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06/05/09 07:19 AM

'City Voices, City Visions' project celebrates best local student videos

By Harold McNeil
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

A full four years before You- Tube inspired legions to become video auteurs, youngsters in the Buffalo Public Schools began composing their own digital videos as part of the curriculum.

Eventually that program, orchestrated by the "City Voices, City Visions" digital video composing project at the University at Buffalo, was expanded to schools across Western New York.

On Thursday, the best of those videos created over the past year by local middle and high school students were screened at a festival held inside the Market Arcade Cinemas. The event doubled as a kind of Academy Awards ceremony in which small trophies were handed out for Best History or Social Studies Video, Best English as a Second Language Video and Most Effective Soundtrack, among other awards.

"MTV has got nothing on you guys," said emcee Keith Hughes, a social studies teacher at McKinley High School in Buffalo, as he handed out the award for Best Group Video to three students from West Seneca East High School.

Students Ryan Kraus, Drew Canady and Steven Shaw used an impressive array of

digital edits and soundtracking to illustrate their video, "East TV Flip Card Show," featuring routine morning announcements made at their high school.

Other students, including Chauncy Tall of Math Science Technology Preparatory School, used wit and humor for a short video on "Little Known African Americans."

Suzanne Miller, director of "City Voices, City Visions" at UB, said the project aims to include digital video as part of the curriculum.

"It's a way for students to learn the curriculum very deeply by having to find visuals and music and writing narration that goes with the concept that they are trying to get across, whether it be Shakespeare or Newton's law or the War of 1812," said Miller.

"These are 21st century students who have [grown up] in a digital world . . . and they know a lot about media. They know a lot about representations visually and through music. They do it all the time on Web 2.0 in their out-of-school lives," she added.

Libby Morrison, 17, a junior at Maple Grove High School in Bemus Point, Chautauqua County, was encouraged by her English teacher, Matt Hewitt, to enter her experimental video, "Starting Point." in the competition.

"I'm creative, but I can't draw and I can't play an instrument, so film is another way to express my creativity," said Libby.

Yaneliz Tomasini, a 15-year-old freshman at McKinley High School, worked on her video with two others in her English as Second Language class. Her native language is Spanish.


Hughes, who also is an instructor for the City Voices City Vision project and teaches other teachers to instruct their students in digital video composing, said the videos are an excellent enhancement to any curriculum, helping to raise students' test scores on standardized exams.

"This has certain social value, like putting it online or putting it on YouTube or really having it out there for all your friends to see. I see my kids putting their work on Facebook, meaning that the learning is not a traditional mode any more, that it's really what it should be: part of real life," Hughes said.

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