

News

HarlemLive Puts Student Voices Online

By LAUREN PARDEE
Columbia Daily Spectator
November 07, 2003

Three floors above the bustling streets of Harlem is a haven of quiet and order for dozens of New York teenagers who dedicate their time to operating HarlemLive, a nonprofit online magazine.

HarlemLive's stated mission is "to empower a diverse group of youth towards leadership using experience and exposure to media and technology." While progress towards such an abstract goal may be difficult to measure, all signs indicate that the program has been a wild success.

Students handle all aspects of the magazine, including reporting, writing, research, web design, video and audio production, management, editing, and photography. Professionals from organizations such as The New York Times, Black Entertainment Television, and ABC News help train the students and serve as mentors to give the teens valuable self-confidence and practical experience.

"By the time they get to college, they feel like they are five steps ahead of everyone else," Calton said.

Richard Calton, a former New York public school teacher, founded HarlemLive in 1996 in order to "provide richer ways for the students to express their ideas and show leadership in ways the schools don't really let them." Students who work at the magazine get a chance to formulate a unique perspective on the Harlem and New York communities.

Gwendolyn Downs is in ninth grade and has been working with HarlemLive for three years. She joined the magazine because "it was something that's going to help in the future, help me get a better job, and help me with my computer skills." Downs goes to the office everyday from 3:30 to 8:00, and she said "it has changed me for the better. It has helped me become more professional in speaking to people."

The current editor-in-chief of the magazine is Christopher Davis, a senior at La Guardia High School. Since he began last summer, he has worked his way up to the top position in the magazine. He hopes to become a professional journalist.

"I found out I wanted to be a reporter when I had my first big story," Davis said, "which was the kickoff of Harlem Week, a celebration of the history of Harlem. I met the mayor, and I saw that being a reporter gave me access to places I've never been able to go and meet people I've never been able to meet. With my press badge, I just went by everyone and went straight in. I had no idea what was going on in the beginning, but at the end of the night I had gotten ten business cards and I'd met so many politicians. It was a difficult experience, but I was proud that I accomplished it."

The magazine's web site has enjoyed similar success, receiving 30,000 to 50,000 hits a month from all over the world. According to Calton, people log on to get the perspectives of youth.

"They may accentuate different aspects of the story that are more meaningful to them," he said. "They've written about stuff in Harlem that some of the big papers just don't cover. People don't realize that there is so much going on in Harlem, that there are so many organizations here."

HarlemLive has been recognized for its work in The New York Times, USA Today, and the New York Daily News, among others. The program has received numerous awards, including the United Federation of Teachers Award, the Fleet Bank Award, and the Global Bangemann Challenge Award.

Individual students from HarlemLive have also received recognition, as the program has sent students to Sweden, Rome, and Washington D.C. to be honored for their contributions. Danya Steele, a former editor-in-chief, was named by Teen People magazine as one of 20 Teens Who Will Change the World.

Katerina Vorotova, CC '07, received the New York Times Scholarship, an award given to "students who have overcome exceptional hardship to achieve excellence in New York City public high schools."

HarlemLive has achieved this success for the past seven and a half years despite very little funding. Its sponsors include Councilman Bill Perkins, Mayor Bloomberg, and AOL Time Warner, but Calton said that "we don't have very much regular funding. We're operating on a shoestring." Calton himself is unpaid and said he is "barely getting by."

Nonetheless, the magazine continues to expand and improve. The staff is currently working with the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Columbia to create a clickable map that people can use to explore Harlem from their computers.

Students from the program continually emphasize HarlemLive's impact on their lives. Davis said he learned "that journalism can really let you know everything that there is to the world, and that you can do whatever you want. Everyone can do whatever they want if people give them an opportunity, a chance."

Added Al-Amir Jordan, "HarlemLive is more than a paper, it's a family. We're really close here. When you come here, you feel welcome."

[^ Back To Top](#)Columbia Spectator Online Edition © 2005 Spectator Publishing Company. All Right Reserved. | [Accessibility](#)

[Advertise](#) on the New Digital Group College Newspaper Network