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**Edwatch by Julia Steiny:**  
**AS220 offers a home base for some disconnected youth**

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, August 27, 2006

Alternative Space 220 -- the number was the address of the AS220's first home -- is a busy center for the visual and performing arts in downtown Providence. Its main mission is to support adult artists doing original works in every possible medium, and on an average week at least 150 artists are showcased between the galleries, workshops and performances. But for all that, AS220 has always held a special place in its paint-spattered heart for kids.

One day, Umberto "Bert" Crenca, AS220's founder and director, was lunching with colleagues in the groovy, newly-renovated eatery on AS220's first floor. Distracted by a sudden commotion outside on Empire Street, Crenca looked up and was appalled to see a kid he knew ranting insanely and making a scene. The kid -- we'll call him Joey -- was known to be unstable.

Crenca, a painter himself, had taught him art when he was in the Training School. Crenca says that for years, Joey had been "in and out of The System," which is code for "The details are none of your business," but includes such possibilities as placements in group homes, foster care, homeless shelters, the Training School, or a family monitored by the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF).

## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In their path to the Rhode Island Training School (RITS), the lives of Rhode Island's incarcerated young women are marked by exclusion. These young women come from the states poorest communities and are disproportionately young women of color. They are victimized in their interpersonal relationships as well as in their relationships with the state. Without profound intervention, their prospects for self-sufficiency and political engagement are slim, even if they never find themselves back in a prison cell. But, since many have grown up under the guardianship of the state and its disciplinary institutions, these young women are also supremely aware of government's possibilities as well as its shortcomings. Despite their personal histories of exclusion- if not because of them- incarcerated young women have immense potential to be leaders and agents of social change.

The *Rossi House Debate Program (RHDP)* empowers Rhode Island's incarcerated young women to be engaged political advocates, for both themselves and their communities, through the development of public speaking skills. In the *RHDP*, incarcerated young women develop the skills and the passion they need to give voice to their grievances. By publicizing their thoughtful arguments, *RHDP* seeks to make visible the plight and the potential of this often-ignored population.

[Kerri, this paragraph is missing. I am waiting on language from AS220-How does this proposed project fit in with your organization's values, mission and direction? Briefly summarize your organization's scope of service, management and governance, and financing.]

Both *RHDP* and *AS220 Broad Street Sisters* were founded by women, are run by women, and are designed to serve the needs of society's most marginalized young women. *RHDP* incorporates the lessons of gender-responsive programming and relational learning in its structure and content. The program's dedication to public speaking nurtures young women's desires to have their voices heard and resolve conflicts through dialogue. Both programs' use of democratic decision-making further ensures the young female participants will have substantial input and ownership in all aspects of programming.

But on this day, Crenca says, "He shows up here stark raving mad, hallucinating his head off, schizophrenic. The TV was telling him things. But he had a 10-percent notion in whatever was left of his mind that he should check in here. This was a kind of home for him and somewhere, somehow, he knew he could get help." In fact, Crenca and the staff knocked themselves out to get Joey into a hospital that day.

AS220 works specifically at creating a home base for disconnected youth, which is to say any kids whose families, neighborhoods, social groups or inner lives are chaotic or troubled. So Training School kids are an obvious audience. Besides three full-time AS220 people working at the prison itself -- integrating art into the regular curriculum, for example -- each week six to eight other artists in various media also go to teach workshops to the inmates. Hopefully the kids make a connection with the art form, the artist or just the idea of hanging around an art center, and when released, the ex-offenders will come to AS220.

Mind you, AS220 welcomes all kids, no matter what their circumstances -- including those well cared-for -- because they all could use more connection with art, adults, friends, possibilities, opportunities, skills, whatever.

The status of young women in the juvenile justice system cannot be described as anything but dire. According to the National Bar Association report *Justice by Gender*, since 1980, the number of girls in the juvenile justice system has increased at an alarming rate, even though juvenile crime has been declining. Girls now constitute the fastest growing segment of court-involved youth. [While 7 incarcerated, young women are shortchanged in the provision of resources and services.] RHDP is part of the emerging movement of gender-responsive programs dedicated to harnessing young women's deep reservoirs of strength and resiliency, to enable them to transform their lives and their communities.

### THE GOALS OF THE ROSSI HOUSE DEBATE PROGRAM (RHDP)

RHDP seeks to empower Rhode Island's incarcerated young women to make personal and political change through the development of their public speaking skills. RHDP is committed to:

- 1) Prepare and engage Rhode Island's incarcerated young women to be effective advocates, for themselves and their communities.
- 2) Provide incarcerated young women with a vehicle for personal change that draws on their unique strengths and honors their lived experiences.
- 3) Transform the institutions that impact incarcerated young women by bringing their views to both policymakers society at large.
- 4) Provide ongoing opportunities and support for young women to express their political voices following their release from the RITS.

### THE ROSSI HOUSE DEBATE PROGRAM STRATEGIES:

RHDP will pursue a variety of strategies to engage Rhode Island's incarcerated young women and bring their voices to the world. While some of the following strategies and services are already in place, funding from the Women's Fund of Rhode Island will enable RHDP to strengthen existing services and expand the impact of its work.

Throughout the year, RHDP will continue to conduct a weekly debate and public speaking class with female residents of the RITS. National research proves that debate programs both improve

So AS220 offers everything from a visual arts class that meets two hours a week, to paid positions as youth performers. Artists teach sound mixing, hip hop, how to disc jockey, break dance, do journalism and more. If they start to sense an unaddressed interest, they'll create a class.

David Gonzalez, coordinator of their performing arts program and director of Rhode Show, and his cast let me crash their rehearsal. Gonzalez says, "The Rhode Show involves about 20 young people a year -- 7 to 12 at any given time. We never know how long a relationship will last, but the average is about a year. The kids come from the Training School, from DCYF or from the community. We're trying to create a performance product that people will buy, and so far it's working. Our audience wants an introduction to hip hop without being enmeshed in the culture. We went to Westerly, for example, and performed for older white people, but ended up hanging around for more than an hour afterwards just answering questions. What's the difference between rap and hip hop? How do you scratch the record [a signature sound of the genre] without wrecking the record? So we're realizing that our real advantage is that people are curious about our culture. So we're working on a piece called Adda Lessons." (Say it out loud.)

The teens who are his cast mouthed off viciously about the schools from which they'd become badly alienated. Amber, for example says, "We're

student's academic skills and increase their civic engagement. *RHDP* employs a student-centered pedagogy where young people learn not only from the instructor but from the opinions and skills of their peers. By the completion of a class cycle, participants learn to craft five-minute affirmative and negative speeches and rebuttals, ask probing questions, and write and deliver a 5-10 minute persuasive speech. Rather than mining their pasts for traumatic stories, *RHDP* participants learn to compliment their personal experiences with substantial research and analysis. By analyzing social issues, young women begin to analyze their *own* lives, imagining new possibilities for themselves and society.

In addition to the weekly debate class, *RHDP* will host three public forums inside the RITS where *RHDP* participants will present persuasive speeches on issues of their choosing. The Forums will include female residents of the RITS, statewide government officials, representatives from the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, the RITS, local non-profit organizations, and students and professors from local colleges and universities.

*RHDP* will increase the visibility of incarcerated young women *outside* of the RITS through the publication and dissemination of the young women's work. All *RHDP* speeches will be published in *Hidden TREWTH*, a newspaper with a circulation of x ... *RHDP* will also submit at least four written speeches to be published in the magazine *Teen Voices*. Funding from the Women's Fund of Rhode Island will enable *RHDP* to produce and disseminate over XXX copies of an audio CD featuring *RHDP* speeches. Finally, *RHDP* will continue to nurture its relationship with local radio stations. *RHDP*, in collaboration with Brown Student Radio, has produced a radio documentary that profiles a cohort of *RHDP* participants. This documentary, as well as the audio versions of the young women's speeches will be available on a new website developed by *Brown Student Radio* and *AS220 Broad Street Studio*, and may be broadcast on *WRNI* and *Blunt*, Maine's Youth Radio station.

Finally, the *RHDP* Program Director will work closely with the *AS220* Youth Engagement Coordinator, the *AS220* RITS Transition Coordinator, and the *AS220 Broad Street Sisters* Program

allowed to ask questions but only on their subjects. Our thinking doesn't matter." (When, oh when will the schools get that if you don't listen to them, they will not listen to you?)

Ariel says, "Those people became teachers because they failed to be correctional officers. I was in detention once and the teacher was screaming at a kid I know didn't speak any English. How come she didn't know that? And if she did.?"

Anjel says, "Their personal style so sucks, and they look at us like we're wrong."

The kids in this cast are from Cranston and other ring cities, so don't be pointing just to Providence for problematic schools and disaffected students. Teaching academics is definitely a hard job, made harder by how distracted the kids are by their chaotic lives and modern media. But the schools should take a page from AS220's book and become better second homes for the kids. (Assuming they even have much of a first home.)

Crenca explains that two types of kids cycle through AS220's doors. "For some we're a passageway and we get a few things accomplished. We have an open door, a long list of resources and programs, how to get a GED, and a willingness to get into personal stuff when that's what they want. We



Coordinator to help *RHDP* participants enroll in *AS220 Broad Street Studio* and *Sisters* when they transition out of the RITS. The *RHDP* Program Director will consult with *AS220 Broad Street Sisters* and funding from the Women's Fund will provide financial support and incentives to assist young women in this transition. *RHDP* and *AS220 Broad Street Sisters* represent the outlet for incarcerated young women to express themselves, either creatively or politically. This unique collaboration serves to expand the opportunities for incarcerated young women without reinventing existing services.

*RHDP* has been successfully teaching incarcerated young women debate and public speaking skills for the last two years. The *RHDP* Director has extensive experience with youth leadership development and minority youth. Additionally, *RHDP* is mentored by its advisory council, whose members boast a vast reservoir of experience with youth leadership development and the needs of incarcerated women: Mackay Miller (Program Director, *RI Debate League*), Kerrissa Heffernan (*Swearer Center for Public Service*), Sandra Enos (Professor of Sociology, RIC), Sol Rodriguez (Executive Director, *RI Family Life Center*), and Samuel Seidel (Former Program Director, *AS220 Broad Street Studio*).

#### OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION

*RHDP* anticipates engaging twenty incarcerated young women in its intensive speech and debate program at the RITS. In addition to these direct participants, an additional thirty female RITS residents will be indirectly impacted in their more limited involvement with the program. We anticipate reaching between 150-200 individuals through the Rossi Debate Forums. *RHDP* will impact at least an additional five hundred other youth and adults through its written and audio publications. *RHDP* anticipates five young women will successfully transition to *AS220 Broad Street Sisters*.

*RHDP* will evaluate the success of its efforts using participant feedback and evaluations as well as data on program participation, retention, and impact. To evaluate the success of the Rossi Debate Class, all program participants will complete both written and oral evaluations. This formal evaluation will complement the ongoing feedback participants contribute throughout the class cycle. Additionally,

*RHDP* will compare its participation and retention data with that of other female-only RITS programs. To evaluate the success of its collaboration, *AS220 Broad Street Sisters* and *RHDP* will collect data on the number of young women who successfully enroll in *AS220 Broad Street Studio* as well as the number retained in *AS220 Broad Street Sister* for at least one year following their release.

To evaluate the institutional impact, *RHDP* will document the attendance for the *RHDP* Public Forums, noting the number of attendees as well as their organizational affiliations. *RHDP* will pay particular attention to the presence of institutional stakeholders. *RHDP* will assess its publication by documenting the number written speeches and audio recordings produced and disseminated.

Program evaluation results will be used to improve *RHDP* in its structure and content. Additionally, *RHDP* will report its results to the program's stakeholders at the RITS and DCYF, as well as to *AS220 Broad Street Studio*.

#### OTHER SUPPORT

In supporting *RHDP*, the Women's Fund of Rhode Island has the opportunity to promote an innovative and effective model for empowering Rhode Island's most marginalized young women. To date, *RHDP* has been funded by a small contribution from the RITS and the volunteer efforts of the Program Director. Funding from the Women's Fund of Rhode Island will be used to supplement the Program Director's salary as well as enable *RHDP* to demonstrate and expand its impact through the publication of the young women's work. The contribution of the Women's Fund of Rhode Island represents a vital source capital and respectability for *RHDP*, so that we may transform our existing, successful program to have a successful and sustained impact.

The initial contribution of the Women's Fund of Rhode Island will enable the program to grow and gain support from other financial sources. The RITS and DCYF have expressed considerable interest in *RHDP* and will continue to fund its programmatic efforts. Additionally, the mission of *RHDP* speaks to a broad range of philanthropic interests. *RHDP* will seek future funding from a variety

have a full-time person working on nothing but transitions [into schools, jobs, housing], because if you don't make contact with that kid fast, your odds of success reduce radically. We deal with hundreds of kids at the Training School, but only a minuscule percentage, like 20 to 40 kids, get involved with us here -- some kids re-offend quickly, leave the state, or all their contact information is dead. But those who do spend some time with us continue to check in after they've moved on. They get a sense of family, home and connection.

"We're very proud that AS220 is a known commodity on the streets."

Others truly become part of the family, sticking around for four or five years. They'll apprentice with certain artists or become Crenca's personal assistant. Especially for this latter group, Crenca says, "We're trying to get our programs to be self-supporting.

"We're selling ads for our newspaper, for example, to the Health Department, Planned Parenthood and Community College of Rhode Island, because we can help those agencies reach certain audiences. The biggest employer of our kids is McDonald's, which is fine, but to get other opportunities, most of our kids just don't have the skills and disciplines required." So AS220 is trying to organize paid work experiences for them that can go on a résumé, as well as smooth the rough edges acquired in

tough neighborhoods and enraging schools.

Money is a huge issue. There are state funds to help keep a Training School kid clean. DCYF helps a little. But if it's just a kid from the community, merely on the verge of trouble, AS200 has no way to subsidize her participation beyond private donations.

Sadly, preventing kid disasters is not much valued, so to get government help, kids must commit a crime, have their family disintegrate or otherwise already be in big trouble.

Crenca says, "The world is vicious to these kids. Vicious. So when I say we're on to something, I mean some of the most hard-core kids love us, respect us, stay in touch with us. We see positive results -- learning more, taking risks, getting discipline -- and we see marked growth in a relatively short time."

Because there's no place like home.

Julia Steiny is a former member of the Providence School Board; she now consults and writes for a number of education, government and private enterprises. She welcomes your questions and comments on education. She can be reached by e-mail at [juliasteiny@cox.net](mailto:juliasteiny@cox.net) or c/o EdWatch, Education and

of sources in the areas of youth leadership development, civic engagement, services for at-risk youth and the children of incarcerated parents. Finally, *RHDP's* minimal administrative bureaucracy and its collaborative efforts limit *RHDP's* reliance on external funders, ensuring its viability and sustainability.

[FINAL PITCH]

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If you are invited to submit a proposal, your specific proposal must include the components below. The specific forms may be downloaded by clicking [here](#) or are available as hard copy by calling Marcia Cone-Tighe, Program Officer at The Rhode Island Foundation.

1. Forms
  - Proposal Summary Form
  - Project Budget Form
  - Demographic Information Form
2. Proposal Narrative (See content description later in these Guidelines.)
3. Organization's Budget
4. Organization's Financial Statement (balance sheet and statement of income and expense for your organization's most recently completed fiscal year)
5. List of your Staff including their job position.
6. List of your Board of Directors including their occupation, if applicable.
7. Copy of your most recent independent audit or compilation
8. Your IRS 501(c) Letter of Determination:
  - If you are using a fiscal agent, please include that organization's IRS Letter of Determination plus a letter to the Women's Fund from your fiscal agent indicating its willingness to serve in this capacity.

### **Content for Your Proposal Narrative**

The narrative itself is limited to no more than 5 typed pages, double spaced, with one-inch margins, in 12-point type, and printed on white paper. All applications must be submitted in English.

#### **Introduction and context**

- Why do you want to carry out this proposed project? Who is your audience? What need are you addressing? How did you determine the need for this project? Why is this a gender issue?
- How does this proposed project fit in with your organization's values, mission and direction? Briefly summarize your organization's scope of service, management and governance, and financing.