
Redondo Beach News

Photography for Change

By Drew Holland

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Among America's chief exports are pop music, fast food and loud tourists.

Not exactly the best we have to offer.

So it is encouraging to know that one Redondo Beach resident is spreading something more edifying around the world. Alina Nadsady, 31, runs a program that teaches elementary school students photography as a way of encouraging self-expression and preventing violence. "Shoot with Cameras - Not Guns" recently won a German competition that takes American ideas and uses them to solve that country's social problems.



Alina Nadsady runs a program promoting self-expression and nonviolence through photography. (photo by Chris Miller)

"I was just very happy because it has never received that level of award or recognition," Nadsady said. "It makes me very proud."

Nadsady traveled to Berlin last month with her friend Susan Valot, who submitted the program to the Transatlantic Idea Contest. Valot, 31, discovered the contest during an exchange program to Germany the year before. Nadsady and Valot were awarded 500 Euros (about \$630) during a ceremony in the Gendarmenmarkt square. The U.S. ambassador to Germany attended.

Nadsady said that during the trip, Germans from the University of Cologne approached her about starting the program there. Valot said that the Germans hope to use it to ease tensions between native Germans and immigrants.

"They have a similar issue as we do in that some people resent the immigrants coming in," said Valot. "But in Germany's case, it's the Turkish and Polish that are arriving."

In her program, Nadsady teaches students basic photography skills, then sends them out into their neighborhoods with disposable cameras. The students can take pictures of anything they want. Nadsady develops the film and the students write about what their photographs mean to them.

"I think a lot of times we don't ask kids what they are feeling," said Nadsady. "This gives them an avenue to express themselves, whether it's good or bad."

Nadsady said that the topics of gangs, graffiti and crime regularly surface in the students' photo essays.

Nadsady started "Shoot with Cameras - Not Guns" in 1998 while she was getting her master's degree in public health from UCLA. Her professors introduced her to the concept, which Nadsady said has been used for years. Nadsady secured funding to create her own program and started it at Hawaiian Avenue Elementary School in Wilmington, where her mother was a second-grade teacher.

"It was really well-received by the community, the parents and the teachers," said Nadsady.

As for the students?

"You should see their faces when we have the exhibition," said Nadsady.

At the end of the program, Nadsady exhibits the students' work for everyone to see. She said it is a very special time that gives students a feeling of accomplishment.

In Germany, the hope is that if native students and immigrant students share their exhibits with each other, it will promote understanding and peace.

In the years she has run the program, Nadsady has taught in Wilmington, Lennox and Harbor Gateway. She also works full time as a community health resource, education and training specialist at Little Company of Mary Hospital in Torrance.

Nadsady reconnected with Valot several years ago at their 10-year high school reunion. The two had attended Bishop Montgomery High School in Torrance but were not very close, according to Valot.

"We found out that we have more in common now than we did in high school," Valot said.

Nadsady encouraged Valot to go on a group study exchange with the Rotary Club. Nadsady had just gone on one to Russia and Finland. Valot had never been out of the country, but traveled to Germany with an exchange program in the spring of 2005. Later, she returned to Germany with the RIAS Berlin Commission, an organization of radio journalists. Valot presently works for KPCC.

It was during this second trip that Valot discovered the Transatlantic Idea Contest, sponsored by the Korber Foundation.

"The first program that came to my mind was Alina's program," said Valot. "It just made sense."

Valot said that one of the strengths of "Shoot with Cameras - Not Guns" is that it does not cost much money but is capable of making a big difference.

Valot neglected the application until the last minute. Nadsady wasn't even aware that her program was being pitched across the world.

Nadsady's program was selected along with several others from the United States. One of the others was a special garden for people who have lost loved ones.

In addition to the German interest, Valot said that some of the Americans who attended the ceremony approached them about bringing the program home to their states. Nadsady said that it is exciting to see her program "snowballing" into something big. She hopes one day to take photo exhibits from America and show them to German students, and vice versa.