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For Roaring Fork High class, media is the message

By David Frey/Aspen Daily News Correspondent

As Ryan Romero walks into his 12:30 p.m. class at Roaring Fork High School, he's got a backpack full of textbooks slung over one shoulder and a camera tripod over the other. In this class, he'll need the tripod, not the books.

This class is Media Empowerment, and the only time it looks like a typical classroom - students sitting in desks, rifling through their notes - is when they're acting.

"Cut!" shouts one student, watching the scene through the viewfinder of a digital video camera, and students go back to what is normal in an unusual class - gathering around the camera in one room, huddling around an editing monitor in another.

In an age where the mass media is pervasive, and it plays a key role in how people get their entertainment, catch up on news and view the world, Media Empowerment is intended to help students understand the power of media and how they can use it to give themselves a voice.

"Ultimately, the idea is to empower students with the idea of how media operates," said Alec Raffin, director of Mpower, the nonprofit group that oversees the program, now offered in every Roaring Fork School District high school.

"Once they recognize that it's a powerful tool, they're able to create their own short films using digital video as a medium."

Students have found it to be a powerful tool for self-expression. This year, three Mpower student films will be screened as part of Aspen Shortsfest's local filmmakers competition March 31.

"Missing," by Yampah Mountain students Diana Nystrom and Teal Hoffman, was awarded best film. It tells the true story of Nystrom's heartache when her younger sister was kidnapped.

"Stand Up," by Yampah's Jay Bashant, Brendan Girardot, Adam Kreft-Mercer, Trevor Payne and Jeremiah Payne, is a music video for a song by the same name the filmmakers wrote and perform - a call to audience members to stand up for what they believe in.

"Are You Ugly?" by Basalt High's Daniela Luzi, looks at body image portrayed in ads directed at young women.

"People can be emboldened by both understanding and creating media," Raffin said. "The empowerment is that power of having the opportunity to share your ideas with the community, and that's important."

The program started six years ago as a project of the nonprofit group YouthZone, where Raffin was the prevention program coordinator. It started as a pilot project at the Yampah Mountain High School, the alternative high school in Glenwood Springs. Two years later it spread to Basalt High, then Roaring Fork High, then Glenwood Springs High.

In 2001, the program spun off from YouthZone to become its own nonprofit.

It's the sort of program that schools with tight budgets have a hard time affording, Raffin said, but they've welcomed in the nonprofit, letting it set up in classrooms not being used. In Basalt and Glenwood, the program now has dedicated teachers on staff.

It's also found a big demand. Classes are limited to 10 students, and each school has waiting lists, Raffin said.

Students say the course has changed the way they look at movies and news. Instead of idly watching, they say, they pick them apart scene by scene. It's also made them appreciate how powerful film is in affecting people.

"It's pretty impressive," says Taylor Maggert, 17, of Carbondale. "It works very well to get your point across. So many people now watch movies than read books. I don't remember the last time I read a book but I go to see movies every week."

For a technology-savvy generation, filmmaking has almost become akin to paper and pens to older generations. Digital technology has put high-quality cameras within reach of everyday consumers, and in the palms of many aspiring filmmakers. Computer technology has allowed ordinary people to quickly piece together films that used to take professionals hours.

For many, a weekend snowboard outing becomes a Warren Miller wannabe.

"I think it's just amazing that you have the power to make movies that change people's lives," said Brandon Howard, 18, of Carbondale, one of several students considering a career in filmmaking.

Students develop their own film ideas and produce them, from storyboard sketches to the final project, and they get together to critique each other's work.

"Part of our teaching style is a democratic classroom," said Raffin. "It's along with the ideas of media. We want to empower them. They should have their own voice. They should also have their own voice in the classroom."

It's a subject that's close to Raffin's heart. He spent four years working in the film industry in Los Angeles, from documentary work to working for the producer of "Scream," but his interest was always to get filmmaking into the hands of students. After vacationing and falling in love with Colorado, he got a job at YouthZone, where he put that interest to work.

"This has always been my passion," he said. "This is always what I wanted to do."

That passion has spread to students.

"It's totally empowering," said Romero, 18, of Carbondale. "He gives us a voice."

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