

NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

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Students expose lost libraries, defunct doors

By **JESSICA GOULD**
Current Staff Writer

A Washington Metropolitan High School in LeDroit Park, the library's shelves are empty and piles of books line the floors. There's no librarian, and even the room's doorknob is broken.

"It's a mess," said junior Joshua Elliot. And it's a metaphor. "It needs to be fixed just like the education system."

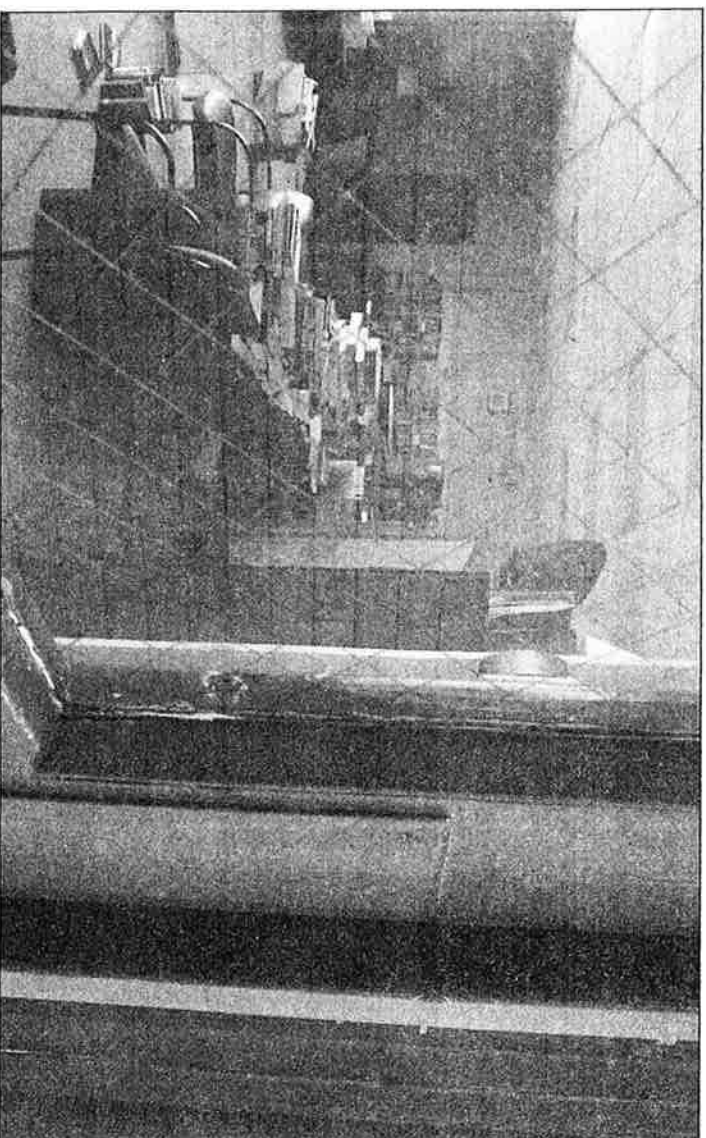
For months, Elliot and dozens of other D.C. Public Schools students have worked with the D.C.-based nonprofit Critical Exposure to bring renewed focus to problems that plague public education. They took pictures of filthy lockers, broken clocks and empty bulletin boards. Now they're using the photos to effect real change on their campuses.

After all, Elliot said, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

And that, said Critical Exposure executive director Adam Levner, is what the organization's mission is all about.

Since 2004, Critical Exposure has been working with students to chronicle their lives through a series of snapshots.

The organization equips students with cameras, teaches them photography techniques, and encourages them to document the issues that are important to them.



Photos by students in Critical Exposure

It has worked with approximately a thousand students across the country in an effort to bring arts and advocacy to low-income communities.

"I really hope that students feel more comfortable as artists and using that as a form of expression, because many students don't have access to the arts," Levner said.

He said the organization chose photography as a medium because it's accessible. "We've all taken photographs, so it's not very intimidating to students when you hand them a camera," he said.

Plus, he said, "It's really powerful. People internalize what



they've seen."

But Levner said the goal is as much about agency as it is about aesthetics. "They have a voice that they can use to change the world around them," he said. "When they see injustice, they have the tools

Critical Exposure helps students document problems at their schools. Washington Metropolitan High School ninth-grader Diamond shot the school's defunct library, top; Roosevelt High School 11th-grader Jacquan focused on students entering through the school's rear, left; and Roosevelt 11th-grader Corey captured the unused front.

they need to make that world better."

So the photographs of facilities quickly morphed into movements.

At Roosevelt High School, students used photographs of classrooms entering the school's back door as part of a campaign to get officials to reopen the school's grand entrance.

"Because of the heritage of the

students — we have a highly diverse population of mainly minorities — we deserve the ability to use the front door," said Roosevelt student and photographer Jacquan Clark. "It's more dignified than using the back door." The front of the school has been under construction, and the doors were open by graduation, as students had hoped.

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Meanwhile, at Washington Metropolitan, students secured \$2,000 from the city to upgrade the library and hundreds of donated books from the Watha T. Daniel-Shaw Neighborhood Library.

"They didn't think it was fair that most schools have a functioning library and we did not," said principal Tanisha Williams Minor. "Now it's just a matter of the adults doing the work and turning their wish list into a requisition."

For his part, Elliot said he's pleased with the out-

come, and he hopes it will be a boost to the school, where only 26 percent of the students scored proficient in reading on last year's D.C. Comprehensive Assessment System. "Every school should have a library," he said. "You need books to be literate."

And classmate Diamond Biggs said she has a new sense of her own power. "I found out that kids' voices really mean something," she said. "Now I know my voice means a lot."

Photos by students are on display through the end of the month at the Pepco Edison Place Gallery at 702 8th St. NW. The gallery is open Tuesday through Friday from noon to 4 p.m.