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Picturing their lives

When students turned a photographic eye on their schools, the reality of budget shortfalls came sharply into focus.

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Eager to try out her first camera, Kayla DeRusha looked around her school halls for something to shoot. But she didn't photograph her girlfriends. She wanted to use every bit of film to expose a surprising side of her elite high school.

Her snapshots, simple but bleak, show an ancient bathroom sink, a tangle of outdated computer wiring and a crumbling classroom floor at City College. In one picture, a teenage girl sits, huddled in her winter coat, in front of a broken heater. In another, two signs: "Library" and "Closed."

"This is the library where students of excellence come to be turned away because there are no books to be checked out," Kayla, 16, wrote in a poignant essay accompanying the photo. "The only real use for this space is for after-school rehearsals or as a hiding place for students who cut class. Welcome to my library."

It is one of 50 black-and-white portraits of life in Baltimore's public schools that make up a revealing documentary exhibit on display this month at Gallery 1448 in East Baltimore.

Taken by schoolchildren who were taught basic photography and given point-and-shoot cameras, the pictures chronicle the disrepair and neglect in Baltimore's public schools.

There are photographs of broken toilets, lead-contaminated fountains, desolate playgrounds. One picture is of a television set, turned on in a biology class, a stark reminder of the challenges faced by an 88,000-student district that consistently ranks near the bottom in Maryland for academic performance.

Yet scattered among them are moments of joy, photos that capture the resilience of inner-city children determined to learn even in dismal surroundings. Several students focused on inspiring teachers; others, vivid art murals or science projects. One snapshot shows a long list of college acceptances posted on a bulletin board at City College, known for its academic rigor and distinguished alumni.

"We didn't want to just pan the schools," said Adam Levner, 30, who coached the middle- and high-school students in documentary techniques. "But there are things that obviously need to be addressed, that speak to just how drastic the underfunding has been."

He and a college friend, Heather Rieman, 31, dreamed up the project two years ago while talking about how often urban schools get shortchanged. Eventually, they both quit their jobs and devoted nearly a year to recording what city schools look like.

Levner and Rieman, both amateur photographers who live in Washington, figured the best way to illustrate the often obscure debate over funding inequities would be through the eyes of schoolchildren. Their idea reflects the growing popularity of children's photography as a form of documentary. Earlier this year, *Born Into Brothels*, a film featuring candid snapshots by children in Calcutta's red-light district, won an Academy Award.

"A lot of policymakers never set foot in these schools. They don't know what it's like," said Rieman, who was on a fellowship at the U.S. Education Department when they began planning the project.

Levner, a community organizer at a Washington nonprofit, agreed. He had seen how well-run affluent

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private schools can be when he taught briefly at the Potomac School in northern Virginia.

Baltimore was a natural choice, Levner said, since its 184 public schools long have been mired in bitter court and legislative battles over chronic funding shortages.

He and Rieman could see the evidence everywhere: in old brick buildings full of peeling paint, in trash-strewn stairwells and concrete playgrounds.

They teamed with Community Law in Action, a youth advocacy program in Baltimore, and landed a \$12,500 grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In short order, they had purchased dozens of 35 mm Canon cameras and began teaching students from Community Law in Action programs, as well as an after-school program in Reservoir Hill and at Crossroads Middle School, a charter school east of the **Inner Harbor**.

The students' assignment was simple: Photograph the best and worst of their schools.

Initially, Levner and Rieman hoped to illustrate the disparities between city and suburban schools. But they had trouble finding better-funded schools willing to participate. Eventually, they hooked up with an after-school program for immigrant girls in Takoma Park in Montgomery County.

Photographs by two of the students at Takoma Park are in the exhibit: a well-stocked library and a sleek gym. But the girls are mostly from poor Latino, African and Caribbean immigrant families who live in crowded apartments on the edge of the hip, artistic town. They see their own share of inequalities.

Before she began shooting, student Bessie Moreno brainstormed with Levner. "I want to get into how there aren't any Spanish kids in the magnet class. How we're still separate," said Bessie, whose parents are Salvadoran and Ecuadorean. But she wasn't allowed to photograph the class.

In Baltimore, students experience less of a divide. Virtually all the student photographers come from low-income homes. They see few wealthy classmates; upper-middle-class residents typically send their children to private schools.

The 60 students participating in the project attend a variety of public schools: mainstream, vocational and magnet. Their educational experiences, and their perspectives, are not the same. Yet their work captures a shared sense of frustration with the state of their schools.

"I'm always focusing on the negative because it angers me that so many of our students are impacted by neglect," said Unique Robinson, 17, a senior at City College. "Every day, we go to City College, the great school in Baltimore, and you shouldn't even have to use bathrooms like we have. They're dirty; the sinks are falling apart, there's no toilet paper and a lot of times, there's no soap or towels."

School supplies often run short, she said. One semester, teachers bought their own paper. Not long ago, she said, the art department ran out of canvases, and teachers resorted to pulling down ceiling tiles for students to paint instead.

Many students took snapshots of dirty fountains, shut off for the past two years, ever since school officials discovered that some drinking water was tainted with lead. Even in bathrooms, stern notices remind students "Do Not Drink - Hand-Washing Only." Bottled water coolers have been installed but sometimes stand empty.

"For 12 years of my life, I drank from the fountains of various schools," Unique wrote. "I realize that my soul can be as lead-filled as the pencils I write with."

Eric Harris, 15, a freshman at Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical High School, took the television photo. Eric, who lives on the edge of Sandtown in West Baltimore, finds his biology class numbingly dull: He either has to copy notes from the blackboard or watch a documentary video. Often, he said, he falls asleep.

He titled his photo: "Where's the teaching?"

One of the first program participants was Sahara Scott, a 14-year-old from East Baltimore. Last summer, while walking around Garrison Middle School on the west side, she spotted a basketball backboard that had neither a hoop nor net.

She was amazed. But she was also excited: she had found a new way to express herself.

"It's great. It gives you a way to say something without actually having to use words," said Sahara. Her best shot, of an exuberant homeroom teacher at **Roland Park** Middle School, is prominently featured.

Kayla had no film left after shooting the missing tiles in her Advanced Placement government classroom and the broken window next to City College's entrance sign: "A Recognized School of Excellence."

But she is as proud of City College as Unique, who photographed the college acceptance list. Their school, which boasts a college-placement rate of more than 90 percent of its seniors, has long been one of the city's best. Among its alumni are two former governors, two former mayors, a Nobel laureate in medicine, journalist Russell Baker and philanthropist Joseph E. Meyerhoff.

It's a picture Kayla wishes she could have taken herself.

"It really is a good school," she said. "I just wish some of these problems got a little more attention."

To see more photographs, go to www.baltimoresun.com/schoolphotos.

On display

What: Critical Exposure: Eyes on Education

When: 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays and by appointment for school groups during April

Where: Gallery 1448, at 1448 E. Baltimore St.

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