

## Gretchen Ferber – Report No. 2

As I reflect on the past four months, I have a much greater understanding of and appreciation for the ways in which community-engaged documentary projects evolve. The process is rarely straightforward and never rigid. A community is made up of individuals with their own unique stories who are joined together through shared history, mutual respect, and a desire to engage in a socially concerned environment. While the function of a community is to be greater than the sum of its parts, it still remains an entity composed piecewise of individuals. Working with individuals who have their own difficulties and their own agenda is a challenge. The process of communicating my purpose clearly, building relationships, and gaining fiercely-held trust has been more difficult than I expected. Understanding the agency as a whole and identifying the relationships that are most important to develop has been equally challenging. However, taking the time to understand the community and cultivate relationships will enable me to produce a much different project than one in which I remained an outsider.

Contextualizing United South End Settlements (USES) within the setting and climate of the South End, Boston has been an important part of the documentary process. After all, in documentary work the most important textual element after the title is the time and place. Location and era are so central in history that the mere mention of Normandy, June 1944 immediately conjures images of D-Day just as Chicago, Election Day 2008 may be immortalized as a pivotal point and image in our nation's story. Documentary work, a function of living history, relies on this descriptive power as well. However, how does documentary work represent people, places, and communities in flux? If the camera is meant to capture a moment in time, how can it accurately describe ongoing transitions and profound developments that occur during, through, and outside the shutter's aperture and speed? Through understanding still photography, I believe it is a valuable medium by which transitory moments might be observed and analyzed.

The South End community is such a place where its residents, young and old, are in a historical limbo that has social implications. Though the cultural landscape of the South End has been adaptive since its inception as a point of entry for immigrants, the movements of the past thirty years continue to spark debate. Specifically, gentrification's consequences garner attention around the neighborhood as well as in the agency that serves many of those known as the "Old South Enders." Many Old South Enders speak of the degradation of community—family based on experience rather than kinship—in light of their neighbors' move to more affordable parts of town. A meandering walk throughout the South End reveals the distinct divide in types and concepts of homes, between new multi-million dollar condos and public housing. The legacy of busing in the 1980s triggers the lasting effects of education inequality drawn on racial lines. These central issues of the South End neighborhood—community/family, home/housing, and education/inequality—reveal a significant undercurrent: identity. What and who is the South End today? How do history and change affect identity?

Understanding the South End's historical roots, the social forces that precipitate change, and the formation of a collective identity give background to not only the agency within this community but also the type of project that can develop through the agency. In light of this, I have narrowed my focus on two programs of USES, Artful Transformations Program (ATP), working with at-risk teenage girls through art therapy empowerment; and Adult Basic Education (ABE), serving adults of all ages and the education levels from literacy to GED (high school diploma equivalent). In

exploring these two programs, I think the central theme of identity will be layered with the complex elements of family, home, and education in what I hope will be a visually revealing manner.

In spending time with the girls of ATP, the theme of family arises often. Since not one girl lives in a traditional two biological parent household, many of them struggle to find ways to describe their family situation and, on a greater level, themselves. Though many of the girls put on a tough exterior and are distrustful of newcomers to the program, by spending time with them weekly, I have witnessed their desire to understand themselves through the making of art. I have been working with two interns in leading a photography workshop once a week in which the girls learn how to use Holgas and explore their surroundings. They then collage many of their photographs in their photo journals during group time, which is centered on mutual respect and allowing space for growth.

In moving forward in my own project, I did a “test-run” of photographing the girls using a view camera. What transpired surprised me. The girls approached the unconventional-looking camera with both wonder and skepticism. They ridiculed me when I disappeared under the black drop, asking why I would waste my time with such an “old-fashioned” camera. However, at the same time they could not help but ask questions and observe me in the preparations. Soon, I had two or three assistants taking light readings and pressing the cable release. During the individual sessions, some girls were impatient while others became quiet and composed, a rarity in a room of girls vying for attention. One girl in particular, who has obsessive-compulsive tendencies, did something extraordinary. She went through a series of steps to prepare for her shoot. She changed her clothes, put on her favorite jewelry, found fabric for a backdrop, and carefully placed cutout stars on the drop. She composed herself and stood still and confident for her portrait. I began to conceptualize a project where the girls could design their settings and in doing so, go through a reflective process.

Focusing on concepts of family and what that means on an individual basis for each participant, I want to continue to photograph the girls using the view camera encouraging them to utilize props or other representations of home. Inspired by a collaborative project with children done by Wendy Ewald in Durham, after the negatives are developed I will encourage them to write and draw directly on the negatives to reveal their personal thoughts on family. With support from the ATP manager and staff as well as the interest from the girls, I am enlivened to see when this project progresses.

The ABE program has participants from a range of experiences, ages, and places, and yet they share the same educational inequalities; at some point in their lives, they did not receive a basic education, and this deficit has affected their livelihood in drastic ways. Over the past couple months, I have been cultivating a relationship with the Intake Specialist/Educational Specialist, Karen, who has become a friend of mine and allowed me to have access to her students who she cares for and protects fiercely. Though my relationship with Karen has been one of the most difficult to initiate, she has been my liaison into a community that I could have never emerged into myself. Introducing me to her students as her “new BFF,” she vouches for my good intentions and encourages her students to simply talk to me, to tell me their unique and trying stories. Though these interviews have only been underway for a couple weeks, the details and themes are powerful and compelling. Here is an excerpt from a 54-year-old student:

I came to Boston in '57, and I came up in the '60s during Civil Rights. I started school in the South End—Joseph Hurley School in elementary. They didn't know too much about teaching kids in the inner city where I come from. The kids I came

up with, we weren't stupid; we just didn't want to learn what the teacher was teaching. We didn't have many black teachers, and the white teachers were teaching us about Dick and Jane and white families, white picket fence, and a dog, all of that. Where I came from, I wasn't like that. It was a lie for us. We didn't want to learn. I couldn't accept that life; there was no black history. It's not about hating white people, but it was the system. It wasn't geared to black people. It was a lie. I would hang with kids just like me abusing; we got together and decided to run the streets, do what we needed to survive.

As I continue these interviews, which have lasted upwards of an hour and a half, I engage in these students' lives, wanting to understand how my childhood and education have been shaped in such drastically different ways. At the end-of-the-semester parties, more students approached me (no doubt on Karen's good word), wanting to share. There is great promise in this project, just as with the ATP project, and I look forward to continuing this important work.

In learning more about collaborative, socially-engaged photography and art making, I am undoubtedly learning more and more about myself, how I see myself in the world as an artist and where I see this work progressing. The challenges always remain and though assimilating into communities is difficult, an amazing moment occurs when I realize I am accepted. I know with certainty this is where I am supposed to be right now. This fellowship is not only an extraordinary opportunity to expand my skills, visibility, and community engagement, but it is also a pivotal moment when I see my clear direction based on the passion, purpose, and fulfillment I have for documentary photography. This is the start of what I hope to be many, many years of engagement in documentary work.