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## Important issues go to school

<http://www.smdp.com/article/articles/4237/1/Important-issues-go-to-school/Page1.html>

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### Venice Arts is bringing social empowerment to students

By [Melody Hanatani](#)

Daily Press Staff Writer

VENICE Following a three-week visit to Africa where photographers captured the world of AIDS orphans through a camera lens, Venice Arts and USC have joined forces to create an institute that promotes social empowerment through photography.

Launched last week, the Institute for Photographic Empowerment is a partnership between the Annenberg School for Communications and Venice Arts, a non-profit organization that brings professional artists together with low income children.

The first institute of its kind in the world, the IPE will facilitate annual conferences, produce academic courses and sponsor photographic and film projects pertaining to the topic of photographic social empowerment.

"It brings together the resources of an academic institution that is devoted to the understanding of communication and its role in society with practitioners who are dedicated to putting the possibilities of visual communication, photography in particular, to work in the service of human needs," said Larry Gross, the director of the school of communication.

The inception of the institution follows a trip in August when several photographers with Venice Arts visited Mozambique and worked with AIDS and HIV orphans, teaching the children how to use professional-caliber cameras. During the trip, the photographers handed the cameras to the orphans, asking them to document their world. The photos will be compiled for a traveling exhibit that is expected to kick off in January.

Last year, a group of Venice Arts photographers made a similar trek to Cape Town, working with HIV and AIDS mothers.

The origins of the IPE can be traced to a similar effort to launch a national conference on social empowerment. That idea came from Venice Arts co-founder Lynn Warshafsky, who proposed the national conference to Dr. Neal Baer last year. Baer is one of the sponsors of the Cape Town and Mozambique projects.

From there, the concept flourished, eventually resulting into what would be the first institution of photographic social empowerment in the world.

"We see our primary role as bringing people together — both in real time and the real world as well via the Internet," Warshafsky said. "We see ourselves as providing a portal ... for people to interact, communicate and engage in policy discussions, sharing projects and making educational resources available."

The institute will be housed in the Center on Communication Leadership at USC.

The USC Center of Public Diplomacy will also have a stake in the institution. Researchers will look to develop foreign policy that would help different cultures better understand one another through photography, said center Director Joshua Fouts.

"Photography skills will provide a window to your soul and provide a window into your culture," he said. "It can facilitate better cultural understanding."

Starting in the spring semester, a course on visual communication for social change will be offered through the

Annenberg school.

The course will be taught by Jim Hubbard, the creative director at Venice Arts who was one of the pioneers in the field of photographic empowerment.

Hubbard is most recognized for a project called "Shooting Back," which documented homeless children in Washington D.C. in the 1980s. With a meager budget, Hubbard gave homeless children cameras, asking them to document their daily struggles.

"It adds another layer to the journalistic view of what struggles and what issues and what lives are like after the media leaves the issue," said Hubbard, a former photojournalist. "I tried to come up with a way in which to influence the public and lawmakers through images."

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