



# REEL WORKS NYC: WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

**A crisis can bring out the best and worst in people – some stockpile, others share. The team at Reel Works NYC most definitely sit in the latter category. The lockdown gave them pause for thought and that thought was simply: ‘what can we do to help?’ Having the emotional needs of their students at the front and centre of mind in this way was both creatively inspiring and focusing. It opened up opportunities in terms of what they could deliver and the determination to do it, no matter what.**

“Teaching film online just feels like an impossibility right off the bat because it’s such a hands-on medium. You get your hands on a camera and then there are all the people who help you to put it together. It’s such a collaborative process.” Because of this, Charles Reynoso, Reel Works’ Manager of Education and Curriculum, was fearful for how they could take the programme into the virtual space. But it quickly became clear that there would actually be some benefits to turning the delivery of all their programmes upside down. “One of the fallbacks of our programming, when it was live, was that we had one teacher in one school, and they worked with those students and tried to get that group of students to come together and form some sort of consensus about the thing they wanted to create,” he explains. “Whereas now, those teachers teach a specific thing – Experimental Film, Black women in cinema, Documentary, The Art of Comedy – and students from all the different schools can just come together in the space that they choose.” It was a complete game-changer in a time where community and culture were suffering. Logistically, it was new territory and the team had to work with technologies to deliver each lesson safely and productively, reworking the curriculums to fit the new world.

However, there was one more significant challenge to overcome – when the students didn’t have access to shared equipment, how could Reel Works (and their contemporaries at Leeds Young Film in the UK) give them the tools they needed?

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KIDS MAKING  
MOVIES IS EXACTLY  
WHAT THEY DO.  
THAT’S WHY  
TIKTOK AND  
YOUTUBE ARE  
SO SUCCESSFUL –  
THEY LOVE DOING  
THIS STUFF.”



“  
THEY’VE BEEN  
LOCKED AWAY  
FOR MONTHS.  
IF I WANT TO OPEN  
MY WINDOW AND  
SHOUT, THEN I  
CAN ONLY IMAGINE  
WHAT THESE  
CHILDREN ARE  
FEELING. AND SO,  
WE ABSOLUTELY  
ALWAYS HAVE  
THEM IN MIND.”

Their Creativity Kits morphed into ‘Guerrilla Filmmaking Kits’, providing the students with the physical products that could help them to realise their ideas, but it simply wasn’t as straightforward as that. Getting the kits to the schools was easy, but into the hands of the students far less so and everyone pulled together, going above and beyond to make sure that they all received their kits. “Everyone was like, ‘we’ll do whatever it takes,’” says Charles. “The teachers were just amazing at calling kids in and getting them to pick it up from school, but for other students we had to drive it to their house. There was just no other way to do it. So, we had one of our people driving all around and dropping off kits.”

The learning began and what came next was unexpected, but beautiful. By giving the students the agency to learn about the aspects of filmmaking that appealed to them, Reel Works opened the door to a remarkable level of engagement. Both in terms of physical work produced and through exploration, brave questions and a means to express how they were feeling. Indeed, some of the classes were designed to give them the space to discuss, rather than just make. Educational Associate, Antoinette Bethune explains: “Everyone was experiencing a societal trauma. A lot of the pieces were able to give space for a ventilation of feelings and really a safe environment to create things or talk about things that really affected them.” Of course, the pandemic wasn’t the only distressing event in the children’s lives. The Black Lives Matter movement had a profound impact on the young people that Reel Works’ teaching artists were working with. On day one of a course on ‘Black Women in Cinema’, Charles recalls a 7<sup>th</sup> grader who had seen the George Floyd video. “The death of this man impacted her so profoundly that she wanted to immerse herself in what she saw as the beauty of Blackness, to understand Blackness. She said ‘I want to know. I don’t want to be a person like that man [Derek Chauvin].’” She subsequently became an important part of the conversation because the whole the topic was ‘Black Women in Cinema’, Charles explains, “it was also a conversation about ‘how do we view each other?’, ‘what effect does that have on us?’. It was good to give them a catharsis in discussing something that even their parents may not know how to have the conversation about.”

Other students used their kits to explore highly mature topics and experiment with an incredible level of focus, such as meticulously created flipbooks made from 150 index cards (“I don’t have the

patience to do what this child did,” laughs Charles) or interviews between two young women on the US immigration process. This enthusiastic involvement confirms that Reel Works delivered what was needed, just at the right time. “Just using the things we gave them to talk about something that could be inspirational, we felt like, ‘ok, this is working!’”

There have been a determined and tenacious network of people making this happen – colleagues, artists, teachers and partners have all played a huge role in completely changing the educational landscape for Reel Works. “The teachers have been extremely supportive,” says Antoinette. ““Every teacher or principal I have spoken to, they always say they need this programme at our schools. They’re under a lot of pressure but students still wanted a space to create and reflect and just be themselves. I will definitely say that teachers did make space for that to happen.” The teaching artists too immersed themselves into this new way of working and volunteered to carefully create and deliver entirely new courses, based around the premise ‘If I were here now, as a kid, and I needed something that would give me some sort of catharsis, what would it be?’ “Each one of our teaching artists is teaching the thing they want to teach their twelve-year-old self,” explains Charles. “For example, the person teaching the ‘LGBTQ in Cinema’ course studied it at university and is very deeply connected to that community and topic. They all kind of drew from themselves.”

Creative collaborations reached beyond New York, in the form of their relationship with Leeds Young Film. The two organisations have laid the foundations for the future in their collaborative work on both the Creativity Kits (“I enjoyed stealing all their best ideas,” laughs Charles) and a beautiful promotional video that captured the strength and resilience of the students. “That collaboration was one of my favourite things because it put us on the same page about what was important, what we were doing and how we should connect with the students,” he says. Future plans see them creating an ‘across the pond’ Q&A, where students from New York can ask questions about life in the UK and vice versa. So, while the past year has been at best, testing and at worst, traumatic, Charles is glad to be able to have taken so many positives into year three of Burberry Inspire. “I don’t want to thank the pandemic for anything, but there’s been so much learning that we want to incorporate into all of our programming because I see the impact it’s having.”