

## METRO

## JUVENILE PROBATION

# Troubled youths gain focus via photography

By Richard A. Marini

A talented photographer can see things the rest of us might miss. Teach juveniles on probation to be photographers and they might see something in themselves that they didn't know existed.

That's the hope driving a one-day exhibit of photographs scheduled for tonight at the Gallista Gallery.

All the photos in the exhibit are the work of a dozen juvenile probationers who participated in project wrangled by Crystal Guerra, a community service specialist with the Bexar County Juvenile Probation Department.

"My boss challenged us to come up with a service learning project to help them complete their court-ordered community service and learn something useful at the same time," she said. "I'm a photographer — I occasionally do weddings and debuts and stuff — so I thought, 'How can I do what I like to do and help these kids, too?'"

The probationers are all under 17, but that doesn't mean their offenses are minor.

"We get everything — kids who are thieves, have been convicted of assault or are sex offenders," said Guerra, who is responsible for a caseload of about 100 youths.

Guerra enlisted the help of the San Antonio Photographers Group, whose members donated time and use of their equipment to show the probationers their way around cameras.

They taught them about photographing athletes and later attended a high school football game and donated the students'

## Youth Probationers' Photo Exhibit

**Where:** Gallista Gallery, 1913 S. Flores St.

**When:** 5-8 p.m. today

**Cost:** Free

**What:** Music, food, silent auction

photos to the school's website. They explained depth of field during an outing to one of the nearby missions, and they showed them how to work under different lighting conditions.

Using digital cameras and their own camera phones, the students produced an impressive array of images: close-ups of brightly colored flowers, football players in moody black-and-white, and cheery, color-tinted portraits of their sneaker-clad feet.

While they all showed technical improvement over the 10-week program, perhaps the biggest change was in their ability to stop and see.

"At first they'd take the camera and *click, click, click*," said Guerra, holding an imaginary camera and miming taking photos of anything and everything in her office. "But eventually they learned to slow down and focus on what they were interested in."

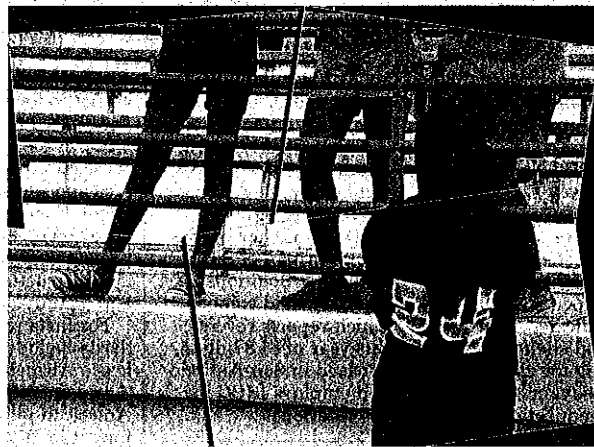
Louis, a young probationer whose surname the Express-News has agreed not to reveal, said he learned a lot from the program.

"I didn't know anything about photography before we started," he explained. "Now I know how what you capture depends on the moment. We shot a waterfall, and I learned to capture the perfect moment



Courtesy photos

The Bexar County Juvenile Probation Department and the San Antonio Photographers Group gave young probationers a chance to learn as they took photographs, including this one.



The photos that will be exhibited tonight at the Gallista Gallery were taken by a dozen juvenile probationers, who showed improvement in skills as well as their ability to stop and see.

by including the things surrounding the waterfall."

And not all the learning was photo-related.

One girl, usually very shy, became much more animated during the lesson in portraiture. Interested in hair and makeup, she spent much of the time assisting the hair and makeup people who'd volunteered to

work with the group.

Guerra said she empathizes with the youths because she, too, had her share of trouble with the law when she was younger.

"I was a runaway. I had a family situation," she said. "I was placed in a group home for a while, and that's where they taught me how to be an adult.

These kids are like photography. Sometimes you have to look a little closer to find something beautiful."

As the program wound down, Guerra approached Joe Lopez about mounting a show of the probationers' work at Lopez's Gallista Gallery. He immediately agreed.

Like Guerra, Lopez has firsthand knowledge of the hurdles these youths face — and how art may help them find a way out.

"I was a juvenile delinquent myself," he said. "I got in a lot of trouble as a young man. I was very bitter."

Lopez credits his mother, his girlfriend (and now-wife) and his art for saving him.

"Maybe photography will encourage these kids to do something positive with their lives," he mused.

Admission to the showing is free, and there will be a silent auction of the displayed photos. Proceeds of the auction will go back to the program, which Guerra hopes to continue early next year.

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