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Nonprofit Gives Teens a Connection in Movie Business

Ghetto Film School in South Bronx bridges gap between classroom and entertainment industry



Director David O. Russell speaks to students at Ghetto Film School in the South Bronx. *PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **LESLIE BRODY**

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Chris Butler, the son of a mechanic in the Bronx, was in class at Ghetto Film School when his accent caught the attention of a guest lecturer, the Hollywood director David

O. Russell.

Mr. Russell recruited him for a small role in “American Hustle,” stayed in touch and later helped him with key introductions in the film business.

Mr. Butler, 25 years old, is starting his dream job this month as a trainee representing screenwriters for a talent agency. He credits his networking through Ghetto Film School, a nonprofit in the South Bronx.

Its connections form a “great platform,” he said, adding that without its help, “there’s a slim chance someone who doesn’t have a family relationship with someone in the industry can be in a position to thrive.”

Located in a converted piano factory where it sits above state parole offices, Ghetto Film School aims to provide teenagers a foundation in filmmaking that can jump-start careers in the entertainment world. The organization’s founder, Joe Hall, likes to say that “if you weren’t born in the Coppola family, we’re your Coppola family.”

The school opened in 2000 as a South Bronx community program for aspiring filmmakers aged 14 to 18. It worked with the New York City Department of Education to open the Cinema School in 2009, billed as the U.S.’s first high school devoted to filmmaking on top of liberal arts. With selective admissions that take into account grades and test scores, its students are 92% black or Hispanic, and 71% qualify for free lunch. It beat the district overall last year with a 98% graduation rate.

‘If you weren’t born in the Coppola family, we’re your Coppola family.’

—Joe Hall, founder of Ghetto Film School

Nationwide, there is a growing call for career-oriented education that will prepare students for professions from engineering to nursing. But some business leaders say that helping graduates land jobs requires stronger ties between schools and employers. According to a 2015 survey conducted for the Partnership for New York City, fewer than 2% of high-school students in “career and technical education” programs actually got internships.

Ghetto Film School bridges the distance between the classroom and the workplace

partly by nurturing relationships with players who provide expertise, internships and introductions. Its board includes Mr. Russell, “Empire” co-creator Lee Daniels and NBCUniversal executive Evan Shapiro, as well as James Murdoch, chief executive of 21st Century Fox Inc. Fox and News Corp, which owns The Wall Street Journal, were until mid-2013 part of the same company.

The school’s supporters say that even students who don’t wind up in film or television gain creative skills crucial for the modern job market, such as teamwork, empathy and problem-solving.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Russell, director of “The Fighter” and “Silver Linings Playbook,” led a class for about two dozen students in its honors film program. He spoke of the horror of creating something boring and the pain of self-doubt.

Major directors often collapse in dismay after tough feedback, he said. “My movie, I was excited about it and now just don’t know if I’m just an idiot,” he said as he mimicked such heartache. “Welcome to filmmaking, by the way. It’s like this every other day.”



Joe Hall, founder of Ghetto Film School. PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The nonprofit’s newest venture, “The Roster,” is taking shape this year with a new \$625,000 city grant pushed by City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito. It plans to run job

boards, showcase diverse emerging artists in their 20s and 30s and connect them to mentors.

It also tries to help its alumni break in through a production company called “Digital Bodega.” It has high-end cameras, editing software and a sound stage they can use for movies and other projects, such as an anti-smoking public-service announcement for Warner Bros. They build reels of paid work to show potential employers.

One person who got her start this way is Melissa V. Murray, a 24-year-old with a purple Afro and an easy smile. She answered an email from Digital Bodega saying a British indie-rock band called alt-J needed a music video. She got that job and in time launched her own production company, the Cynical Owl.

Access to free equipment at Digital Bodega has been a huge help, Ms. Murray said, along with honest feedback from peers there. “You have a network of people who give you pointers and help with business decisions,” she said. “It’s like having a safety net.”

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Mr. Hall, the school’s founder and a formal social worker, said mentoring “got hijacked by the social-service industrial complex,” which too often sees all minority youth in poor areas as fragile, discounting their artistic potential.

He prides the school on not taking money from organizations that label the students as “at-risk” or “disadvantaged.”

“We’ve kept it very simply focused,” Mr. Hall said. “They come here to learn filmmaking and storytelling.”

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