

GEOGRAPHY STUDENTS AT AKI KUROSE CREATE, SHARE DIGITAL STORIES ON GLOBAL ISSUES WITH STUDENTS IN INDIA

First-year teacher, Stefanie Richardson, calls the students in her 8th grade world geography class at Aki Kurose Middle School "my experts on the big issues of energy, poverty, jobs, homelessness and hunger."

Working in small teams for eight weeks, the students learned how to use research techniques, photography, writing and the internet to create digital stories about these five topics, and how they impact not just their own community but the larger world, as well. While creating their digital stories, the students were paired with students at the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala, India to engage in an online dialogue about how important issues are addressed in a different culture on the other side of the globe.

Bridges to Understanding, a local non-profit organization, was invited by Stefanie to help provide hands-on guidance and mentoring to the students from beginning to end. Founded by renowned humanitarian photographer and Mercer Island resident, Phil Borges, Bridges' mission is to "bring digital technology and the art of storytelling into classrooms to empower and unite youth worldwide, enhance cross-cultural understanding and build global citizenship." Tania Westby, program director for Bridges, headed a small team of Bridges staff and volunteers who assisted Stefanie in her classroom by meeting with the students during their 50-minute class period a few days every week, guiding them in how to conduct research, take photographs, write a script and create a two-minute digital story about their chosen issue. The students' digital stories are posted on the Bridges web site where they can be viewed and discussed by students around the world. At the same time, Stefanie's class can view digital stories made by their partner class, and many others, posted by Bridges' classrooms in places like India, South Africa, Peru and Guatemala.

On Wednesday, November 26, the students at Aki Kurose held a film fest in the auditorium for their fellow schoolmates to see their digital stories on the large screen. "It was gratifying to see the students become so engaged in the creation of the stories," said Stefanie. "The mother of one student told me her son looked forward to class every day and talked about what he was doing when he was at home. Another student took the initiative to write the script for her team at home and brought it into class the next day. This project really sparked the students' interest, even those who are often the most difficult to engage." Principal Mia Williams hopes to be able to expand the program to include other classrooms throughout the school and, she notes, "to give the students ideas for ways they can be involved in their community."

For more information on Bridges to Understanding, and to view the digital stories created by the Aki Kurose students and others from around the world, visit <http://www.bridgesweb.org/projects/gallery.html> .