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Wyoming: Grant-funded program turns teens into documentary makers

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By **Matt Vande Bunte**

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WYOMING -- Allison Parker filmed a segment on her immediate family. She interviewed cousins during a Fourth of July gathering for a piece on her extended family.

And her video also includes a part titled "cattery," which records her work as a Humane Society of Kent County volunteer.

"I'm a big pet person," said Allison, 13, who has two cats, two birds and two parakeets at her Wyoming home. "When you go to school, they tell you it has to be about this subject. With this, we get to do it on our own."

Viewers of Allison's upcoming self-documentary will get a glimpse of how the teenager has been spending her summer. All she has to do now is finish the voiceovers, sound effects and other editing in time for a premiere next month on WKTV public-access television.

"Pretty much everything I just learned," said Allison, a student at Vanguard Charter Academy. "I didn't even know how to work a camcorder."

Allison is one of three local teens working with a college professor this summer to make documentary videos as part of a new "Independent Voices" program, run jointly by WKTV and Wyoming Parks & Recreation with a \$2,000 grant from the Wyoming Community Foundation.

The idea is to get teenagers into WKTV studios, where they can tell their own stories in personally meaningful ways, said Kenny Westrate, recreation programmer for the city. The program is inspired by "American High," a PBS television series.

"Our department has been looking for different ways to reach out to teens and provide opportunities for them beyond the traditional means of teen programming that we've done in the past," Westrate said. "We want to see what they have to say through their eyes."

The student filmmakers have been meeting twice weekly since mid-June with Kasey McCargar, an assistant professor of digital media at Kendall College of Art and Design. They take home tiny video cameras to film their daily lives. Then, at WKTV studios, McCargar is helping them turn their videos into finished documentaries using computer editing programs.

"I just want them to learn how to be visual storytellers," McCargar said. "Usually, the easiest subject is yourself."

Taylor Dombrowski and Morgan Jensen are working together on a documentary that includes footage from a summer camp.

"It's fun to record things and be able to look back at it," said Taylor, 15, who attends Jenison High School.

On the other hand, adding graphics and original music to make the video presentable for a public audience is plain hard work, she said.

No air date for the documentaries has been set, yet. Organizers plan to run the program again next summer.

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