

Art exhibit, film screening aims to change perspective of Englewood

Amanda Wills
TECHNEWS WRITER

For every gun murder on Chicago's south side, there are approximately ten million daps, high fives, handshakes, hugs, and kisses. Of course, these expressions of love, family, friendship and respect are rarely newsworthy, so we hear about the violence and the drugs and the tragedy instead. For plenty of places in America, that's all we hear about. That's West Baltimore, it's Northview Heights in Pittsburgh, and it's Englewood in Chicago.

This exhibition hopes for a more nuanced examination. The intent behind this display of Cyrus Dowlatshahi's and Amanda Williams' work is to reveal the fact that the people living in the south side, and in all

disadvantaged communities, are ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances.

Though Englewood is flagged as one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the country, little else is mentioned about the people who live there. Furthermore, mainstream news coverage fails to explore the root causes of segregation, disinvestment, and the institutional racism that cause poverty and violence to persist.

In different ways, south side natives Cyrus Dowlatshahi and Amanda Williams go beyond what you find splashed across the headlines of the local paper to explore the nuances and complexities of south side life. Both find themselves in Englewood.

Cyrus Dowlatshahi's documentary, "Takin' Place", is a slice-of-life window into places that many in Chicago's ultra-segregated cityscape never visit. Although the film isn't concerned with advancing any kind of social justice agenda, it's obvious that for many on the south side, the cards are stacked against them: from uneven policies and racial discrimination that make it impossible to find work after acquiring a police record, to the dangers children face when walking to and from school every day that don't exist in other communities. The film is simultaneously hilarious, and very much about traveling outside your comfort zone and being a guest in other people's homes and in their lives, as Dowlatshahi – an Iranian-American Hyde Park native – is still very much an outsider in Englewood.

Amanda Williams paints soon to be demolished homes in Englewood using

vivid, culturally derived colors, marking the pervasiveness of undervalued Black space. In Williams' "Color(ed) Theory" she works within social landscape of the place (Englewood), landscapes which are the visual residue of the invisible policies and forces that have shaped most inner cities. Rather than simply painting a picture of the neighborhood for outsiders, Williams is directly trying to engage the local community by way of mapping the visual representations of what poverty or race may look like with the colored medium. With these works scattered throughout Englewood, Williams hopes to strike a note within the neighborhood by reaching for forgotten memories of a place soon to be gone.

A cappella group, 'The Filharmonic' interviewed on WIIT after performance

Reno Waswil
DISTRIBUTION MANAGER

The Filharmonic is a popular Los Angeles based a cappella group whose claims to fame, in addition to the group's impressive and distinctive musical style, was as a semi-finalist of NBC's a cappella competition "The Sing-Off" and their subsequent portrayal of the vicious a cappella group "Manilla Envy" in the film "Pitch Perfect 2." Speaking to their style, their website describes them as exemplifying "an urbanesque hip hop sound with 90's nostalgia." This, on top of their commitment to "honor their Filipino heritage" and their variety of entertaining personalities akin to that of a "boy band," carved them out a notable niche in the a cappella scene.

Last Monday, Union Board invited the group to perform in Center Court on their "Get Up and Go" tour. On Friday morning, I was given the exclusive opportunity to interview two of the members of the group,

Trance Gaynor, one of the four tenor singers of the group, and Jules Cruz, the base singer of the group, on Illinois Tech's student run radio station WIIT 88.9FM. Since performing at Illinois Tech earlier that week, they had performed at Aurora University in Illinois, Rose Hulman Institute of Technology in Southern Indiana, and called in from Atlanta, Georgia the morning of their show at Georgia State University.

The group proved to have an interesting formation to say the least. They ultimately cite their meeting period to meeting at a cappella conferences like the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA), the very same competition of which the one in the Pitch Perfect movies was an exaggerated version.

Although the group was composed of members from a few different collegiate backgrounds at the time, Cruz explained that many of them had already known each other from prior schooling and a cappella

competition experiences, which compelled them, having heard of the return of "Sing Off," to unite in Los Angeles with the common goal of competing in it.

It was because of this motive for forming that there was more of a learning curve leading up to their appearance on the show than possibly many of the other groups. It was in fact, on the very first episode of the show, which was taped only a few weeks after they had learned that they would be contestants in it, that they had their first public performance. Despite this, they succeeded in making it to the semifinals, competing and beating out groups that had been together for several years.

Having that under their belt opened doors to them that they otherwise may not have, such as their casting in "Pitch Perfect 2." The loads of other passionate a cappella groups and singers that were in the film, which included many The Filharmonic members recognized from "The Sing Off" and their ICCA days, made it what Gaynor referred to as

a "geeky a cappella reunion."

This aspect gave a sort of familiarity to the event, but there was still no lack of complexity and "largeness," for which they only played one small part. They didn't even know that the name of their group would be changed to "Manilla Envy" in the movie until they actually saw it. They explained that the original intent was to bring on a K-Pop group for their role in the show. When the producers of the film could not find a professional a cappella group of that genre, they decided that the Filharmonic would fit and subsequently brought them on.

I concluded by asking them when their tour would end and what they planned on doing in their down time, which would be between the end of May and the beginning of fall when they would begin touring again. Cruz and Gaynor answered that they would be working more on writing some original music and putting more videos up on YouTube while they have time.

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