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Volunteer of the Month

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Volunteer, film maker puts focus on area homeless youth

The desire to volunteer enhanced by the urge to create can take people on truly amazing journeys. For a young Beloit film maker, the journey appears to only have begun.

Ruben Burgos and his wife, Annie, are already deeply involved in service to children. The couple manages the day care and pre-school program at Faith Builders on Murphy Woods Road. And Burgos said he has been fascinated by film making since early childhood.

"My father used to film us on vacation and send the film to our grandparents in Puerto Rico," Burgos explained. "If we didn't smile enough, he made us do the scene over again."

Through his ambassadorship with Beloit's Chamber of Commerce, Beloit Memorial High School's Lunch and Learn program and mentoring a homeless student, Burgos was inspired to produce a film documenting the lives of three unaccompanied, homeless teens titled, "16:49:00." The film, which focuses on the hours between school days, has already won a national media award from the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth as well as a top-10 pick slot for the 2011 Beloit International Film Festival. But its full impact on the Stateline Area is being felt in other ways.

"Ruben is a very special individual. I met him when he interviewed me for the documentary film "16:49:00," said Ann Forbeck, MSW, homeless liaison for the School District of Janesville. "He is a warm, caring person who put me at ease in the same way he put the students in the film at ease. He spent countless hours collecting footage and 'editing in the dark' as he works full time and has a small child plus another on the way."

Forbeck added that the film has given her hope for the region's homeless, unaccompanied youth. After two years of research and planning to provide housing and support services for these students, her group Homeless Education Action Team (HEAT) was close to giving up because of insufficient funding.

"Ruben's film has inspired several families to open their homes to homeless teens, and we will soon have emergency shelter for them in Rock County," Forbeck said. "His film has inspired five bands to plan a benefit concert to raise money for a group home for students who cannot return home. Ruben has always been happy to help by providing additional copies of the film, editing it to meet specific needs. He also maintains the "16:49" website and makes changes as needed for HEAT. I call Ruben my angel because he came out of nowhere and is making our dream of a safe, stable home for homeless teens come true."

Burgos is modest about his achievement but ardent about the film's subject.

"I have a heart for these homeless youth, and to have them open up to me despite potential isolation and embarrassment was a huge blessing," Burgos said. "It was good for them as well. It is encouraging to see the changes in them after the film was completed. They told me they thought the movie was cool."

The film took about nine months to complete. Meanwhile, it has drawn the attention and admiration of individuals and organizations throughout the greater Beloit area.

"I met Ruben roughly one year ago when he approached me about a documentary he was working on to highlight the plight of homeless youth," said J. Marc Perry, director of planning and development for Community Action Inc. in Janesville. "Since that time, the documentary has taken on a life of its own and I had the good fortune to engage with Ruben on a number of levels. I am very proud at this point to call him friend, as he is an extraordinary human being."

Perry added he feels Burgos is selfless to the point of martyrdom.

"What I mean by that is he is a young man who has devoted his life to the service of others," Perry continued. "He believes in the common good and still has a strong belief in humanity. He refuses to be jaded, and sees the good in all people. His first question is always, 'How can I help?' He inspires those around him to do more and be better. He is a young man without a lot of material wealth, but is a billionaire when it comes to richness of the soul."



Ruben Burgos reflects on the success of "16:49:00" in the stairwell of Faith Builders' church where he filmed a homeless youth's story.

Submitted photo

Burgos gives credit to his wife Annie for allowing him the time to follow his heart.

"I'm so thankful for my wife," he added. "Film making is quite time consuming, but she lets me do my thing and express my creativity. We all have gifts of talent but it's wonderful to be able to live your dream. For three years we directed the church's theatrical program. I loved being able to give dramatic twists to our events. But the challenge of trying to tell three life stories in 35 minutes was tremendous. I mean, how do I do these stories justice? How do I capture the essence in the editing process? The kids deserved my best effort. Sometimes I had to walk away from editing because of the intense emotions the process evoked."

The film "16:49:00" is not Burgos' only volunteer film effort. He has also applied his passion and expertise to help in the area's efforts to alleviate hunger.

"Ruben is a high-energy guy with a strong positive outlook on life," said John Wong, senior financial advisor at M&I Bank and president of Rock County Rotary's Kids Against Hunger program. "I met him at Beloit Memorial High School's Friday Lunch and Learn meeting and saw what he could do."

Wong added that Burgos agreed to do a timely video on another program, Impact Africa, and has designed a logo which Wong says is perfect for the cause.

"Ruben is extremely talented. His "16:49:00" film is very moving," Wong said. "He is very giving and can sense what needs to be done almost before he is asked."

For Burgos, volunteerism is essential to life.

"People need to come out from their four walls," he said. "Too many see and admire volunteer causes from afar. I believe we should dive in. Volunteering is comparable to sports. We can be either players or spectators."

Burgos is a player. His film making company, Positively Video, is focused on future efforts to help nonprofit organizations attract the attention and funding they must have to continue helping those less fortunate in the Stateline Area.

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