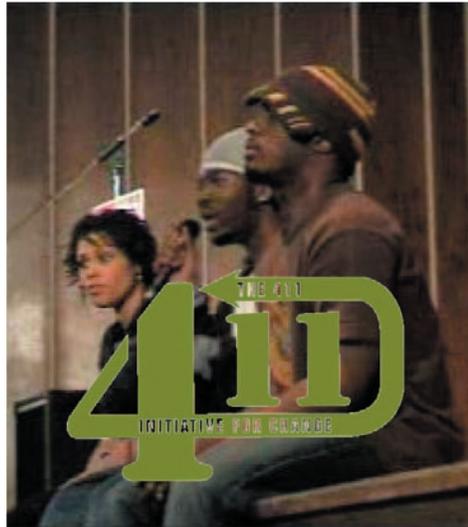


The Laidlaw Foundation: The Barbershop Show



Thanks to Laidlaw Foundation funding, 411 encouraged youth to discuss and celebrate human rights.

Led by the 411 Initiative for Change and conducted in partnership with Amnesty International, this tour used a musical theatre presentation to engage youth in discussion about human rights and the role they can play in affecting positive change in their communities, domestically and overseas.

Funded with support from the Laidlaw Foundation's Youth Engagement Program, this work is also supported by the Ontario Arts Council, and the Federal Government Departments of Heritage and Justice. Hosted by Will "The Barber" Strickland, who creates the script and supporting lesson materials, the show is a series of vignettes that might occur in barbershop conversation and features rap, poetry and songs that use "edutainment" to deliver information and ask questions of students regarding the effects of war, use

of child soldiers, violence against girls and women, child labour, and the right to education.

The show involves active touring artists such as Melanie Durrant, Rikoshay, and Eternia. After a one-hour performance that invites student participation throughout, there is a half hour discussion session where students are asked for their understanding and perspectives on the messages profiled in the show and have the opportunity to ask questions.

Supporting classroom materials are made available online for teachers to use in follow-up to the show. Will, who has worked extensively in the music industry, also created a seminal course on hip hop culture, "Edutainment: The Impact of Hip Hop on American Culture," at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Dwayne Morgan, spoken work

artist and founder of Up From The Roots, which promotes the positive artistic contributions of African Canadian and urban influenced artists, is another of Barbershop's performers. He and other artists work with 411 and Will by providing existing material related to the topics for the shows or creating pieces that address the issues. Both Dwayne and Will speak of the response and ongoing interactions with youth who have experienced the shows.

"We've all been to the boring assembly" says Dwayne, "we try to keep the script loose, not too rigid, and go with the flow of the audience."

Participants can interact directly with performers after the show and all can be reached by e-mail through www.whatsthe411.com.

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411 Executive Director Tamara Dawit indicates that some school communities are a challenge, "We had to change the term 'hip-hop' in promotions to 'popular culture' and sometimes teachers and principals are nervous when we start the show", response from staff and youth participants is typically favourable. Teachers speak of the program as helping civics curriculum to "come alive — the activity provided an opportunity to discuss, debrief and

research human rights issues. This was an excellent presentation, very student-friendly and the debriefing that followed was exceptional."

The program is also seen as inspiring youth to become more civically engaged, "Something special was exchanged between staff and students with the performers. Students were moved emotionally and inspired to be an active person in our society."

There is opportunity to further expand the youth engagement in this approach to more directly in-

clude youth in the decision-making and creation of the project. It is worth sharing this model from the perspective of its success in engaging artists in community issues in a manner that requires meaningful time commitment, reflection on the issues at hand, and direct interaction with a variety of communities.

The full grant story can be found on the Laidlaw Foundation website, www.laidlawfdn.org.