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Teens Shine a Light on *Young Heroes*: A Speak Out Military Kids Video Project

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Abstract: A group of military and non-military teens led by New Jersey 4-H mobilized the statewide Speak Out for Military Kids (SOMK) project. The goal is to raise community awareness of the issues facing youth of deployed military parents. This article describes the first step of the project—the design and production of *Young Heroes*, an 18-minute video featuring interviews with youth who have personal experience with deployment. The SOMK participants not only produced a video, but also mastered new skills while performing a community service. Though recently completed, *Young Heroes* is reaching diverse audiences.

Background

The Operation Military Kids (OMK) initiative is responding to the emerging deployment issues confronting youth and families in more than 30 states. The need for increased military deployment of National Guard and Reserve units in recent years has placed unique stress on military families. Because these families live within communities and may be our next-door neighbors, they do not have the same support network as active duty families living on installations.

OMK is funded through a partnership between Army Child and Youth Services and USDA. Each OMK state plan is implemented through the efforts of the State 4-H-Military Liaison and a team representing the joint commitment of federal, state, and local partners. Being involved with the military is not new for 4-H (Pavlicin, 2003). At the national level, a formal relationship with the Army has existed for 10 years through the USDA/Army Youth Development Project (Ferrari, 2005).

Introduction

In 2005, the authors as Co-Project Directors, organized a team of representatives from community organizations as well as the National Guard and Army Reserve. The New Jersey OMK team was awarded \$50,000 to implement the four mandates of OMK throughout the state. The NJ OMK State Team, consisting of two youth representatives, one Rutgers Collegiate 4-H representative, and eight adults, attended a weeklong training with other state teams in Kansas City. As a result of intense planning and input from the youth on the NJ team, the group selected the mandate, Speak Out Military Kids (SOMK), a youth/adult partnership, as the main focus of NJ OMK. SOMK is a youth-led initiative aimed at raising community awareness of the issues faced by youth impacted by deployment.

Program Plan

The NJ OMK State Team identified three objectives for their SOMK program.

1. Providing sensitivity trainings to community groups and schools.
2. Providing communication skill building opportunities for teens.
3. Designing and implementing a service project.

In May, 2006, the OMK team sponsored a weekend leadership retreat in the wooded setting of a YMCA campground. The recruitment effort attracted a dynamic and diverse group of 18 teens representing military and non-military youth, including five 4-H members. During that outdoor camping weekend, the youth were guided through a series of fun, experiential team building exercises designed to motivate and inspire. By Sunday afternoon, the personal bonding and shared enthusiasm of the group created the momentum that continues to drive the project today.

Video Design and Production

As a result of participating in the leadership retreat, the teens decided to pool their talents in technology, music, theater, and public speaking to produce and distribute a video. In partnership with adults, they developed a plan of action to accomplish the first step of their project, creating an effective media tool. This media tool was designed to meet the SOMK objectives by describing the stages of deployment through a teen point of view by using human interest stories.

SOMK Goes Hollywood

Over the summer months, the teens came together for 6 days of planning and implementing the video production. The idea of a "news team" format grew from the impromptu playfulness at the first production meeting, when the teens pretended they were news anchors and weather gurus. The action plan unfolded in stages as follows.

1. Create the storyboard.

2. Identify and choose roles.
3. Recruit guest interviews.
4. Write and edit scripts.
5. Practice interviewing skills.
6. Rehearse with teleprompter, lights, and cameras.
7. Select site locations. Schedule interviews.
8. Design sets.
9. Film scenes and interviews. (In total, 14 film hours were recorded.)
10. Edit, assess, re-shoot, edit, and revise.
11. Generate musical score.
12. Complete opening, closing credits, and media permission forms.
13. Obtain labels and packaging.
14. Create discussion guide to accompany video.

Outcomes

Following the May leadership retreat, participants were invited to complete an Web-based questionnaire (Archer, 2003). Only 30% of the participants responded. All reported that the training changed the way they think, act, or behave and that they plan to use what they learned. At the conclusion of the series of video production meetings, the youth actively engaged in all stages of the project completed a paper self assessment survey rating their skill level in 14 categories before the project compared to their skill level following completion of the video. The highest gain was reported in the following skill categories:

1. Outlining a storyline using a storyboard.
2. Writing relevant and concise interview questions.
3. Rephrasing questions to make them more clear to the interviewee.
4. Working positively with a team.
5. Voicing personal experiences, gaining self-expression.
6. Increasing understanding of emotional challenges of the stages of deployment.

To enhance the value of the video as an educational tool, the team developed a discussion guide and a training manual. Teens and adults interested in creating community awareness can participate in a 3-hour training focusing on the areas of public speaking, group discussion facilitation, and community action plan development. After showing the *Young Heroes* video, presenters lead their audience through a group discussion and then participate in a pre-designed community service project supporting military youth.

Summary

The New Jersey OMK team initiated a youth/adult partnership in support of SOMK. They produced *Young Heroes*, a video featuring interviews with military youth. The teens challenged themselves to master new communication and technology skills. The stars of the show are the youth who relate their personal experience of their parent's deployment. With their video project, the SOMK team brings home to the viewer a very real sense of what military deployment means to youth. This method can be adapted to create community awareness of other topics such as gang prevention or other teen issues ranging from dating to driving.

Call to Action

You can view a three minute clip of *Young Heroes* at <http://www.operationmilitarykids.org/public/somk.aspx>. *Young Heroes* is available as a complete packet including DVD, discussion guide, and training tutorial. If you are interested in a train-the-trainer workshop at your site, please call or email lyons@njaes.rutgers.edu or kraft@njaes.rutgers.edu. For more information about Operation Military Kids visit www.operationmilitarykids.org <<http://www.operationmilitarykids.org/>>

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