# Student Research for Action

From 2003 – 2006, WKCD had the opportunity to help students and teachers nationwide initiate and conduct ambitious student “action research” projects targeting critical education and community issues. **The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** provided the financial support for this three-year initiative.

## Student Video Celebrates San Francisco History and Challenges High-Rise Development Plan





**SAN FRANCISCO, CA—**The Build San Francisco Institute looks like a busy architecture firm: in a light-filled, airy space, blueprints are spread over a conference table; a small group is researching city demographics at a station of computers; and someone is on the phone asking questions of a seismic engineer. But these twelve engaged workers are not architects-they're sophomores, juniors, and seniors in high school.

In the Spring of 2005, students converged in a project-based learning classroom to create a high-quality documentary video about one of the most pressing and underreported real estate development issues in the Bay Area today: the Rincon Hill Plan. The project provides a replicable model of achievement: it merges multidisciplinary, real-world research with rigorous learning, and influences public opinion in the process.

The Rincon Hill Re-Development Plan would transform two square miles of warehouses South of Market Street into a luxury high-rise condominium area. It would also invest city resources in the courting the biotech industry's wealthiest workers, and dramatically alter the skyline of the city by the Bay. The "Rincon Towers" video documents BSFI's students' investigation of the plan, driven by a complex question: Should market forces alone dictate the supply of residential housing in SF south of Market Street? In a city where only fifteen percent of the citizens can afford home ownership, this is a powerful question, and one with no simple answer.

Students began by researching the history, geology, demographics, economics, and aesthetics of San Francisco. They toured the city with video cameras to determine which features made it unique. They read selections from Life and Death of Great American Cities by Jane Jacobs, and Global City Blues by Daniel Solomon; attended SF Planning Commission meetings; interviewed politicians and developers, and grew to appreciate the complexity of decision-making through which a city evolves.

As they met with city leaders and studied the angles of the problem, the BSFI students were astonished to realize that they knew more about the issues of affordable housing, public policy, and urban development than many adults they encountered. By documenting each stage of their learning and condensing it into a one-of-a-kind 45-minute video, they hope to raise public awareness about the issue-and increase the public's participation in the development process.

**The Learning Process**

One of the most extraordinary aspects of this high-achieving program is that it draws students who, for the most part, are struggling academically. Students at the Build San Francisco Institute came from probation programs and continuation schools, as well as arts and charter high schools around the city. They take busses and trains downtown at lunchtime to join their counterparts in the BFSI office.



Part of the program's success can be attributed to the self-selecting nature of the project. Student Yury Kogan, 16, explains, "Everybody was like—oh, yeah, I want to do that! And everybody who wanted to do it just got in a group. Everybody had the same goal." Another factor contributing to the success is a mentorship program, which immerses students into the professional work environment. Two afternoons a week, BSFI students work with a mentor in a professional setting which matches their interests, from engineering and construction firms to a neighborhood history center. The other three afternoons were dedicated to research and documentation as a team.

Program Director Will Fowler says, "A project like this is all about organization. It's not the kind of organization from the old days in teaching, where you had the five-step lesson plan. You have to know who's working on what; you have to be, in essence, the manager of a media company. It's more the job of a producer than a director."

Fowler and instructor Dave Rosenbaum built the program to operate in modules, each one of which could serve as an end-point. The beginning weeks were spent on skill-building and background research, before the work of the project formally began. "On the first day of class," teacher Dave Rosenbaum says, "many did not know how to use a ruler. We had almost no supplies; we had Legos, and construction paper. So we started with Legos: 'See how far a distance you can span with Legos.' We created a bridge. That launched us into spatial relations, engineering, and group work."

The first three weeks were focused on academic skill-building. Rosenbaum taught cursive penmanship, so that students could write quickly and take notes. To prepare for the visiting speakers, students practiced how to appear attentive, use good listening skills, and ask informed questions. For research, they focused on outlining, reading a passage and summarizing, and using complex sentence structures to convey ideas. In math, they created basic word problems based on real-life economics, such as how to read a budget, or calculate the rate of return on an investment.

For the second three weeks, students focused on background research about development and gentrification in the city of San Francisco. Working in teams, they created PowerPoint presentations in lieu of papers or tests. They acquired new vocabulary phrases: eminent domain, entrepreneurship, DINK (Double Income, No Kids), fault line, capital investment, rate of return, absentee landlord. They traveled throughout the city of San Francisco, tracing its history from geologic time to today.

By the seventh week, they began to host the roster of expert speakers which would become their living textbook. From the CEO of the property company behind the Rincon Towers project, to a prominent land-use lawyer who opposed the project, students encountered the dueling minds behind the public ideas. By interviewing nine of the most influential people in city politics around their central conference table, students got a real-life immersion into the policy process—and injected their voices into the dialogue.

The students filmed these teaching sessions with developers, city planners, and political leaders, and those teaching sessions form the backbone of their video. Many let down their public personas and became unusually candid in the classroom. Students introduce the viewers to the multiple faces and facets of the Rincon Hill Plan with careful editing, and allow viewers to draw their own conclusions.

The film is shot and edited in a straightforward manner. Between clips of San Francisco landscapes and monuments, students narrate their subjects. They introduce the clips of expert speakers and summarize the speakers' position and point of view. Their scripts are condensed, stimulating, and well memorized.

**Not leaping to judgement**

In the tradition of investigative reporting, the team did not make prior judgments about the issue. Instead, they entered the complex vortex of city politics and economics, and tried to proceed without pre-conceived ideas. Brandon Kissinger, 18, says, "Just like San Francisco's diversity, that movie is really diverse: we all come from different points of views and different places."



Although the issues of poverty and homelessness are not covered directly by the camera's eye, an awareness of their import sometimes surface in the expressions of the student narrators. In one particularly moving moment, Henry Boteo, in a clipped Mexican accent, says, "There's no room in this city for me." He shoots a burning gaze at the camera before walking off screen. The screen is empty for a split second, and the viewer registers his absence. The subtlety with which the issues of gentrification and development are treated-in what is often a strident, polarized debate--make this documentary stand out.

Indeed, one of the hallmarks of its genuine inquiry is that the students did not come to a consensus opinion about the project. Some, like Rachel Johnson-Leiva, feel that Rincon Hill should be preserved and revitalized as an historic area. Osmundo Arguello is in favor of discarding the project entirely, and investing money in San Francisco's poorer neighborhoods. Others, like Brandon Kissinger, see an economic benefit to housing the wealthy, and feel excited by the plan. The atmosphere of healthy disagreement is a tribute to the level of intellectual respect among the students.

"I don't want to sugar-coat this," says Dave Rosenbaum, speaking about the group work. "It's incredibly intimate and it has all the conflict and difficulty of family relationships, when you work intensively in small groups." Student Osmundo Arguello agrees, but he adds, "Something good comes out of work like this. You feel proud of what you did, what you have accomplished. All you've got to do is put your mind into it, do what you have to do, get on task, get to work. Don't let time run."



"Rincon Towers" will screen this summer at the S.F. City Planning Commission, student film festivals, and grassroots organizations. The students who researched, wrote, filmed, edited, and starred in the video hope that their work will benefit San Francisco's diverse communities, encourage participation in the civic process, and ensure a fairer economic future for residents of the city they call home.

They're not ending there, however. The Build San Francisco experience has awakened passions in its students, several of whom plan to pursue college studies in architecture, interior design, construction management, and history. As David Gastaneta, 16, says, "I'm going to design something in this city: that's what I'm going to strive for. I'm going to leave my own opinion, and my own impact on San Francisco."

**Click below:**

Proposal to What Kids Can Do | Program Structure
Rincon Towers project-based learning unit (1.2 mb PDF)
An interview with Program Director Will Fowler