

The Youth NETWORKER

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Homeless Youth and the Media

Some thoughts on unintended consequences

By JT (Jerry) Fest

Last week, ABC's 20/20 aired a program highlighting the plight of homeless youth, focusing on 4 youth who they followed for 14 months. If you missed the show, you can watch the entire episode [here](#).

I've been hesitant to write this article, as I'm sure much good may result from this program. But when we are dealing with the lives of young people, we owe it to them to consider the unintended consequences of being identifiably depicted in the media. The reality of these unintended consequences was the catalyst for most youth-serving agencies back in the 80's and 90's, at least those with which I was associated, developing Media Policies in an attempt to protect young people from media identification. I was reminded of the need for such policies when I watched the 20/20 special. Many people will point out the positive aspects of the show ... I'd like to take a moment to consider the other side of the picture.

I was extremely uncomfortable with several depictions of the life of 17-year-old Rebekah from Falls City, Oregon. In one scene, 20/20 cameras recorded her and some friends partying and chugging down vodka. This is an image that is now recorded for all time and aired nationally ... can any of us predict how that scene might affect Rebekah 5, 10 or 20 years from now? Not to mention the fact that if I recorded under aged kids drinking and posted it on YouTube, I might be subject to arrest ... I have to wonder why 20/20 gets a pass. But even more disturbing to me was the way they depicted a 59 year old man who was providing Rebekah with housing. Granted, I know nothing about this situation, but 20/20 was unable to document *any* evidence that the situation was anything other than what he and Rebekah claimed it was. However, 20/20's agenda on this was evident in the scene where they kept asking leading questions until Rebekah finally conceded that "maybe he looks at me," and then they cut to an out of context question where a youth worker stated that she had never heard of a situation like that being innocent. But without any evidence to the contrary, is it fair to present a man who may only be providing something that Rebekah's own parents are unable to provide as a predator to a national audience? And did the media consider what might result when the man views the program, only to see that his act of charity has him nationally disgraced? Did the media consider what that might do to Rebekah's ability to continue to be housed?

And what about the story of June? Only 14 and obviously dealing with major issues, did the media consider how exposing her sexual activities and emotional struggles might affect her later in life? Even more difficult for me was watching the segment when June begins to tell the camera about her suicidal thoughts. Maybe it's just me, but when a young teen begins to consider suicide, that's when you *turn the cameras off* ... something the media rarely considers doing.

Please understand that this is not a criticism of the programs highlighted in this show. My concern is with how identifiable media exposure may affect the young people exposed. The show begins by stating that they are about to open our eyes to something that is going on all around us, and yet most of us are unaware. I had to ask myself, why is that? I personally was involved with several of these national media shows over 30 years ago, and the media sporadically dips into the street sub-culture from time to time. They have never been hesitant to expose these kid's lives ... and then they go away, until there is some new reason to expose them. But when they leave, the kids are still there, with their pain frozen in time and preserved in a way that may make it harder for them to leave those lives behind. Kids who have never received attention for anything get on national TV for being homeless, in pain, sexually active, and abusing drugs. What does that teach them, and what impact will that have on them in the future?

I don't have the answer to those questions. Until I do, I will remain cautious and concerned anytime the media wishes to identifiably expose young people.

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