

seeing ourselves SUCCESSFUL

THE WORCESTER YOUTH PHOTOVOICE PROJECT



“We need more ways
to see ourselves **SUCCESSFUL**
than just in the ripples
of the water.”

Lucky Thach,
Youth PhotoVoice Photographer



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many groups and individuals contributed to the success of Youth PhotoVoice Worcester. We would particularly like to thank Worcester Youth Center; the Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts, and Worcester Roots, who helped recruit youth photographers, supervised their work and organized transportation; and photographer Tammy Woodard, whose warm instructional style and constant encouragement helped youth participants realize their creative potential.

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INTRODUCTION

What is life like for young people in Worcester? What makes them happy, challenges them, and encourages them? What upsets them, confuses them, and makes them angry? Adults can guess, but they can't actually know – not unless they can somehow manage to see what young people themselves see.

Seeing Worcester through the eyes of the city's youth: that's what Youth PhotoVoice Worcester, a local project that asked young people to document the positive and negative aspects of life in their community through photographs, was designed to make possible.

Conducted as part of the Worcester Youth Capacity Project, a program of the United Way of Central Massachusetts, this initiative began in October 2008 and lasted almost a year. New England Network for Child, Youth and Family Services coordinated the project, working with the Worcester Youth Center, the Southeast Asian Coalition, and Worcester Roots to recruit and train young people to participate. These three agencies are part of a coalition of organizations working to expand their capacity to serve the city's youth.

Youth PhotoVoice Worcester is based, as its name implies, on a technique called "photovoice" that has been used by groups throughout the world as a way of promoting positive community change. In photovoice projects, ordinary people seek to document their communities through photographs (the "photo") and captions (the "voice"). The results have often been stunning, powerfully conveying information that outsiders – and even many insiders – had either never known or noticed before. The young people participating in Youth PhotoVoice Worcester were given the

standard photovoice assignment: to capture their community in images and words. It seemed simple enough. But on second thought, perhaps it wasn't so simple. In a city that they knew so well, that was filled with things they saw every day, what stories were important enough to tell, and why? To help decide, the youth worked through a series of questions: What do we like about Worcester? What don't we like about it? What would the city look like if it were a perfect place for young people? And, finally, how can we possibly answer these questions through photographs?

PhotoVoice pictures are not meant to be self-consciously "artistic," but rather are intended to tell what a local area literally looks like to the people who live there. That said, many of the photos the youth took are indeed beautiful. Sometimes the beauty they captured – a shining lake at night, green shoots sprouting beside a city trash can – would have been obvious to any passerby; other times, it emerged only after the photo had been taken and passed around for other youth in the photovoice group to see. Looked at by fresh eyes, everyday urban scenes suggested new meanings and ideas. As one young

"To me they were just pictures of my neighborhood, but to everyone else they spoke hundreds of words about life."

Under the direction of Tammy Woodard, a professional photographer, the young people gathered twice to learn about the photovoice method, to hone their digital photography skills, and to talk more about the messages they wanted their pictures to convey. Once trained, they were given cameras and journals, and sent out to do their work. For months, the young people took photos throughout the city, generally in small teams and sometimes accompanied by adult youth workers. Finally, they gathered again to select their most interesting images, edit them, and write narratives to accompany them.

photographer said, "To me they were just pictures of my neighborhood, but to everyone else they spoke hundreds of words about life." Together, the young people's photographs create an impressionistic look at Worcester – fond, critical, humorous, and introspective – that we hope will provoke conversation among youth and adults, inform policymakers, and inspire others to pick up their cameras and capture the spirit of their surroundings through photographs.

"Many of the images were nothing more than random shots taken of their own neighborhoods. Yet when the images were paired with words, stories began to unfold – not only of the youth's own personal life, but the lives of young adults all over the country."

IN THE CITY



Per order of the youth of Worcester, we are angry at the loss of what could have been.

Photos: Raeven Johnston, Brian Johnson Jr.
Caption: Diane Ihebor



A night out together:

Photo: Ariel Santana
Caption: Group



Destroyed!

Photo: Juliana Villegas Cruz and Lucky Thach
Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



Alleys can be very creepy...

Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



Unfinished business.

Photo: Isaias Rodriguez
Caption: Group



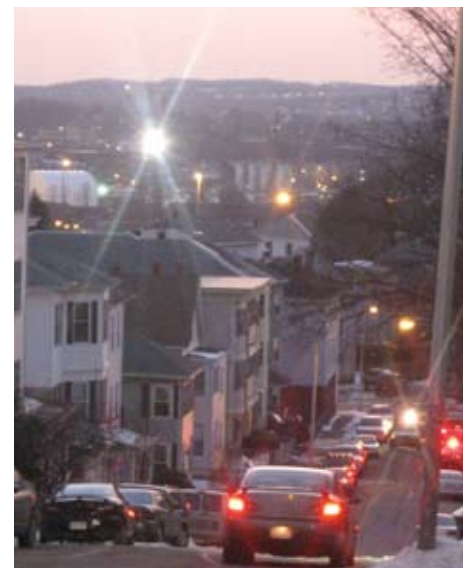
Many from Main South call this place their childhood - tangled swings, rusty slides and an entrance to creativity. It's not a huge place. Not even enough space to play hide and seek. It doesn't have a lake. It's not perfect. But who needs perfect when a child's imagination creates its own sanctuary?

Photo and Caption: Thu Nguyen



City hall is a city view that people can stop and stare at.

Photo: Lucky Thach
Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



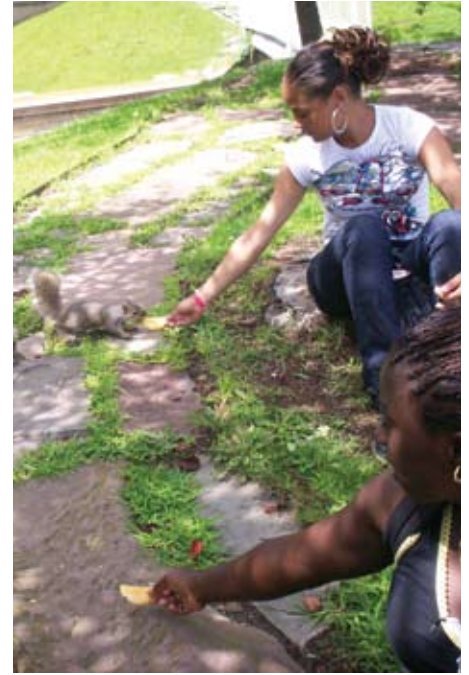
Busy lights are city lights.

Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



Get your stuff together:

Photo: Isaias Rodriguez
Caption: Group



Give a squirrel a chip and it will eat for a day;
teach it how to open a bag of chips and it will
eat forever:

Photo and Caption: Diane Ihebor



Game over?

Photo: Isaias Rodriguez
Caption: Group



I think we're having too much fun looking
at our shadows, we missed something of
value. Take a second look, can you see what
we missed?

Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach

FINDING NATURE



In this lonely world, we wander off by ourselves and try to capture nature's beauty.
Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach



Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the red-berried moon? These berries have been in this park since Worcester was born....
Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach



Everything grows old and rots away... Maybe sometime in summer it will bloom once again.
Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach



The park is our essential answer for peace, quiet, and communication. Why not share the view?
Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach



Families are all over the place.
Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz

ADVICE



Enjoy your young age while you still can!
You should be more careful next time
(%&\$#%*@).

Photos: Juliana Villegas Cruz and Lucky Thach
Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



When will we realize we are using energy we really don't have? Every time we keep a plug in an outlet, we waste energy. We take what we don't need. Just pull the plug!

Photo and Caption: Thu Nguyen



Support them while they are young, so when they are older they will know you will be there.

Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



A penny found is a penny saved!

Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach



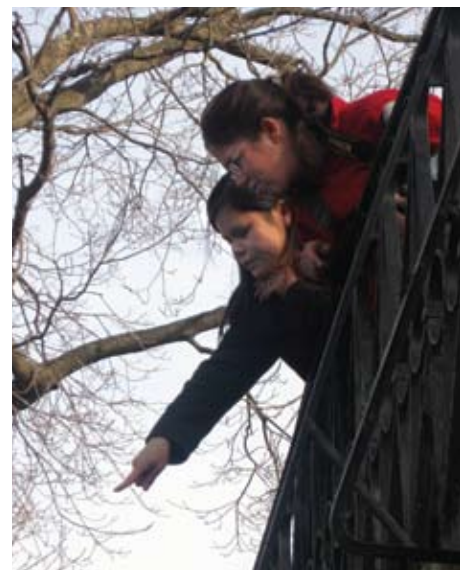
Tuning out distractions and getting down to business. We all need to do it.
Photo and Caption: Diane Ihebor



I have exactly 13 minutes and 6 seconds to finish this paper before first period...Lesson: 'Family Guy' at 3 a.m., not a great idea!
Photo and Caption: Diane Ihebor

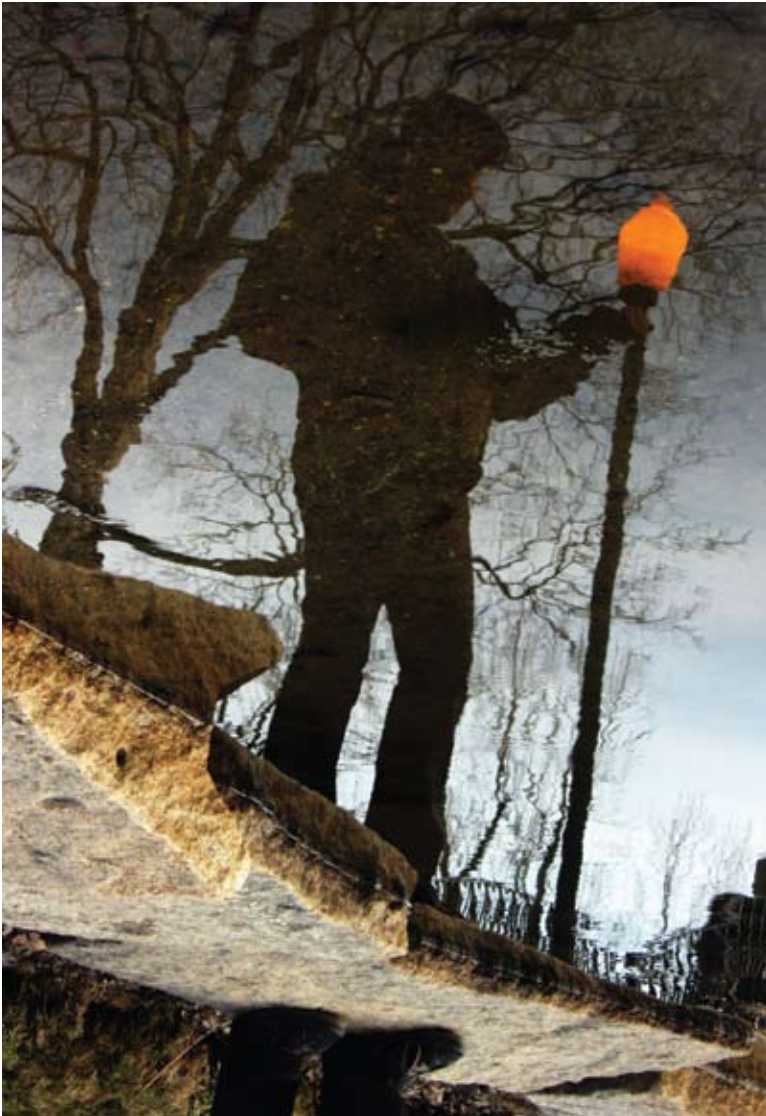


If you don't leave stuff behind, you won't have a reason to complain.
Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



Show your friends what you think is interesting.
Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz

QUESTIONS & PHILOSOPHY



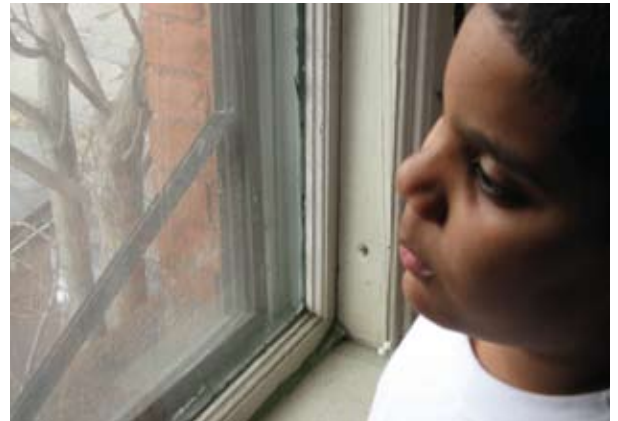
What we see in our own reflections are our dreams.
Every color, every chance we get to hold the light...
We see ourselves only then and there as it seems.
It's our mirror image we want to pursue...
But is it in our reality?
We need more ways to see ourselves successful,
Than just in the ripples of the water.

Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach



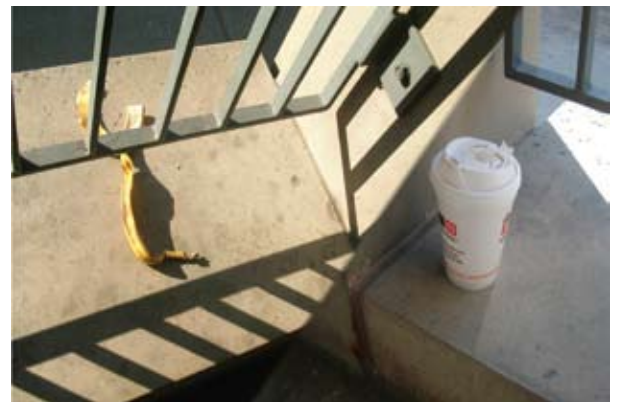
Are these the answers to our problems?

Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach



What will my future be?

Photo: Ariel Santana



Our community is turning into a universal trashcan! Do you want to be part of this?

Photos: Lucky Thach

Caption: Lucky Thach and Julianna Villegas Cruz



What if... everyone was treated the same?
Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



What else can't we do?
Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



What if you knew your future was just a dead end?
Photo and Caption: Thu Nguyen



Even when times get tough, there is always a dim light in the attic.
Photo: Raevan Johnston
Caption: Diane Iheborn



Does this sign ring true? Is it really "more you"?
Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



Do you think I'm cool?
Am I perfect?
Am I cool?
Do you think I'm perfect?
Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



Like the roots of this tree, we are the foundation to a better society.
Photo and Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz



How dare we as a species place ourselves on a pedestal of godliness? Life, and the world, will always find a way to survive.
Photo and Caption: Thu Nguyen



In our plain world, we need it to be filled with colors. We wander amongst ourselves seeking variety in this world...

Photo and Caption: Lucky Thach



Imagine... each crack is an obstacle we must overcome. Do you seep into the cracks and lose yourself or do you build new sidewalks over them?

Photo and Caption: Thu Nguyen



These are here to support, they reflect on the support we should be getting.

*Photo: Juliana Villegas Cruz and Lucky Thach
Caption: Juliana Villegas Cruz*

THE YOUTH PHOTOVOICE WORCESTER TEAM



Ha Bui, a graduate of College of the Holy Cross with a BA in Psychology and a concentration in Asian Studies, has been working with the Southeast Asian Coalition (SEAC) since her sophomore year of college. After graduating, she continued to work at SEAC as a Youth Coordinator. She also currently works at Community Healthy Link, with adults who have mental illness. For Youth PhotoVoice Worcester, Ha partnered with Juliana and Lucky from Youth Effect, driving them around the city to take photos and overseeing their writing and photo-editing work. According to Ha, the thing she most enjoyed about the experience was seeing youth who usually have little to say getting a chance to involve themselves in a project, to “open up and share.”



Josh Cohen, a youth worker at the Worcester Youth Center, helped organize the PhotoVoice project. “The opportunity that Youth PhotoVoice Worcester gave to the youth involved is not something to be taken lightly,” he said. “‘A picture speaks a thousand words’ is a phrase we hear often, yet we don’t realize that it stands for a literal interpretation of what a picture actually does. Youth PhotoVoice Worcester gave skills and a voice to the youth who tried to capture images that meant something – either to them, individuals who share things in common with them, or their community. However, and this is the beautiful piece, many of the images were nothing more than random shots taken of their own neighborhoods. Yet when the images were paired with words, stories began to unfold, not only of the youth’s own personal life, but the lives of young adults all over the country. The images captured colors, textures, actions, issues and life in the most beautiful and oftentimes subtlest of ways. The project gave youth a chance to be artists – artists with important messages that needed to be heard. As the PhotoVoice leader at the Worcester Youth Center, I hope opportunities like this never stop, and that the learning and creation that take place during projects such as this spread like wildfire all over the City of Worcester and maybe, eventually, the country.”



Juliana Villegas Cruz, an aspiring photographer and interior designer, is a member of Youth Effect at the Southeast Asian Coalition (SEAC). A freshman at North High this year, she has been active in Youth Effect since 6th grade. Juliana said she hopes to learn more about photography and improve her techniques. For this project, she enjoyed visiting different parts of the city to take pictures. One trip was to the library, where she noticed details she might not have taken in before. “In downtown Worcester, we were able to observe youth being active outside (i.e., skateboarding) but we also saw a lot of trash left on the ground at the library (even though we were not sure who left it there),” she said.



Diane Ihebom is a senior at South High this year. “I value education and right now that is my top priority,” she said. “I am inspired by art and music. I enjoy taking pictures and capturing moments I can’t put into writing. I like to express myself through photography, painting and writing.” She said she is excited about her final year of high school. “I am very ambitious and driven and hope to use my creative energies in the future.”



Andrew Le, a graduate of College of the Holy Cross with a BA in Chemistry and a concentration in Asian Studies, introduces himself as “Andrew ‘Danger’ Le” as a way to show others that he is an adventurous and outgoing type – a guy who defies conformity. He is a responsible young man whose leadership skills have been honed through his work at the Southeast Asian Coalition (SEAC), where he recently became Youth Coordinator of the Youth Effect program. Andrew also helps run the ESL program at SEAC. Throughout college, Andrew took on many leadership roles that helped him in his work in the community. For Youth PhotoVoice Worcester, he helped Juliana and Lucky organize their photo collections and communicated with project advisors to ensure that all the work got completed.



Thu Nguyen begins her freshman year at Middlebury College in Vermont this fall. “Being part of Youth PhotoVoice Worcester helped me see my community, Worcester’s Main South, through different perspectives,” she said. “I’ve been living here since I was 3 years old, and taking snapshots of Worcester should be an easy task. But that wasn’t always the case. Sometimes I felt like glorifying Worcester for its beauty, yet sometimes I’m walking by the dirtiest and most garbage-filled abandoned jungle. But in the end, it didn’t matter if the picture was boring or provoking, stunning or dull, weak or powerful; all of it captured the Main South I knew. There are too many aspects of Main South to portray them all, so what I aimed to capture was my relationship with the place I spent the majority of my life in. Main South plays an enormous role in my life and who I am today. These pictures and captions I created reflect not only Main South, but also me.”



Isaias Rodriguez, 16, learned concrete skills through his work in the project. “The good thing about Youth PhotoVoice Worcester was learning about photography,” he said. “The skills I learned might possibly help me one day to get a different job. I also learned a little about using the computer to fix pictures and how to make photos better.” Yet he also learned about the transforming effect of taking, and looking at, photographs themselves. “In the beginning of the project, I wasn’t sure how I was going to take good pictures,” he said. “I had never done anything like this before. I started by just walking around my neighborhood taking photos. Once I brought the pictures back to the group and we started talking about them and adding narratives to them, I was really amazed about what people saw in my photos. Everyone saw things in my photos that I didn’t see. To me they were just pictures of my neighborhood, but to everyone else they spoke hundreds of words about life.”



Douglas Tanner, M.Ed., LSW, acted as coordinator for Youth PhotoVoice Worcester. Formerly a master carpenter and restorer of old houses, for the past 20 years Doug has been involved in a variety of educational projects with youth, adults and families in New England. In his role as technical assistance coordinator for New England Network for Child, Youth and Family Services, he has spent three years working intensively with youth service organizations in Worcester, helping them to get better at what they do. “I loved being involved in this project,” he said. “I am thrilled with the effort and achievements of these young photographers. I learned a lot and I came to a new level of appreciation for the skills and art of photography.”



Lucky Thach is a youth leader and aspiring actress, model and artist. She is a sophomore at Doherty High School this year. She works as a youth leader for Youth Effect at the Southeast Asian Coalition (SEAC), and enjoys taking pictures and using Photoshop to edit them. Through Youth PhotoVoice Worcester, Lucky combined her two interests of poetry and photography to make meaningful pieces of art.



Tammy Woodard, a freelance photographer since 2002 and formerly a newspaper photographer, trained youth in the technical and creative aspects of photography for this project. She is the owner of Tammy Woodard Photography, based in Worcester, MA. She said, "I was excited to be involved with helping teens take better photos and learn to communicate through photography."

Not pictured: Raeven Johnston, Ariel Santana and Brian Johnson, Jr. All three are members of the Worcester Youth Center, where they participate in the center's Urban Community Action Planning for Teens (UCAPT) program. They took pictures for Youth PhotoVoice Worcester.

