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'I Matter' Project Promotes Positive Self-Images

By Arielle Dollinger

adollinger@longislandernews.com

Huntington resident Rob Goldman had a job that paid him to travel to beautiful places with beautiful people. Technically, he was a fashion photographer, creating images for advertisements and magazines; actually, he says, he was “making pretty lies.”

When he realized in a moment of clarity that he wanted to create honest photographs – photographs that would depict reality and not fantasy – he abandoned commercial photography. The year was 1994. He and his wife had a child, and it was time to stop pretending that perfection was anything more than misguided perception.

Today, he is the founder and program director of “I Matter” – a series of workshops he created in an effort to keep kids from turning to drugs and alcohol by promoting positive self-esteem.

“My goal is to give kids a voice in the community and to remind people that our kids need to be taken care of,” he said. “We forget to ask our kids what they need, and there’s an assumption that we as adults somehow know that, and it’s sort of funny, ’cause I think that what we think our kids need is based on what we needed when we were kids, and it’s such a different world.”

The “I Matter” project invites teens to workshops during which they pair off to ask each other a list of questions about themselves, write their own personal statements about who they are and the way in which they see themselves, and then take photos of each other. Participants then choose a photo of themselves that they like, with input from the group. The photos are blown up to about three times life size and placed underneath a quote from the individual’s “I Matter” statement. Then, the photos are displayed in windows of a community building, like a library.

According to Goldman, the program is really a composite of the elements of three others – The Help Portrait, The Inside Out Project and Post Secret – a union that came to him in an epiphany after years of trying to figure out a way to combine his work as an artist, an educator and a social activist.

The Help Portrait asks people on one day in December to take a photograph of someone they identify as being “in need,” and then to give the photograph to the subject as a gift. The Inside Out Project, created by a photographer in Paris called JR, asks people all over the world to photograph someone in their community; the photographs are blown up to giant poster-size and hung publicly, turning ordinary people into community celebrities. PostSecret asks people to anonymously mail in secrets on postcards, with the goal of displaying the secrets and allowing people to empathize with others and to realize that many of one individual’s secrets are the same as another’s.

Goldman calls the breed he’s created “social impact art.” Its roots are an acting concept called “private as public.”

“The idea is to be able to say that I’m going to say something and feel something that’s really personal, but then I’m gonna have the courage to make that public,” Goldman said. “And I think that, that empowers both the subject and the viewer.”

Sixteen-year-old Yair Koas, a junior at The Schechter School, attended the program’s workshop at the Huntington Public Library’s main branch on



Huntington High School junior Jason Moreira’s photo is currently on display at the Northport Public Library, and will be displayed in his hometown of Huntington by June.

Tuesday night. He said that he enjoyed the opportunity to be both in front of the camera and behind the camera.

“We got to choose the photos, we got to write what we represent,” he said. “There was guidance by the adult coordinators but, you know, they didn’t overwhelm us.”

He said that he thinks it will be incredible to see the photos in the library windows.

“It sort of just shows what a big impact we can make, ’cause we’re spending a couple hours here but we’re already making connections with people, and you’re know it’s the same thing with the photos... People are gonna start looking, and they might start asking questions,” he said.

And when people start asking where the photos came from, he said, they will see a message of self-empowerment and pride.

Northport High School senior Casey Burke got involved with the program through a school club called Students Against Destructive Decisions. The club adviser knew Goldman and suggested the club members attend an “I Matter” workshop.

“I think it’s good because it’s not just outright saying to teens, ‘Hey, here’s a lecture, don’t do drugs,’” Burke said. “It’s a different approach, and it’s an

artistic approach... I can tell that teens see it differently than people just saying, ‘Don’t do drugs.’”

Members of the younger generation are experiencing the program, but members of previous generations are watching with already established perspective on today’s society.

“It’s the pressure,” said Cathi Borner, 71, a member of the Huntington Friends of the Library. “These kids have to accomplish so much...and you never know... what they’re thinking in terms of escape.”

Friends of the Library President Noel Zirpolo, 76, along with Cathi, told the kids at Tuesday night’s event that their organization would donate \$1,000 to the “I Matter” campaign.

“Between the alcohol and drugs, and keeping up with schools and the pressures that they have... there’s just, too many things for a teen to handle,” Zirpolo said.

After their first program at the Northport Public Library in August 2013, the organizers received nine requests for the project in two weeks – next up is the Commack library and then Harborfields. They also visited the Huntington Public Library’s Station branch on Saturday. For more information, visit imatterproject.org/Huntington or follow @imatterproject on Instagram.