

Exploring the Perspectives of Milwaukee Opportunity Youth through Photovoice

February 2019

Photovoice is a participatory program evaluation method in which people record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns through photography, act as potential catalysts for change through group discussions, and inform decision-makers¹.

The Re-engagement Center in partnership with Socially Responsible Evaluation in Education (SREed) conducted a Photovoice evaluation to engage the voice of Milwaukee Opportunity Youth (OY), young adults ages 16 to 24 who are disconnected from school and work, in developing and refining their program. Photovoice was designed with the understanding that "people often have an expertise and insight into their own communities and worlds that professionals and outsiders lack."¹

The Re-engagement Center is a pilot program serving Milwaukee OY

The Re-engagement Center is a pilot project that seeks to test the impact of a holistic, place-based model for young people in Milwaukee. The purpose is to re-engage and re-connect OY to education, the workforce, and other supports that increase self-sufficiency and stability. The project is a collaborative partnership between the Silver Spring Neighborhood Center, Carmen Schools of Science and Technology, and other community organizations that serve youth in Milwaukee. It is funded through the Milwaukee Succeeds Funders Collaboration.

OY shared photos in response to six prompts

OY were asked to share photos in response to one or more of the following prompts:

1. *This gets in the way of accomplishing my goals.*
2. *This is a picture of me.*
3. *This is where I like to spend my time.*
4. *This is what needs to stop in my community.*
5. *This is who/what motivates me to keep going.*
6. *This is what the American Dream means to me.*

Spotlight on Youth Voice: This is who motivates me to keep going.

One participant shared that this necklace symbolizes his father who passed away recently. He explained his father's reputation in the neighborhood as a skilled mechanic and his belief in hard work. He shared his sorrow and grief from losing his father. He is choosing to honor his father by working hard as his father did and so his father's influence motivates him to keep going.



¹ Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>.

Nine OY shared their photos and stories

Three OY leaders helped to plan the project and piloted the prompts. In total, 8 OY shared their photos and discussed the meaning behind their photo in relation to prompts during the pilot in November 2018 or at a discussion event held in January 2019. One additional OY submitted a photo and explanation via email.

All of the participants were young people of color and most were young men.

OY shared photos of loved ones, places and objects to convey their stories

The most popular prompt that OY selected was “this is who/what motivates me to keep going”.

The photos that OY shared were of:

- Their loved ones, such as parents, children or siblings
- A place, such as a home or room
- Objects, such as a necklace, cash or a drawing

OY discussed challenges they face, strengths they possess and how the Re-engagement Center could support them

OY shared their photo with a group of their peers and told the story behind the photo in response to the prompt they chose. As a group, the OY answered these questions based on each person’s story:

What challenges are OY facing individually and in the community?

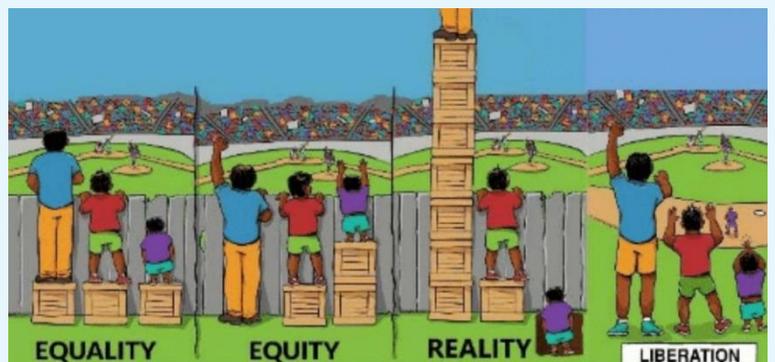
What strengths and assets do OY have individually and in the community?

At the end of the discussion, OY brainstormed ideas about what the Re-engagement Center could do to support them and peers like them in overcoming challenges and building on their strengths and assets.

Spotlight on Youth Voice: This is what the American Dream means to me.

Everyday Reality! That’s what comes to mind first when I see this photo, that’s the exact reason why I chose it.

I feel as if it’s the perfect representation of both the sunny and far shady sides of the American Dreams [in] actuality. The side I’m actually living verses the side I’m striving to thrive in. –OY submission²



² Participant submissions were lightly edited for punctuation and spelling.

OY discussed the challenges they face transitioning into adulthood and coping with loss and trauma

The OY participants discussed challenges that they heard expressed in their peers' stories about their photos. They discussed challenges in moving from adolescence into adulthood, such as becoming parents or pursuing stable employment without having a model to emulate from their own parents. They discussed facing new experiences for the first time, such as having a loved one in hospice care. The participants also discussed experiencing trauma, living in unsafe neighborhoods, and the death of loved ones from illness or violence.

Spotlight on Youth Voice: This is who motivates me to keep going.

My son [son's name] and wanting a beautiful future is what motivates me. Knowing I have a life on my hands makes me want to push to succeed higher and harder. Before he even came it was always hard for me to get on it and stay on it with consistency. I've never been able to find a good job that I think is a good fit for me meaning pay wise and it's because I don't have so much experience in people's eyes...

I want to show that I can be consistent and stable, I've been feeling like a failure lately to my son but I've never just given up! I have to push harder and harder for him and he makes me do that! –OY submission³

OY discussed the strengths and assets they possess, such as the capacity to transform themselves and people who inspire them

Participants also discussed strengths that were revealed in their peers' stories. They talked about their ability to change for the better and the characteristics that they possess to do so, such as perseverance and making sacrifices. They discussed coping with hardships by cherishing the memories of those who died, finding peace of mind through sports and acceptance. They also discussed the positive people in their lives who guided them and inspired them.

Spotlight on Youth Voice: This is who motivates me to keep going.

This is a photo of some people who motivate me. Both my Pops & my big brother died kinda recently & I still have very hard times even thinking about the different situations. Seeing where they both came from & how their lives changed for the better before the trauma really pushes me.

At one point in time they both lived the fast life, selling drugs, hustling basically but towards the end of their journey they both became LEGAL entrepreneurs: both own multiple houses and my dad having his own business. Cancer took one & a bullet took the other. But yet I know they still live in me so seeing this picture gives me all the motivation/push I think I need in life in order to be a successful individual. –OY submission³

³ Participant submissions were lightly edited for punctuation and spelling.

OY envisioned the Re-engagement Center as a safe haven to connect with peers and coaches, access needed services and gain employment opportunities

Participants suggested that the Re-engagement Center could offer a safe place to network with peers and to work with a coach like them to develop their strengths and hold them accountable. They brainstormed needed services, such as a food pantry, mental health therapy and housing. They also suggested offering work readiness and employment activities, such as career exploration and exposure, networking, internships and community service.

OY brainstormed the following list of services and supports that the Re-engagement center could offer to them and their peers:

Space for positive outlets: parks, gyms	Academic services for kids: childcare, after school programs
Accountability	Career exploration and exposure
Develop strengths	Networking with professionals
Support to address challenges: mental health therapy, networking with peers	Internships/community service
Leaders/coaches who OY can relate to	Housing
Safe haven, stable place with peers	Meals/food pantry
Plan and engage for changing community priorities, e.g. political activism	

About This Project

This project was made possible through funding by Milwaukee Succeeds. The project team was comprised of Elizabeth Cain and Rachel Westrum. This report was prepared by Elizabeth Cain.

About Socially Responsible Evaluation in Education (SREed)

SREed is an evaluation center at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee that works with a variety of clients to provide them with timely and actionable formative and summative information about a variety of educational programs and policies.

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