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Two women explore minds of pre-teen girls in film

By Julissa McKinnon, STAFF WRITER

TWO YEARS ago, Dawn Valadez of San Leandro and Kristy Guevara-Flanagan of Oakland embarked into uncharted social territory: the mind of the pre-teen girl, age 9 to 13. Their medium: videotape. Their tools: one handheld video camera, one long dangly microphone, and a world of patience. On a crisp November afternoon, Valadez and Guevara-Flanagan began a typical shoot on the asphalt playground of Emery Middle School Academy.

As soon as the classroom doors flew open for recess, a throng had formed around the three-person camera crew, who are a well-known trio to the eighth-grade class they started filming a year and a half ago. A few students clustered in front of the lens, asking what the women wanted to film today.

"Just you guys," Valadez answered with a grin. Valadez, who works in youth development and received her master's degree in social work, sat at a picnic table to talk to curious passers-by, while the film crew hit the pavement.

Camera in hand, Guevara-Flanagan sidled up to a group of girls plotting to ask the boys for an "autograph" on a 3x5 index -- er, business card. Intern Anna-Lena Isaksson of Sweden was right behind her, fishing for sound with the microphone.

As Guevara-Flanagan shadowed a girl chasing a boy across the basketball court, a wild shot barely missed the camerawoman's head.

If Valadez or Guevara-Flanagan was doing this just for fun, she would have given up long before now. But they are women on a mission. So far, they have filled 280 hours of tape with thousands of pre-teen moments.

The subjects of their yet-unfinished story are four urban girls of color and their journey through junior high, as they shed childhood and take their first tentative steps into adulthood. After eight more months of filming, Valadez and Guevara-Flanagan will begin paring down their film library into a 56-minute, 40-second montage on growing up.

Valadez openly admits that most seasoned videographers might scoff at the amount of tape they've amassed for such a short flick. But the idea was to do a longitudinal study on preteen girls -- a group left in the shadow of the media and market spotlight on female teenagers.

Guevara-Flanagan points out that the latest research reports that American teens are depressed. She and Valadez are investigating the pre-teen years, before such problems emerge.

"We hear how girls lose confidence and self-esteem in their teen years. But it's at this age (preteen years) that we see them start to step out of academics and athletics," said Guevara-Flanagan, a free-lance video editor and former teacher.

"When they lose that relationship with their body, they start to give up that control."

Valadez and Guevara-Flanagan hope their documentary, which they expect to finish two years from now, will help parents and educators understand that encouragement given to young girls lasts a lifetime.

This vision keeps the two women chugging strong, returning to the nondescript Emeryville junior high week after week despite the financial strain of their project.

So far, the video taping has been funded by \$8,000 worth of grants, \$30,000 of their own earnings and \$3,000 in contributions from about 100 friends and family members, said Valadez.

If everyone were paid for every hour of work, the cost of the six-year project (including preparation, taping and editing) would total about \$300,000, Valadez said.

But as government officials continue to slash funding for programs such as the National Endowment for the Arts, full compensation is little more than a fantasy.

Independent artists such as Valadez and Guevara-Flanagan can only hope to defray some of their most obvious equipment expenses. Meanwhile, the competition for a shrinking pool of grants keeps growing, Valadez said.

"There are a hundred other projects in the Bay Area that are equally valid and important and are also working on the most limited funding," Valadez said.

"But we're going to get a return on our investment. We've put too much life and soul into it -- there's no way we're not going to finish it now."