

## *Video Review*

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Glenn Hutchinson

# *The Real World of Young People and Service*

## *Everyday Heroes*

*Rick Goldberg and Abby Ginzberg, directors  
Berkeley, CA: Kovno Communications, 2001*

I'd watched MTV's *The Real World*, and I remember thinking, 'This is kind of compelling, and these people aren't even doing anything. What if you had people who were doing something interesting with their lives?'

-Rick Goldsmith, co-director of *Everyday Heroes*

Most students know *The Real World* of MTV, but a new "Real World" is here: *Everyday Heroes*, an inspiring film that examines a diverse group of young people serving their communities, trying to make the world a better place.

Directors Rick Goldsmith and Abby Ginzberg's new film focuses on an organization that has not received much media coverage: AmeriCorps. In 1993, under the Clinton administration and passed by a bi-partisan vote in Congress, AmeriCorps started sending over 40,000 young people annually into communities throughout the United States, paying them a minimum wage and then an educational stipend at the end of their year of service. *Everyday Heroes* tells the story of one AmeriCorps team from the San Francisco Bay area.

Goldsmith and Ginzberg piece together powerful images of service that flow like a reality TV show with transitions between scenes underscored by contemporary music. However, the pace of this film is slower than MTV, which makes the most powerful scenes sneak up on the viewer as pleasant, poignant surprises as the camera records AmeriCorps members: tutoring elementary and junior high school age children, teaching sex education classes, discussing bio-diversity and environmental issues, completing a garden project, coaching sports teams, planning a service-learning project for a senior center, and even conducting a drumming class for youth. With footage of their training, service sites, and interviews, two story lines emerge: 1) AmeriCorps

members helping children, mostly as tutors and mentors, and 2) members squabbling with their supervisor.

For a service-learning writing course, this documentary could serve as a good introduction at the beginning of the semester or later in the term to prompt discussion about the challenges of service. In my freshman writing class, I showed a portion of the film during the middle of the semester and then invited a guest speaker from the AmeriCorps program to share her experiences with my students.

For my classroom, one strength of *Everyday Heroes* is how it examines issues of diversity and the effect of racism on how individuals work for social change. The members of the San Francisco team represent diverse ethnic groups, sexual orientations, and educational backgrounds (some are college graduates, some from high school). In one scene, the AmeriCorps members participate in a training activity in which the leader reads off a series of statements about their experiences growing up. Those blessed with advantages in life take a step forward, while those who endure racism take a step back. At the end of the activity, white members stand up front, while people of color find themselves at the back of the room. After this scene, one of the most moving moments in the video occurs when Steve, an African American member of the team, shares what it's like to be stopped by the police on his way home because of his skin color. After seeing this scene, one of my students,

Mari-Lynet, commented that such a real life story connects well with our writing class about community, "There are many people, even in this class, who have never seen a vulnerable black man." *Everyday Heroes'* discussion of diversity helps to complicate issues of social change; as Brandon writes, "I noticed that the answer to [such problems] is deeper than I knew."

This film helped my students see young people serving their communities, experiencing the rewards of helping children better their reading levels and understand something new, but also the difficulties of bureaucracy and burn-out. Most of my students were unaware of the existence of AmeriCorps or the number of young people involved in service, which "shocked"

them. In his in-class writing, Ryan confessed, "Honestly, I did not know programs like this, to this extent, even existed." The stories of *Everyday Heroes* helped my students think in new ways about their service projects; as Antoine writes, "Watching the video makes me want to possibly do something involving kids as a service project in this class."

One drawback for the classroom is the film's

length of 109 minutes. Although the time spent on internal conflict, the bickering between the team and its leader, illustrates the tension of diversity and the struggle of some people to accept an African American woman as their leader, I found other scenes more compelling. In my freshman composition class, I fast forwarded through a few parts and showed scenes that focused more on the team's training, service,

and reactions both to their successes and struggles as agents of social change.

My students found *Everyday Heroes* an "inspiring" film, for the young people depicted were believable heroes. As Dorra explains, "They also have their own problems and they're trying to figure out how to deal with their life." In one scene, for example, one AmeriCorps worker from a more affluent background breaks down in tears when she struggles to identify and connect with minority youth from the inner city because of her different background. Ginzberg and Goldsmith also show how some Americorps members don't complete the whole year because of financial and emotional stress.

*Everyday Heroes* accomplishes its most important goal: making people more aware of AmeriCorps and how people are trying to better both their community and themselves. As students read and write about and begin their own service, Goldsmith and Ginzberg's film can serve as a useful touchstone for reflection. As Michael writes, "I noticed that they not only try to challenge the children they work with, but also themselves." The film challenges me as a teacher too, helping me re-think my assumptions about youth and service and the problems and possibilities of diversity.

*Everyday Heroes* is an essential addition to any university's library or service-learning program. For more information, visit [www.everyday-heroes.org](http://www.everyday-heroes.org).

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AmeriCorps member  
Ivan Alomar with students.