

## From Impact to Action: A Seeing is Believing Success Story

DECEMBER 2009, VANCOUVER, BC

On November 21, Directions Youth Service Centre officially unveiled a brand new media lab for at-risk youth. This achievement, and the numerous actions that surround it, was made possible by the Seeing is Believing program.

Directions fills a key service gap in Vancouver; it deals with the city's most marginalized youth, many of whom have been forced out of other shelters. While other youth service organizations maintain strict policies around drug use, pet ownership and even swearing, Directions operates under a 'shelter first' mandate. It concentrates primarily on getting youth off the street and out of dangerous emergency shelters, secondly on providing the support needed to get clean, find a job and reconnect with family.

### The Impetus for Action

In October of 2008, executives from Electronic Arts visited Directions as part of a Seeing is Believing tour focused on creating opportunities for at-risk youth. The visit began awkwardly as white-collared executives sheepishly found seats next to tattooed and pierced street youth and tentatively engaged in conversation. As the initial tension settled, the conversations grew more lively and a realization spread quietly through the room. As one executive later put it: "These kids weren't too different from the testers, animators and artists we work with every day." What's more, many of the youth shared the same interests as EA employees. Most were aspiring artists, musicians and writers who may have one day ended up at EA had their lives not been altered by unfortunate circumstances.



*Marty Hasslebach, Managing Director, Vancouver Film School meets with a youth named "Fraggle" during the initial SIB tour in October 2008.*

## A Natural Fit

In the post-tour debriefing, the excitement in the air was palpable. Poster boards quickly filled with ideas on how business could get involved on the issue. For the team from EA however, the idea that garnered immediate consensus was that the notion that EA could help these youth fulfill their creative potential. After all, this was something the company did for its employees every day (EA's campus looks more like an elaborate rec room than an office complex). Furthermore, EA saw an excellent opportunity to engage its employees in something that would truly resonate with them and deepen their commitment to the organization.



*Youth from Directions were actively involved in the planning, design, and construction of the new media lab from day one.*

## Driving Change Downward

Guided by decisive executive leadership, EA reached across the organization to recruit artists, engineers, IT specialists, and facility managers to make the new project a reality. After several conversations with the staff at Directions, EA decided on a media lab where youth would be able to access to every tool available to create professional-grade art, music and film. The process was guided by clear messaging from the executive team at every step: this is a priority, this is core to who we are, we *will* make this happen regardless of the obstacles.

## Creating a True Partnership

Once a room had been selected for the new facility, EA went back to Directions and asked both the staff and the youth what they would like to include in the new room. The response was that the facility needed all the trappings of a professional creative environment, but also had to be a place where youth would want to spend time. To foster a sense of shared ownership, EA engaged youth at the centre from the earliest stages of the design process. Over the course of 4 nights, executives and artists from EA and youth and staff from Directions laughed, bonded and went through a seemingly endless amount of pizza as they transformed the facility into something completely original. The end result is a room that speaks to the design aesthetic of both parties featuring 6 fully equipped work stations, a gaming console, and a plasma TV for movie nights.

### **The Beginnings of Something Larger**

If the media lab is the most visible element of EA's commitment to at-risk youth, it is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg of this budding corporate-community partnership. With the success of this project, EA has already initiated a secondary program wherein youth from Directions are brought to EA's Burnaby campus to test and provide feedback on new videogames. The pilot project already has garnered rave reviews from youth participants, who not only receive excellent work experience and free videogames, but also the inspiration and encouragement to return to school so that they can one day gain full-time employment with EA.

### **An Accomplishment for the CBSR Team**

CBSR is proud to have played a small role in brokering this partnership and hopefully it speaks to the organization's ability to affect change at the ground level. CBSR hopes to use this example of community leadership to inspire future Seeing is Believing tour participants to take similar action.



*Wendell Harlow, EA Community Outreach Manager and SIB alumni helps paint a mural.*