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Anti-violence project Witness set for massive roll out

By STABROEK STAFF | 5 COMMENTS | ARCHIVES | WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2011

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A project which started here in August and which uses the arts in the battle to stop violence against women and children, has received a major boost that could see the work of Guyanese children highlighted the world over.

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The Witness Project, through which the Margaret Clemons Foundation (MCF) seeks to draw attention to and spark conversations about the effects of adult human behaviour, particularly gender based and child directed violence on society's most vulnerable and impressionable witnesses, our children, is part of the global photography project by the French artist JR called Inside Out.

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Witness has been adopted by the New York-based technology, entertainment and design (TED) Prize. As a result, video footage of the roll out of the project is to be included in a documentary film that will reach an international audience. The roll out, which was slated to be held next month, has been pushed back to January 2012, because of the general and regional elections which are also scheduled for next month.

The Witness Project began with 15 children — between the ages of 10 and 17—who were exposed to training and who were then each given a kit which included point-and-shoot camera, carry case, memory card, backpack, t shirts, photography book, materials explaining the project, release forms and letters of commitment. Their mission was to take photographs which would be converted into huge posters of eyes and put up in heavily trafficked areas of Georgetown, after which they would be added to JR's Inside Out site and viewed by people from across the globe. This was completed and the photos submitted to MCF to be made into posters.



Minister Priya Manickchand with the children photographers at the workshop in August.

In response to an email from this newspaper, Margaret Clemons said that the concept behind the project is that children are our most impressionable and vulnerable witnesses to adult behaviour. The posters of children's eyes would be a stark reminder that our worst behaviour, violence at home, is not conducted in private at all. It is conducted in front of our children. They are witnesses to all of it.

Now that the project, which partners with the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security, Help & Shelter and the Varqa Founda-tion, has been expanded, the number of posters has been increased. Margaret Clemons, in response to an email from this newspaper, said the Witness Project has been challenged to match and surpass a roll out of 400 posters that was done in Toronto. To this end, the children photographers have been asked to take at least 500 more pictures of different models to make the Guyana project the largest global roll out. While this seems a lot, it ought not to be an issue for the intrepid child photographers. According to Clemons, one of them, a girl, had already taken "322 of the most compelling photographs you have ever seen and each and every

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photograph was accompanied by a signed release by the parent or guardian.” These were for the original project.

The age of the models—who were at first just children—has been increased to up to 21 years old. MCF envisages using one photo per poster and these photos will be used full-face instead of just the eyes. By being photographed, Clemons said, models will be making a statement that they are “against gender based and child directed violence.”

She said that TED Prize Production Manager, Anna Verghese, who is responsible for the responsible for the JR Inside Out initiative, met MCF representatives, was informed about the Witness Project and viewed the photos of the eyes. “Seeing all of the pictures was very impactful...” Clemons said. As a result, she added, Verghese “offered help by making a poster contribution of 100 free 3’ X 5’ posters (valued at \$400,000) and she also offered us huge discounts to print the rest of the posters. In addition she said that she could arrange for international press coverage,” for the roll out.



The Witness Project was launched with a workshop held in August at Cara Lodge, where the objective was explained to the children who were then trained in basic photography by New York-based Guyanese American Studio Manager at Sesame Workshop, Alysia Christiani. The Project Director is Nancy Stevenson.

The children were selected by the Ministry of Human Services, Help and Shelter and Varqa Foundation, which is the School of the Nations after-school literacy programme for the children from Tiger Bay.

Clemons, who did not have enough words to praise the work done by the children, said, “We have been completely amazed and deeply moved by not only the quality of the pictures from each and every participant, but the very depth that each picture reveals of the subject model. These kids got exactly what we were looking for. We never expected that. These pictures are extraordinary!”

A major impact of the project, she said, will of course be that the children who would have “used photography to make a loud and powerful statement... learned something new; they learned how to have a big voice on a very serious topic and they will have felt the power of this big voice as it gets rolled out to Guyana, New York, Paris and the world.

“They will have learned that there are different ways to send a message and that the arts help to bring the message home loudly and in a way that impacts on communities.”

Clemons said that MCF has been trying to find programming that can take hold and grow in Guyana and she believes Witness is that programme. Next year, she said, will see the production of a book involving the same group of children plus another 20 or 25 children.

Clemons also praised Minister of Human Services Priya Manickchand, head of Varqa Foundation Brian O’Toole, Margaret Kertizous of Help and Shelter and others involved for the commitment to and assistance with the project.

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