

Cloud nine is great, but Planet Hollywood is real! Bright idea teaches filmmaking - and more - to inner-city students



Rayvon Hicks,
Allison Silberberg
and Robby Preston
at Planet Hollywood

To Allison Silberberg's friend, Walter Mosher, it was just another after-dinner conversation. But to Silberberg, it was a call to action.

The two had bemoaned media reports that Washington's inner-city youths lacked hope. Silberberg went to bed thinking about their conversation. In the middle of the night she awoke with an idea. The next morning she called Mosher:

"I didn't even say hello," Silberberg recalls. "I just said, 'Lights, Action, Camera!'"

Mosher suggested to the adjunct film professor at Washington's American University that she meant, "Lights, Camera, Action!" She said that was OK; LCA! was better than LAC! as an acronym for a project to empower young people. That can-do attitude helped Silberberg jump other hurdles that lay ahead.

A year later, she watched proudly as seven students from Anacostia Senior High School fielded media questions after their film, **Poppy**, had premiered at the American Film Institute in

Washington's Kennedy Center - a few miles and a world away from their crime-plagued Southeast Washington neighborhood.

That premiere, the gala that followed at Planet Hollywood, the fried chicken that fed the crew during filming and the donuts they shared on Saturday mornings as they learned to work as a team,

were all donated. The 16mm Eastman EXR film was processed and transferred to videotape by Colorlab, of Rockville, Maryland. Randall Blair of Blair Productions donated hours for the off-line edit, and Henniger Video provided on-line editing and the rest of postproduction.

Silberberg had rallied that support for a program nearly everyone said couldn't be done - at least not quickly. When the

school district offered little help, she found a DC policeman and aspiring screenwriter who took her straight to Anacostia. When the school said security and staffing concerns prevented it from opening on Saturday mornings, that same friend, Sherwood Ballard, found them the community room at the local police precinct.

From chairs gathered there in a circle, the LCA! students learned about filmmaking and life's choices. When they first met, Silberberg asked each student about their goals. Few could answer quickly. No one had asked them

before. She tried to explain how day-to-day activities could lead toward or away from a goal.

"Several mentioned they wanted to be lawyers," Silberberg says. "I said, 'Let's figure that out. That means college and law school. That means good grades.'"

"Then they asked how they could afford college. I told them, 'You get the grades, then we'll figure out how to pay for it.' They were full of self-doubt. And at age 16, I feel strongly they should believe anything is possible."

As the months went by, they learned that at least **Poppy** was. Each week, the students discussed classic films Silberberg assigned them to watch. They conceived and wrote a script. And with help from some of Silberberg's former

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students at AU, they made their creation a reality. All credited as first assistant directors, the seven LCA! students took turns at camera, lighting, sound and blocking scenes. Each learned certain jobs, then taught the others.

Silberberg says the students also learned from the journalists who followed them to produce several stories for local and national media. Their film has aired on two Washington public television channels, and LCA! was featured one morning on a local television talk show. Silberberg also reports the Discovery Channel has expressed an interest in **Poppy**. Recently the film received a CINE Golden Eagle, qualifying it for entry in international film festivals.

Although she wants to continue the program, Silberberg says her non-profit LCA! corporation still bears debt from **Poppy**. Nevertheless, she draws strength from the words of Rayvon Hicks, the film's star, who now plans an acting career.

"I had dropped everyone else off after the television premiere," Silberberg recalls. "We were alone in my car, where the kids had been joking with me, pointing out where shootings had occurred in the neighborhood. Rayvon noted humor was just their way of dealing with the threat of violence. But he added: 'This is serious. If I can only say one thing, it's that there's a lot of talent and promise here. We're not all thugs. We just want to be given a chance. And given a chance, look what we did. We made the movie **Poppy**.'"

LCA! is a 501(c)(3) corporation under the US tax code. For more information, write to: Allison Silberberg, 1544 Mount Eagle Place, Alexandria, Virginia 22302-2120, or phone 703/379-5565.



The stars of **Poppy** are (from left) Duke Jackson, Troy Mitchell, Chaqurha Lee, Ernest Solomon, Rayvon Hicks, Robby Preston, Maurice Sanders and Charmaine McCowan