

Washington Jewish Week

Students put Milton school history on screen

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It's the last day of shooting and Willa Rothenberg, Ilana Kissel and Lilli Libowitz, all 12, are running through their pre-filming checklist.

Is the camera on? Check. Is it recording? Check. Is the battery charged? Check. Is there enough memory on the SD card? Check.

The girls — and the two adult helpers — now stand in silence for a minute to get an ambient background baseline for the audio. Lilli begins the afternoon's first interview, Gideon Brosowsky, a well-dressed and well-spoken fourth-grader at the Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School in Washington, the school the production crew also attends.



FROM LEFT, ADAM STRONG JACOBSON, RYAN SANDBERG, ABIGAIL TANNEBAUM SHARON AND MAILE WALDER WATCH THE CAMERA ON THE FIRST DAY OF SHOOTING THE SIXTH-GRADE DOCUMENTARY. (PHOTO BY MIRANDA CHADWICK)

They are among the 23 sixth-graders preparing a documentary on the history of their school, founded in 1988. They are also the first class in the Milton's middle school. The theme of their project is "taking a vision to reality," with the school as a case study. Students have been interviewing people involved with the founding of the school as well as current and former students and faculty.

That checklist is important. One time, Ari Blumenthal, 12, was among the last students left after a day of shooting and turned off the camera. Middle School Director Lisa Schopf "freaked out," he said, thinking the camera had been off the whole time. But these filmmakers know what they're doing.

"We think these students have the opportunity to do something they normally wouldn't do and maybe it will change their lives," said Head of School Naomi Reem.

The process is meant not just as a new learning opportunity, Reem added, but also an extension of their Judaism and personal experience.

"It's not a documentary for documentary's sake," she said. "But we took it and connected it with their experience as sixth-graders."

Schopf said the students were able to see the parallels between the journey from vision to creation of the school and their role as the first class in the middle school.

"That's been one of the most amazing things," she said. "These students, who are the inaugural year of our middle school, are talking to people who are the pioneers of this school."

The students themselves tended to be less abstract about their favorite parts of the process. Most common answer: doing the audio. The students were divided into crews of five for each day of filming.



GIDEON BROSOWSKI, A MILTON FOURTH-GRADER, TALKS TO THE CAMERA WHILE LILLI LIBOWITZ, RIGHT, ASKS HIM QUESTIONS. (PHOTO BY HANNAH MONICKEN)

One operated the camera, another listened on earphones for audio quality, two more logged the activity and interview answers and the fifth person conducted the interview.

“When I was doing audio, I could hear literally everything,” said Willa. Once she even heard a firetruck go by through the headphones.

“I liked recording [when] you were wearing the headphones, because if you didn’t do your job, like if you heard something that other people didn’t hear and didn’t tell them, the whole thing wouldn’t work,” said Adam Strong Jacobson, 12.

But for Reut Skromme, 11, the most memorable moment came when she interviewed a former student, now in his 20s. In her research, Reut had dug up an old speech he gave before a local zoning board about their school and surprised him with it during the interview.

“I liked being the interviewer,” she said, “because for one of my interviewees, I found this document he had written while at Milton and he was very happy and started giving us these great stories.”

The students also had help from Milton school parent Abigail Tannebaum Sharon, a professional filmmaker. Before they started filming, she said, she emphasized how this isn’t just fun, it’s also her work and they should take it as seriously as she does.

Then they showed up, she said, and impressed her with their professionalism and commitment to the project.

“I think when they got there, it clicked,” she said.

Schopf agreed.

“There was this energy of, ‘Oh my gosh, we’re really doing this?’” the middle school director said. “I think it meant a lot to them that they were being taken seriously.”

The documentary, which will probably end up around 10 minutes long, now needs to be edited. Students will help decide how the movie should look, what to include and in what order. The school plans to premiere it this spring for the student filmmakers, parents and interviewees.

Willa, for one, can’t wait. “I’m just so excited to see the final film.”

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