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Mobtown Beat | Education

In Focus

Students Involved in Critical Exposure Program Show Their Photos of Broken-Down Schools to City Schools CEO Bonnie Copeland



Frank Klein

SHUTTERBUGGED: City Schools' head Bonnie Copeland (center) looks over photographs of city schools taken by student Unique Robinson (right) at a Critical Exposure exhibit.

By [Stephen Janis](#)

Gallery 1448, just east of the Inner Harbor on Baltimore Street, was the perfect space to showcase the work of Critical Exposure, the nonprofit program behind a black-and-white photo exhibit of physically ailing city schools. Arranged in a single horizontal line around the room, the photos of closed libraries, broken bathroom stalls, and collapsing ceilings looked stark and honest bathed in the glow of the gallery's abundant natural light. The brainchild of Adam Levner and Heather Rieman, two Washington-based education experts with backgrounds in public policy and advocacy, Critical Exposure armed some 60 Baltimore City students with cameras and instructions to document the conditions in their public schools. The result was the depressing montage that was on display at Gallery 1448 in April.

The project, which was supported by grants from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Community Law in Action, received positive media attention, including a front-page article in the Accent section of the April 19 *Sun*. But the real coup for the students involved in the project was a private, pre-arranged April 25 showing of their work for city schools Chief Executive Officer Bonnie Copeland. Shortly before Copeland's arrival at Gallery 1448, Unique Robinson, a 17-year-old senior at Baltimore City College who participated in Critical Exposure, said she thought the photos should be particularly relevant to the CEO's goal of improving city schools.

"If we show her these pictures, she can't ignore them," she said.

"I can't express in words how we feel about this," added Kayla DeRusha, a 16-year-old City College student, pointing to a photo of missing floor tiles in her AP English classroom. "But I'd be happy to show her."

Copeland's visit was, at least for Levner and Rieman, the realization of their ambitions for the Critical Exposure

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project, which they conceived on a cross-country trip last year. Their goal was to use visual storytelling to bring attention to problems at city schools. The two borrowed money to buy 35-mm point-and-shoot cameras for the students, and directed them to document the worst and best things about attending Baltimore schools during the 2004-'05 school year.

“Students rarely have an opportunity to have their voices heard by people who are in positions to make decisions that directly affect their lives and their educations,” Levner says. “That’s why we’re having this exhibit.”

Levner says he invited both Mayor Martin O’Malley and Copeland to the exhibit’s April 1 opening, but neither could attend. Copeland later agreed to visit and view the photos on another date. “Her office was very responsive,” Levner says.

Copeland arrived at the exhibit in a sleek black sedan wearing a thick scarf, and her demeanor was polite and professional. When Unique Robinson showed her photos of a library at City College that had been closed for several months, her response was to ask: “Why don’t you show me a photograph of something you’re proud of? Are there other libraries you took a picture of that aren’t closed?”

Proceeding to the back of the gallery, 14-year-old Roland Park Middle School student Sahara Scott guided Copeland through a three-picture series that highlighted the broken basketball rim in her school’s gymnasium. Copeland pointed out a photo of a student standing beneath the rim, holding a basketball.

“This student enjoys playing basketball,” she told Scott, who responded by telling Copeland that her photos were intended to show that “it’s not really fair that some students can’t play the sports they want to.”

Then Copeland came to DeRusha’s photos, which consisted of images of broken floor tiles in classrooms. DeRusha explained that many of the students refuse to respect their school facilities because of their poor condition.

“A lot of students trash the facilities because they’re in disrepair,” DeRusha said. “If we could fix them and learn in a beautiful environment, I believe it would be something to proud of, and then students would treat it better and attendance would go up.”

Copeland listened to DeRusha’s plea, then countered it with a question: “But our oldest school [Cherry Hill’s New Era Academy] has attendance of 96 to 97 percent, and the students are in the same old building. What do you think is the difference? “

DeRusha didn’t have an answer.

After completing her tour of the gallery, Copeland stood in the middle of the room with the students gathered in a semicircle asking her questions. When asked by one student whether she had learned anything from the photos, Copeland was straightforward.

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“There were no surprises,” she said. “We obviously don’t have enough money to bring our facilities up to speed, but we’re clearly aware of the problems. . . . I think the pictures are terrific.”

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City Paper could not reach Copeland for a comment on the show by press time. But the kids involved in Critical Exposure were grateful to have her attention, even if she could not make them any promises.

“The students themselves were thrilled,” Levner says. “They felt that she heard their comments and really looked at their pictures. We would have liked more time so that students could have asked more questions and had a more in-depth conversation, but given the limited time we thought the interaction was productive.”

“The fact that this happened was surreal,” Robinson says. “I never thought I would be able to talk to Copeland. . . . It’s just great that we’re finally being heard.”

Though the Gallery 1448 exhibit is over, the Critical Exposure photos will continue to be shown. They will be presented to the City Council during a reception on May 11, and they will be displayed at the offices of the Association of Community Organizations United for Reform Now, aka ACORN, through the month of May. They will then move to the Village Learning Place, where they will be displayed during June.

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