

Stories of their youth

Some of the newest Radio Rookies at WNYC's studios (l. to r.): Irina Sverzhanovskaya, Keith Tingman, Victoria Cruz (in back), Yesenia Cadena, Muntu Waliyaya and A.J. Fraizer.
Photo by Steven Sunshine



NPR's Radio Rookies program allows Bronx teens to air their own segments

BY ABBY LUBY
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THEY'RE CALLED Radio Rookies.

But seven Bronx teens will be hitting the big-time air waves, adding their voices to National Public Radio.

Armed with state-of-the-art audio equipment, they will be reporting about their lives, schools and communities.

A Peabody Award-winning youth journalism program, Radio Rookies works with inner city youth, teaching them how to tell their story in their own words.

The new Radio Rookies, ranging in age from 14 to 18, are Miguelina (Erikka) Diaz, Yesenia Cadena, Victoria (Vikki) Cruz, Amon (A.J.) Fraizer, Irina Sverzhanovskaya, Keith Tingman and

Muntu Waliyaya.

For the next six months they will trek down to the lower Manhattan studios of local NPR affiliate WNYC.

"This is your studio. This is where you come to work," Radio Rookies Senior Producer Kaari Pitkin told the group last week as they toured the Varick St. studios.

Pitkin said the goal is to teach the kids how to come up with ideas and produce pieces for broadcast.

Story ideas run the gamut — reflecting the realities of living in poverty to difficult family dynamics, housing dilemmas, academic frustrations and the environment.

"I would like to explore racism," said A.J. Fraizer, 14.

Irina Sverzhanovskaya, 17,

said she was interested in the nuclear disaster that took place at Chernobyl in 1986. Muntu Waliyaya, 16, said he would like to interview people he admired.

But the first assignment is a bit more fun: interview someone about a favorite song that brings up a specific memory.

"You will learn how to record, mix and edit," Pitkin said. The turnaround time for the five-minute piece is two days; the incentive — a movie ticket or a \$10 iTunes card.

Helping to get the creative juices flowing, veteran Radio Rookie Keith Harris, 18, played his story, which ran last fall: "Read a Book," his account of how he covered up his inability to read in the ninth grade.

Harris' story was as much about himself as it was about many of his peers. Pitkin said

teens often risk telling a story that exposes their vulnerabilities.

"This is about youth development and media production together," she said. "The shared experience gives them a deeper appreciation for each other, and as a group they become strong."

Finding teens interested in Radio Rookies led Pitkin to the Next Generation Center in Morrisania, where teens get free help in tutoring, job searches, housing and medical assistance.

"We look for teens who can get stuff done on their own and have a level of commitment. We always have kids with a different range of talents and interests," said Pitkin.

For Pitkin and other Radio Rookie staffers, the process is deeply gratifying. "The stories can change a kid's life after they

air."

She said a Radio Rookie from Brooklyn recently told his story about mounting struggles in school. After his story aired he got a call from a private school offering him a \$42,000 scholarship. "It's contingent on him doing his homework," she said.

Another Radio Rookie produced her story about trying to leave foster care and get into public housing. But because she couldn't find a job, she was closed out of the housing waiting list. After the story aired she was offered a clerical job and soon after found housing.

The Bronx Rookies' final documentaries will air sometime in the fall, usually on NPR's "Morning Edition" show from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m. weekdays on WNYC 93.9 FM, 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. on WNYC AM 820 and online at wnyrc.org.

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