspective rather than thinking empathy. It makes the interview better.” Learning to work as a team is also an impact of Reel Grrls. In particular, the girls work with others whose lives are dissimilar from their own, for example prep school users collaborate and learn from homeless users or those living in foster care.

Moreover, girls learned to master high demand, professional skills such as film editing, storyboarding, film production, film scoring, distribution and communication, all of which can easily transfer to higher education and future employment competencies. Reel Grrls builds positive self-esteem and fosters a desire to go to college or seek employment. With substantial resumes demonstrating significant skills and accomplishments, and letters of recommendations from Reel Grrls staff, girls feel confident to compete with others in these arenas.

### ***Family Outcomes***

Families also encountered positive outcomes engendered by Reel Grrls activities. Girls often pass along their technology and media skills to parents or younger siblings so that they, too, may share stories with others. Parents benefit from Reel Grrls in that they are given

assistance with their child's upbringing and professional development. A sense of pride is also fostered among parents as they revel in their children's accomplishments.

Families have even reunited because Reel Grrls users have voiced their concerns and struggles through their movies. Illustrating this point, the center's program manager spoke of one teen's experience,

One girl's mother died when she was young. Her dad was in and out of jail. She did this documentary about her and her dad's relationship. It made an impact on him. Now, she has a relationship with her dad and it came out of her Reel Grrls experience.

### ***Community Outcomes***

Community outcomes were similarly evident from teenagers' interactions with Reel Grrls. The executive director stated that by hearing what girls have to say, the community at large can benefit. To demonstrate this point, the program manager provided the following examples:

A girl was born to addictive parents. She is a twin and both girls have cerebral palsy. You wouldn't know it to look at them at first. She told her story [through film] and was able to create a discussion guide that is now given out to Al-Anon and Al-Ateen.

One girl directed a health and safety video for the Ballard School District. It was cool, kid friendly and engaging. It communicates an important message that these youth can only tell. Adults can't do that.

Learning to work as a team with members of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds can also have community benefits. As the girls progress to college and work environments, they will have learned valuable skills about cultural inclusion.

In addition, providing a safe and healthy environment for teenagers to participate in can be interpreted as having community benefits. Reel Grrls helps to keep at risk, homeless, foster care, low income and middle income youth off the streets and out of trouble. It engages teen girls in productive and worthwhile activities, while helping to keep people and communities safe.

### ***Challenges facing Reel Grrls***

Like many nonprofits, Reel Grrls is faced with an assortment of challenges. When asked about difficulties, Reel Grrls founder and executive director indicated that although funding was the easy answer, the reality is that lack of space and too few staff were the predominant problems. She felt that this hindered recruitment, as girls "had so many choices for after school programs...like sports." Cramped facilities made it difficult to compete with more alluring options. The executive director also spoke about staffing shortages, stating, "We have a huge program and only four staff. We'd like to reach 200 girls per year. Now it is only 100 per year. We have a large equipment budget but I would like to allocate it for staff."

The program manager presented a somewhat different focus to the question of center challenges. For example, transportation provided a problem as some girls travelled as much as

twenty miles to reach Reel Grrls. Although free bus passes were available, it did not necessarily resolve the transportation issue. Childcare was another challenge. She went on to explain,

We met some kids who were interested in the program and they had babies. Kids with babies. What do you do with teens who have kids? Their moms would baby sit for them, but if we want to work with kids who have babies, we need to know about handling daycare.

Of particular concern was the lack of diversity in Reel Grrls programming. The program manager suggested that Reel Grrls currently was not attracting enough women of color or women with varied socioeconomic backgrounds, either as staff members or users. The program manager felt that recruitment of such women as staff could provide teens with positive role models and more opportunity to work with women of color in the film industry. Developing and fostering this cultural diversity was considered important to the center's future.

### **Conclusions – Digital Inclusion**

Reel Grrls targets users from all socioeconomic and ethnic groups by providing youth media programs that are restricted only by age and gender. It empowers teenage girls with the skills and confidence to tell their stories through film. The organization provides a safe environment for girls to explore their ideas without the intimidation and male judgment typically present in boy focused or mixed gender media programs. Augmenting this environment is the trusting attitude embraced by Reel Grrls staff as users are permitted to check out expensive laptops and video equipment for an unspecified period of time. Life skills such as responsibility, teamwork, and public speaking will help girls develop the type of work ethic desired by employers. The technology skills they learn in the areas of digital video and audio will also help them as they pursue further educational and professional goals.

Reel Grrls is an important vehicle for promoting digital inclusion among at-risk youth populations. Girls who have not worked with digital media nor have such technical programs available in their schools are encouraged to explore the possibilities offered and encouraged by the program. Furthermore, Reel Grrls makes high-end equipment and a myriad of software programs available to users from at-risk demographics. Through outreach among homeless, minority, and low-income populations, Reel Grrls strives to provide as many girls with the digital media experience as possible.