

EMPOWERING



Image designed by Orian Medeiros-Green and linoleum print by Joshua Tsang

the shield

vision individual voice compelling intriguing art respect quality unity culture fair beauty knowledge global alive brave connection unique innovative sincere youth acceptance diverse awareness compassion genuine hope kindness real soul creativity equality freedom inspiring open personal joy infinite purpose

Students from around Austin come together to create a project in order to draw attention to young lives around the globe, starting in South Sudan

South Sudan, where the cameras are being sent.

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Weeks before the school year even began, a group of six high school students from all around Austin sit around a crowded coffee house table filled with caffeinated drinks, laptops and notebooks. Dozens of

emails are sent, ideas are brought up and then shot down one after the other and students scramble about trying to figure out solutions to problems most students never have to solve. At the end of a long day filled with lots of trips to the barista and many bathroom breaks, the six students have completed their ultimate task: defining and explaining a concept called A Youth Mind.

"It was a lot of just grunt work getting the idea to paper," said Westlake junior Campbell Erickson, the founder of A Youth Mind. "When you have an idea like A Youth Mind where the goal isn't as physical as it is existential, it's like in the clouds and we're working to make the sun shine through the clouds a little bit. When you have something like that, it's a lot of sitting there trying to figure out how you can bring that down to earth and put it on paper. And that was about \$30 worth of coffee right there."

Created, based and centered around the importance of young opinions and stories, A Youth Mind is an international project based in Austin for the purpose of shedding light on how people really live around the world. Starting in South Sudan, the creators of A Youth Mind said they will send disposable cameras to schools in certain areas where they have set up connections with teachers in order to enable young kids to tell their stories and break down the stereotypes of poverty through the act of photography.

"I think [corporate and professional photography] puts people in a box," said McCallum sophomore Orian Medeiros-Green, an active member of A Youth Mind. "Even saying 'the people' [classifies a certain group of people as one]. A lot of times Africa gets referred to as a [whole] just because of the

stereotype that [corporate] photography has put on it. So I think that with the youth taking their own pictures, and allowing them to express whatever they want, rather than someone capturing them, [this project] will be able to open a lot of people's eyes to the reality of living wherever this project is being done, rather than having the misconception or stereotype that has been put there."

While the high school students are adamant about keeping control of the project in the hands of the young people in their home countries, A Youth Mind wouldn't be possible without the help of sponsors and companies who will buy and ship all of the cameras and make the necessary connections in South Sudan.

"I got approached by a guy named Christopher Douglass from Lone Star- Africa Works, which is an NGO (an organization that is neither run by the government nor a traditional business working for a profit) operating outside of South Sudan that helps entrepreneurs basically export things to the U.S," Erickson said. "He asked me to come to South Sudan with him and do the project [there], but I can't go to South Sudan. It's got an awful civil war [so] it's super dangerous. But I was interested in kind of keeping on the track of using photography to tell a story so I posted something on Instagram saying, 'Hey anyone want to help me do this project?' And then 36 hours later we had a project plan and a business plan and it was A Youth Mind-East Africa, specifically South Sudan."

The ultimate goal of the project is to get as many clear photos as possible in order to tell as many students' stories as possible. According to Erickson, if 50 percent of the cameras come back and around 10 percent of the photos are usable, A Youth Mind will be left with about 100 photos to publish. From those 100 photos, 50 will be chosen to be incorporated into a larger book that will one day hold a vast collection of original photos and stories depicting young people's lives around the world.

"[The photos will] probably be informal, everyday life

kind of things instead of perfect, professional portraits that *National Geographic* photographers do or something," said McCallum sophomore Joshua Tsang, one of the original six students. "It's all gonna be other kids' photos so there are probably going to be some mishaps; however, I think it's going to be able to show the poverty and living conditions out there, but I think what we were trying to focus on more is the beauty you don't actually see from other photographers and pictures from there."

The project is still young in nature, yet all of the members are confident that A Youth Mind is a strong idea that is here to stay. While they are in the middle of sending cameras to South Sudan, the program hopes to expand its ideas around the globe, incorporating as many kids' lives as possible. After asking Erickson what he will do when he graduates in two years, he acknowledged that he and his partners will have to trust their replacements with this idea that is near and dear to all of the students' hearts. Once they graduate, they will pass the project down to the other high school students who will be charged with the mission to keep the project going. Erickson said that when he graduates, Medeiros-Green will take over as the head director and then it will be his turn to lead the group and continue the program in a way that allows it to be passed down for years to come.

"It's an interesting project because it can expand infinitely," Medeiros-Green said. "You know you can't go to too many places. The whole point of it is to learn how people live and experience life without stereotypes, and people experience it differently all over the world. Like people in North Austin live differently than people in East Austin and South Austin might. So we can expand infinitely, and it's definitely something that our team has understood and dedicated their time to and they understand that it can go for as long as it could. You know it could be a lifelong thing. But the idea is to be global. We want to give a fair opportunity to every country and every place to show how they live."

Hannah Ilan