

## Program helps kids bring community into focus

10 local students take part in statewide community documentation project

Mariecar Mendoza • The Desert Sun • April 9, 2010

The snap, snap, snap of the shutter happens so fast, but for a group of Coachella Valley teens the sound encapsulates what they hope will be a lasting message.

Ten students from Coachella, Indio and Mecca were selected to participate in Venice Arts, a week-long, statewide community documentation project that ends today.

Armed with professional-grade digital cameras, the teens explored their communities through a lens, with the ability to zoom in on their surroundings.

The ultimate goal: To raise awareness of the importance of building a healthy community.

"If you want to make a community better, then first you have to understand the things that need to be improved in a community, and they're learning this first-hand via taking pictures," said Quinton Egson, chief professional officer for the Boys & Girls Club of Coachella Valley.

The eastern Coachella Valley is just one of eight communities chosen to participate in the statewide project, which is part of the California Endowment Build a Healthy Community Initiative, Egson said.

"It feels cool because most of us haven't been out

there and involved," said 13-year-old Celeste Lopez of Indio. "Just by doing something such as taking photos we feel we're doing something (for the community)."

For 16-year-old Thania Espinoza of Coachella, the project is her opportunity to share her heritage with other people.

On Thursday, she was one of three students led by professional photographer/project instructor Doug McCulloh who photographed date farming.

"It's really important for people to know that this is still a big part of how Coachella works," Thania said, referring to the leading crop in the valley's agricultural industry.

Photographing her grandfather, 61-year-old Joaquin Espinoza, harvesting dates at Sunwest Farms in Thermal, Thania hopes others will understand the labor involved in bringing fresh produce to the table.

"We should let people know that this isn't just something easy you could do. It takes hard work and dedication," she said. "This is how we were brought up and it's important that everyone knows that this is what Coachella is about."

Professional photographer/ instructor Reggie Woolery said he got involved because of the prospect of witnessing "how photography might lead to a form of activism by the kids."

"People talk about how the camera is kind of as a mediator. It allows them to have access to certain communities that they wouldn't normally have access to and ask questions," Woolery said. "And we hope that after we leave they will continue and really

dig deeper."

Project organizers expect to produce a series of images combined with text and audio segments to convey health disparities and socioeconomic conditions as perceived by the eyes of local youth.

"The result is some powerful visual stories that help illuminate the challenges and strengths in their community," said Lynn Warshafsky, executive director of Venice Arts.

The project began last year and is expected to be completed this fall, with work to be showcased in a public art exhibit in Los Angeles and possibly in a traveling exhibit, Warshafsky said.

Student work also will be posted online on several different Web sites including Venice Arts' Web site, [www.venice-arts.org](http://www.venice-arts.org).

"Photography in my view is not about just making a photograph. It's about learning how to see your own community. It's a kind of focused, deep seeing," McCulloh said. "And it has the side benefit of making photographs that other people can see and expressing your community to the larger world outside."