

Student documentaries honored

Hunting for heroes

Chelsea Foster, Colfax Record Correspondent



Kim Palaferri/Colfax Record

E.V. Cain English and multimedia teacher Olivia Conn works closely with Gabriel Hudson on an editing assignment in preparation for the Heroes Project he will undertake later this year. Videos completed over the past four years by local students of Conn and fellow teacher Suzanne Scotten have received national recognition.



Local students and teachers have been honored with national recognition for their work over the past four years with the Heroes Project. Teachers Suzanne Scotten and Olivia Conn from E.V. Cain School give students the tools and motivation to complete their own documentary film projects. Scotten previously taught at Weimar Hills School.

The films cover important topics and inspiring people from history and current events that the students view as heroic or making a difference in the world. The videos completed by Weimar Hills School students over the past four years were chosen from over 200 applicants to be featured at Microsoft's Partners in Learning Global Forum in Seattle.

"I think it's pretty amazing that eighth-graders can create such powerful projects as to be honored in this way," Scotten said.

Scotten includes the Heroes Project as a yearlong assignment for her eighth-grade English classes. Students choose a subject or person who is doing something to restore a broken world or someone who has triumphed through adversity and create a documentary film about that topic.

Conn prepares the students for this assignment by teaching multimedia and English at sixth- and seventh-grade levels.

"I focus on making sure the kids have those skills at hand – like filming, downloading video, editing video, using music and telling a story through documentary – so that they are ready to go when they get to Suzanne's class in eighth grade," Conn said. "We also focus on how a narrative is told, having a narrator, using music in a video, interviews. There are a lot of literature concepts that fit naturally with what we teach in media and with the Heroes Project."

Students then use their knowledge of narration and real-world technology skills to create a documentary film. The topics are varied and often intense.

"The project is about oppression and overcoming adversity. Things like Anne Frank, Cesar Chavez, the Japanese internment camps, Cambodian genocide," Scotten said. "Students have interviewed Holocaust survivors, former POWs."

The videos' subjects span the globe, but the students also frequently highlight local unsung heroes, like the Courage House in Sacramento or the Auburn Community Garden, which donates over 26,000 pounds of produce to the Salvation Army each year.

"I think the thing that amazes me most is that these 13-year-olds are tackling tough topics and have received national recognition for their work," Scotten said.

Conn said that students have been deeply affected by their exploration of people who overcome adversity.

"A lot of the kids tell us that they realize that life's more than just the little things. They've been inspired by people even in our own community who make a difference. It gives them a world perspective that they didn't have before," Conn said. "It's something they can be passionate about."

Breanna De Mello, a junior at Colfax High School who completed the Heroes Project at Weimar Hills when she was in eighth grade, said that it made a big impact on her.

"The Heroes Project was my favorite project we did all year. I learned so much about others and how their lives are so much different from ours," De Mello said.

De Mello completed her documentary about an epidemic of violent rape women endured in the Congo. Her video was startling and heart-wrenching.

"It actually made me cry after seeing what happened to all the women in the Congo. I felt so sorry for them," De Mello said. "This project got me to see what goes on in other countries and got me to go outside of our little world."

The national recognition continued when Scotten and Conn were interviewed by Story Corps about their endeavors with the Heroes Project earlier this month. Story Corps records interviews with people who have had interesting real-life experiences and catalogs them in the Library of Congress, so the Heroes Project will be a permanent part of American history. Scotten credits the students for creating such inspirational work.

"There are some smart kids working with very few resources and doing amazing things," Scotten said. "They see that they can change things. It's their world, and they can and do make an impact. So often we think, what can one person do? But really one person can do a lot. That's what these kids learn."

The recognition earned has inspired Scotten and Conn to continue using the teaching tool. Students at E.V. Cain will engage in the Heroes Project this year, and Scotten hopes to showcase the projects for the community.

"We hope to reach out to the community and create some kind of a film festival, perhaps coordinating with the public library or a local theater," Scotten said. "This way, parents and community members can see the great work that students are doing."

The Heroes Project depends largely on grants and donated equipment like video cameras and computers for the students to use. To donate new or used equipment, contact Suzanne Scotten or Olivia Conn through E.V. Cain Middle School at www.auburn.k12.ca.us/ev-cain/ or at 823-6106.

To view some of the past student projects online, visit: www.mrsscotten.com/heroes.html.