

Minding the Gap between Brooklyn and Tanzania

By Zoi Calomiris

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In a windowless classroom at Champlain College in Vermont, Brooklyn born and raised film-maker Chris Bashinelli paces back and forth before the forty MCW Youth Leadership Retreat participants. Treating the room like an amphitheatre, he pauses to let his words sink in.

Chris, 24, describes the stoop outside his childhood home. “My stoop... and everyone in Brooklyn has a stoop... is a home base for all my friends—from Russia, Ireland, Egypt, and Korea, pretty much everywhere. They taught me early on how to value diversity.”



(Left to right) Abdu Mohamed, Chris Bashinelli and Innocent Nizeyimana in Vermont.

When he was still a student at Marymount Manhattan College, Chris decided to travel to Tanzania, fulfilling his long-time goal of going to Africa. “I wanted to see what life was really like and what I could do to help.”

He traveled to Tanzania with a Sony handy cam. “I was there for a month and I experienced the beauty of the country. I also saw the challenges of what daily life was like for some people,” he said. These challenges, such as urban flight, water shortages and the lack of education and employment opportunities, were highlighted in Chris’s documentary on his trip, “Bridge the Gap: Tanzania.”

Later, when Chris returned to Brooklyn he had a new sense of purpose: to set up Bridge the Gap TV (BTG), a web series highlighting stories of everyday life around the world. One of the first films he produced was “A Tanzanian in Brooklyn,” featuring MCW’s Tanzania Country Coordinator, Abud Mohammed.

Chris set up BTG after almost a decade as an actor, which included parts on HBO’s Sopranos. His experience as an actor has served him well as a film-maker, in which he uses film to create dialogue, understanding and partnership between different cultures.

While still active in Tanzania, Uganda and most recently Abu Dhabi-UAE, Chris’s latest project is closer to home. He is exploring what life is like for young Oglala Sioux living on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota.

“We want to focus on challenges facing the community, like unemployment, alcoholism and poor infrastructure; at the same time, we also want to focus on stories of resilience, resourcefulness and success,” he said.

Chris hopes the series will eventually make its way to television, helping change the American public's perceptions of life on Indian reservations.

He shared his footage with MCW board members Anna Condoulis and Roberta Richin, who both encouraged him to apply for the MCW Alumni Ventures Fund that he was ultimately awarded in July, 2011. This micro-grant, complete with mentorship and start-up funds, will help Chris screen his series on the reservation and in high-schools in South Dakota.

To the retreat participants from Kyrgyzstan, Rwanda, Israel, Palestine, Kosovo and the USA, who have all come to Vermont to learn how to turn their personal dreams into concrete plans, Chris is a success story.

“When you meet Chris you immediately notice his energy and his charm. He's someone you want to talk to. And, he's someone who has turned his personal vision into reality,” said Roberta Richin, an MCW board member.

As a participant of the 2009 MCW retreat program, Chris hopes to see Bridge the Gap TV copycats among the 2011 participants. This dream seems possible, especially with Dylan Howard, a 21-year old film-maker from Maine.

Dylan has already set up the Image Gazer Film Festival, a traveling screening of shorts and independent features. His vision is to create a travel series that fosters intercultural dialogue by also showing stories of everyday life from around the world.

Perhaps Chris's series—about Tanzania, Uganda, Abu Dhabi and Pine Ridge—will be among the first shorts screened at the festival this year.

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Zoi is an MCW intern who was actively involved as a speaker and facilitator in MCW's 14th International Youth Leadership Retreat (YLR) at Champlain College in Vermont.

Bridge the Gap TV launched its first program, “Fair Trade Uganda” on cable in August, reaching 45 million viewers in 80 markets across the USA. To learn more about Bridge the Gap TV visit <http://www.bridgethegaptv.com/>

To learn more about MCW (Miracle Corners of the World) and the Youth Leadership Retreat program, visit www.miraclecorners.org/