

What's Happening with Act Out

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Act Out is a project in which youth learn about sexual assault/violence issues by producing films and plays that contend with the subject matter. This year, Act Out, has immersed itself deeper into the Skrappy's community. Skrappy's is a drug- and alcohol-free youth-run performing arts center where young people from a variety of cultures express themselves, receive support, and achieve their goals. The Skrappy's community consists of alternative and mainstream youth, including homeless youth, youth with difficult home lives, and young people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, primarily ages 12-23. Many of these youth live their lives in contrast to mainstream culture and "systems" and often have difficulty building trusting relationships with adults. Consequently, these youth experience uneasiness with topics such as sexual assault "prevention" due to wariness of any prescriptive overtures coming from institutions or adults who they often see (erroneously or not) as the source of abuse.

We have decided to take a less formal approach to sexual assault/violence prevention and education trainings, given the youth's obvious discomfort with the subject matter. For example, prior to working on treatments for a film, we discuss hypothetical situations regarding sexual assault that the youth address and research. This method helps them argue their positions or abandon them based on the information they acquire and/or the quality of the argumentation.

Invariably, the discussion extends to include other youth at Skrappy's, which may represent the ripple effect that we were anticipating might emerge from this project. We are finding that sexual assault as a topic becomes less disconcerting when it is not forced on Skrappy's youth. Similarly, we are seeing the same thing develop when the topic is not contained to a particular project (Act Out). Also, our program coordinator at Skrappy's, has encouraged this openness by commissioning art that contends with sexual assault from outside the Act Out group.

Other instances that could encourage this ripple effect: Our Act Out youth leader, talking about participating in Take Back the Night during Skrappy's presentation at the Children Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) conference in May 2008. She will also discuss the issue when Skrappy's presents to school superintendents, social workers, city and county officials in September 2008 with The Youth Advocacy Committee.

This produces markers in the immediate environment of Skrappy's and in the larger social environment of the community that declare our stance against sexual assault. In a sense, we see this position emerge as an extension of Skrappy's broader philosophy: mutual respect among members. Given this atmosphere, we anticipate a cyclical effect in regard to film making in Act Out. When the environment already asserts a position on

sexual assault, the content of Act Out movies are liberated from the basest depictions of the subject, the didactic and the heaviness. So, if sexual assault can be more comfortably referenced by the youth, the members are able to be more creative, to take aesthetic risks, be inclined to use humor, and to be irreverent. A less grim approach is important to the extent that it indicates a degree of ownership, regarding knowledge and understanding of sexual assault; it corresponds to a sense of empowerment.