1. THE PROJECT

1. Starting +

Thursday early evening. It is 16 days after September 11th, 2001, although the terrorist attack that just hit the city doesn't yet have a name.

I am sitting in front of about a dozen refugee teenagers who've come here to our workshop space at Global Action Project (G.A.P.) in midtown Manhattan to find out about this new project, the Documentary Project for Refugee Youth. The faces in front of me are all different –most are African and several are European. There's a lanky boy from Burundi by the name of Serge; a serious quiet Bosnian girl called Aida; a friendly outspoken girl from Sierra Leone named Loulou. At the moment I know little else about them except the chilling but fundamental fact that each has in common the first-hand experience of war in their home countries. Out of this displacement—what I assume are richly compelling journeys from war zones to New York City (ironically now also a war zone)-- the project hopes to create two things: community and documentaries.

2. A small orange box

I hold a small orange box in my hands, a beautiful small 3X3 cube covered in woven fabric. I am sweating because I'm wishing right now that I were more of a magician, with something spectacular to pull out, like a rabbit or tiger. I hold it out towards the teenagers circled around and tell them that everything we're going to do together is in this box right now. It's true, I say, as Aida gives a skeptical smile and Serge looks confused. I slowly open the box and pull out:

A legal size white paper with red handwriting: We (heart) U. Thank you!!!
It is a handmade poster held up by someone on the West Side Highway for the emergency workers as they drove to and from the World Trade Center site that is still smoldering. This paper, I say, represents things on our mind right now, what's happening around us in New York. It also represents writing, and expressing ourselves in words, which is something we'll do.

Next is a family photo from India. Photography will be important in this project. So is the Past and the places we're from, our family and friends.

I pass these around. I notice Ishmael looks closely at the photo. Next:

A seashell that reminds me of this summer, of seasons, of time passing, of things we collect. An 'Adventure in NY' card that stands for the new things we'll do and new places we'll see. A fortune cookie that symbolizes two questions: What does the future hold for us? How will your new lives in America begin to unfold?

And last, and most importantly, the HEART-SHAPED STONE. This, I say, is the foundation of our work: Heart -- caring for each other and what we do, and creating a community based on this. Just as a building starts with its foundation stone, so our work together –whether words, pictures or video-- will hopefully grow out of this.

The box is empty now. Later that night the kids have left (all interested in continuing) and I pick up the empty box. Pulling things out of a small box makes me no magician, but what I hope we'll all

come to see is that magic can be found in unlikely places, made under seemingly unlikely hands. I hope we'll produce together a long colorful weave of precious moments and –like a long colored scarf—pull it out of the opened box.

3. A workshop

We meet once a week after school, sit in a circle, and talk, create, eat. We call these sessions workshops, and Sumitra and I facilitate. We're not teachers of video or writing or photography per se, but we end up teaching these things while concentrating on what the youth are bringing into the room –their thoughts, experiences, personalities, dreams. From this raw material we hope to make art.

And raw it is: most have been in the country but a few months, and who knows what they've been through… and so in these early workshops we hope first to build a group, get the participants moving, laughing, thinking; developing trust and friendship amongst each other, and taking small creative steps with writing, video and photography. And each person has a shiny, large scrapbook… Thick blank pages to paste Polaroids, draw and write…and continue the journey.

4. "Dear Fanata"

Tonight's activity: to write a letter to someone you know, someone from whom the war has separated you, someone you remember and miss, and would maybe keep writing to while you're in the U.S.

The group spreads out on the floor, crouching over the scrapbooks, grabbing markers and pens and calling out for help with spelling. At times like this –working with a dozen non-native speakers all eager to better their English and express themselves—it's crucial to have several adult supporters. Our college intern named Ritchie helps Mama.

Mama –tall, lanky, exuberant—is from Sierra Leone. She sat and wrote to Fanata, a 15-year-old friend she befriended in Guinea. Most of the Sierra Leoneans fled their country for neighboring Guinea before coming to the U.S., and Mama thought she had spent maybe three years there. In some type of provisional refugee camp, she and Fanata would work together, then sneak out and go dancing.

Dear Fanata

My Greeting is coming to
you in the name of Allah.
I hope this letter will meet
you in a good condition.
I think about you everyday
and night. The things you do for me
in Guinea was very important
to me. I will try my best
to bring you in America.
I want to see you again.
I miss you.
Don't listen to People
who are jealous.
I will call you.

-Mama

Ritchie sat with her as she described arriving in Guinea hungry, and how Fanta brought her food. As Mama and Ritchie talked, Ritchie started crying. Later, he wrote in his journal: "We were sitting side by side and we barely looked at each other in the eyes. She noticed I was crying through her peripheral vision and told me to stop. She said, 'Don't do that Ritchie.' I was able to stop for a couple minutes and then I started again. I looked up and I began to see the gloss appear in her eyes. Soon she was crying softly and we

talked and shared. The crying didn't disrupt our talk. It just was. She wanted to open up and share this. It wasn't that it seemed bottled up. It was just something to share."

At the end of the workshop, they photocopied the letter to send, and Mama carefully wrote an address on the envelope that didn't have any numbers. We didn't think it would get there, and Mama said she might give it to someone to hand deliver.

5. Journal as Journey

The next day Sumitra gestures passionately, Ritchie seriously nods, and I listen. Big feelings and ideas consume us, as, without the group, what we're doing with them. We are teamed together for the first time; we are making up the 'curriculum' as we go along. I for one am happily stunned that, in Ritchie and Mama's interaction last night, so many things lined up: an activity, a caring relationship, creative expression. Sumitra postulates on 'the nexus of literacy and listening.' I talk about the scrapbook as a way that each young person could bring bits of his or her self to the book. That words, photographs, and drawings could –by their very forming, by the way pages fill up— reflect an individual also in the process of growth, change, and revelation. About the 'journal as journey.'

Ritchie quietly tells us that last night he forgot he was doing an exercise, forgot about our aim of easing the youth into notions of past, present, future. 'All of a sudden the curriculum wasn't some dry approach…The letter writing experience was about what Mama wanted and needed to do. It helped to reconcile her present feelings about her friend with her memories of her in the past.'

We talk about Mama and wonder about the others' and what they've been through. I know that we have to go slowly, to create, as in a scrapbook, layers of opportunities for the memories to reveal themselves.

6. This is like wonderland

An hour and a half from Manhattan, we pull two vans full of our new group into an estate off the Atlantic coast of Long Island. Betty Puleston greets us, cigarette in hand. She's in her eighties, and –as a long-term supporter of community art and video projects—she's opened her house to us for the weekend.

Or houses: two small ones right next to each other filled with books, antiques, family photos, and art. She leads us into the second one, lights another cigarette, and gruffly laughs: "I don't know how people can live only in one house!" She marches us outside on a tour and there's too much to take in: a horse in a white-fenced corral, a pond, statues, an indoor pool, alpacas, a peacock and other birds, a goat-house now divided and furnished for guests. Doting the grounds are several other shacks converted into guestrooms. And beyond all this, dozens of acres, half of it protected marsh-grass fields, and the bay to the ocean.

The youth are stunned with excitement, and run off towards balls, bikes and boats.

The idea for being here is simple: a weekend retreat away from the city's noisy routine and towards nature, quiet, and group-bonding.

There are many little moments we could

highlight: the boys bravely sleeping in the goat house; Didi carefully composing B&W pictures, Serge and Mohamed almost capsizing the canoe, dancing to hip-hop after dinner, the look on Dino's face when we surprise him with a birthday cake, Jelena's bonding with the animals, and the poem Ishmael writes for Betty when we leave. We cookout and eat together and tell stories and argue and laugh. Through our cameras we perceive the glorious autumn light. We are giddy with sun and fresh air and fun.

7. I Know I am Safe.

And there's also a very serious side to what's happening here. Many of the kids, being with each other and being here, are beginning to feel safe. Sumitra and I don't yet know what happened to them during the wars they experienced, but we are touched and humbled as we look at the images they've drawn and words composed in their scrapbooks:

Aida, who lived through war in Bosnia, writes with the characteristic reserve and strength we'll come to see in her more and more:

Day is so nice, like in my dream. It's beautiful. I can feel sun on my body and wind is touching my hair. Everything is so quite. Nobody talks, I can't hear the cars, there is only song of the birds, wind and sound of the airplane. It is hard to describe with the words what I feel right now, but I can say that it is really, really good feeling.

I am so far from everything. I don't have to think about the problems, about bad and ugly things. I would like that everyday in my life is like this one. I know I am safe here, I know nothing bad is going to happen to me, nobody can hurt me. Maybe I wrong, because only god knows, what is going to happen to you in the future, but right now, I am not afraid of anything.

And Sumitra-- with geese flying overhead under a beautiful sky-- reacts in conversation with me the next day:

"…This is like wonderland, this is like a magic place… It's also an opportunity for us to introduce them to a lot of things. Some people run with it. Look at Aida's entry; she talked about not feeling scared, about feeling safe! I felt a serious lump in my throat, man! Ha! Yeah, she felt safe and happy, and last night she talked about how much she loved being with all of us, and felt like we were all together. I think it's amazing to be part of those moments where she feels safe."

Although we don't yet know Aida so well, we have a good hunch that for someone like Aida to feel this and express it is significant.

8. Group picture = group?

Before departing Betty's we pose for our first group picture. When the pictures are developed back in NY, I immediately love this picture's energy --I see joy, ease, closeness, fatigue, goofiness. I see Mohamed, Serge and Chris about to burst out of the frame two seconds later and run in another direction, and have to be corralled into the van to go back to the city…

The photo reveals to me that after this weekend a group is definitely forming.

When you work with groups, you take the landscape of what's possible, focus it –and give the cameras to the youth and see what they see. They see what they see. You all bring out what's already there. And like a photographer, it's important to

know the chemistry of your medium, to understand that something important is happening beneath your field of vision -- that silver halide crystals arrange and solidify themselves. They respond to light. And it is this exposure that is captured on the photographic paper I have in front of me.

The filmmaker/photographer have this in common with the teacher/group-facilitator: we're always looking for good light, responding to it…eager to see what is revealed.

9. Two letters home

The others fight over copies of this photograph. As they use the weekend's pictures in their scrapbooks, this particular one ends up highlighting two different letters sent to two different continents. In one, Didi writes to her friend Minela in Bosnia, and, in the other, Mohamed writes to his sister 'Baby' separated from him and still living in Sierra Leone…

Hello Minela! Oh, I wish that you are here with me in this moment. These past few week my life is totally changed. You know that when I came here I didn't know anybody. I was so lonely without any friends. But now my life is changed. I met some very nice people. Last week we went to a beautiful farm. We had so much fun. I saw a lot of things that reminds me on our home, Minek. Remember when we used to go to that river near our house. I saw one just like that one. Just it wasn't river it was much much more biger. And I remembered our Laugh, our tears, our secrets. I really liked that place. There is so much memories. But also we had a lot of fun. We played soccer, volleyball, we ride a boat. It was very nice. You see this picture on the top. Those are my new friends. There are two girls that speak my language and rest of them at least trying to speak English. This is nice group, is' it? Everyone is so nice but still I miss you my friends over there.

-Didi

I like this picture because of all the people in it. Dear baby I mis you—because I am in America I like America. I like to go out with my friends I went to a farm I swam in the swimming pool. What are you doing in your country. Do you go to school in your country. It has been a long time that I haven't seen you. Are you OK in your country I hope to see you in America soon.
THIS IS
MOHAMED
YOUR
BROTHER.

2 WAR TESTIMONIES

1. What happened?

Why did Mohamed get separated from his sister Baby in Sierra Leone? How exactly was Aida's experience in Bosnia 'un-safe'? What prompted Mama's journey from her home in Sierra Leone to neighboring Guinea?

The New Year begins, 2002, and it's time to take some of the trust we've built to risk a simple question I haven't thus far directly asked to ten young people who all call themselves refugees: WHAT HAPPENED? I bring the video camera into our circle as an additional participant. I sense that what they have to say, and how they'll say it, will lead us into the creation of our film, but for right now we focus on sharing stories.

We keep it simple: people are invited to speak, not required. And the rest of us will simply listen and ask questions at the end. They say sure, okay and look at each other across the circle with anticipation and yet are reluctant, of course, to be the first to speak.

Mama volunteers to go first, and we clip the mic on her. Her hair is in a cute new style, curled in a long boopy strand behind each ear, and she has bangs. Mama's hairstyles change just like her moods… one minute she gestures and guffaws about something, and the next moment, sits quiet and graceful.

Our camera adjusts to find the right frame; and Mama sits and adjusts herself, not just her hands one over the other, but her bearing… she's very composed, calm…

Tonight, Mohamed follows Mama's lead. It isn't until much later that I wonder about the reasons why these two might have wished to speak first. Or in general what they had in common. The big thing: both their fathers were killed during Sierra Leone's civil wars.

[What follows in this chapter are the briefest of excerpts of all the youth testimonies….please see 'Resources' for the full transcripts.]

FAMILIES TORN APART

MAMA *Sierra Leone*

"The thing that happened to me…I'll go through my story. One morning when I was in Kabala we was sleeping when my father wake up to go to pray. My house had an outside and you can put a mat on the floor and pray. So my father went to take prayer water then we heard him go outside. Then when my mother went outside, my father was killed, my sister was outside too. My big sister, but she's dead. She was outside. When she heard when they killed my father, then when she went to…when they killed someone, you went to hold the person. They shot her back then they went. When they shoot my father, she went to touch my father and they killed my sister.

…everybody's running. Everybody's going. The war is in the place; everybody's running away to go, you don't even look at each other's face….my mother hold our hand then we went under the bush and walk, and my mother knows some people in Guinea and we went there. We walked about three weeks.

[Now]…Sometimes I feel bad like when I go to school and the teacher shouts at me, I feel bad about those stuff that happened to me --it make me mad."

MOHAMED *Sierra Leone*

"My country, they fight three times, all those fights I was in my country. …we were sitting in my house then bad people come in my house, the rebels. They say if my father don't give money, they kill my father. Because my father rich, people tell they have a lot of money in the house, then they go to the house, they say if my father don't give the money, they kill you. I'll kill you. My father keep the money in the ground then my father has no money, then they shot my father, then my father died.

"…Then they took me to [carry] all the guns for them and the ammunitions and the bullets then they give me drugs in my head here and then tell me to fight for them. They say if I don't do that, they will kill me. Then they stop to beat me, they beat me first a lot. They say if you don't join us, we'll kill you, then they put a gun in my face.

"…A little boy like me that killed the father and the mother, a little boy like me, because it's not the fault, the people give them drugs to kill their father and their mother, because if they don't kill their father and their mother, they gonna kill them too.

"…In my country, they were looking for little boys, because little boys are scared people. They weren't looking for the big people, they were looking for the kids. Because the kids, they were having a mind to kill people. The big people can say to the kids go

fight, go kill that man, if you don't kill them, then I kill you. Then the kids, they just shoot. They show them how to shoot, how to use a gun. It's for power, because they want to be the president, they're fighting for president."

ISHMAEL *Sierra Leone*

"Then for my own testimony, when I was a baby, I was raised by my great-grandmother, so I was with her in 1997 when the rebels came to the city. The capital of Sierra Leone. Freetown. Because I was in the city, Freetown. So they were looking for youth to join them. I was with my great grandma with two of my uncles. So that morning, we woke up early in the morning and we just hearing gunshots. The country is covered in smoke and fire. Then people say, the rebels have come. Since that time, we don't know what they look like, if they are human beings, if they are animal, we don't know, because we never see them.

"So, they said rebels has come, so some of my neighbor describe them to my great grandmother. Then my great grandmother said, 'Well since this is the condition they are looking for youth to join them so they will fight and overcome the government and rule the country, so I want you guys to jump through a window and hide there for a while. If they came here, they didn't see no youth guys, they will just go away and do what they are doing.'

"So we jump through the window to the next house, be there for a while then the rebel come to my house and they say to my great grandma, 'We hear that you have three youth guys here. We want them.'"

SOCIETIES FRACTURED

LOULOU *Sierra Leone*

"I was in Freetown, everything was fine when the war was going on, we'd turn on the radio and hear that the rebels attacked some place in the south or the north or the east and they killed some amount of people and a lot have been displaced and stuff like that. And we were like, okay, we've heard it, and maybe you'd be waiting for somebody to pick you up to go to the movies. Actually, at that time, I was younger, but sometimes when I sit down and think about those moments, I was like, we were not actually taking the whole situation seriously. Like I just told you, when we just heard it, we'd be discussing, and we'd say 'Oh, did you hear what they just said, they killed 75 people over there.' 'Oh, that's sad, but anyway, let's forget about it.' That was our way. And it came to the point where God, the Heavenly Father was like oh, now you guys are not serious about it, you will be tested also, because we were like, 'Oh, they are far away from us, they are in the south'. There was a time where I heard they were in Bo on the south and I didn't know when they would come down, so I said 'Oh, I am far away from this problem so let me just forget.' And that was what we kept on saying and saying and saying until boom, they attacked the capital."

AIDA *Bosnia*

"I didn't understand the things that were happening around me. Like when the airplanes were flying, they were dropping the bombs. And a lot of people were killed. I remember how hard it was the first time I heard a man I knew was killed. It was the first time in my life I heard someone was killed. Yeah, I was young, it was hard to understand.

When the war started, everything changed. Like Serbian people and Bosnian people, they were friends, but when the war started, they became enemies. Even in the town where my father was born, your neighbors come to kill you or beat you if they are Serbian people. The people who live across the street from your house, they were fighting each other. I didn't see it. It happened when I left, when I went to my grandmother's house in the other town, but people were talking about that. My father was there."

SIBLINGS IN BASEMENTS

SERGE and **CHRIS** (brothers) *Burundi*

CHRIS *"We used to hear guns in our town, but we used to hide. You can't go to school no more. It was our only chance to live or die. And they keep us and we don't go outside.*

SUMITRA So you would only go into the basement if you heard some gun shots because of some fighting?

SERGE "*Yeah, it was just a hiding place. But sometimes some days we were hungry. Some days the war was serious and the war was for real and we couldn't go out. For a whole day. Sometimes the war was like that and then five hours later… But life wasn't good; it wasn't nice for us.*

RAESHMA How? Can you describe it?

SERGE *were like hungry. It was very scary for us. We were scared to go outside. They keep us in the basement.*

RAESHMA What did you do all day?

SERGE "*We just slept. We was like praying in the basement. We think that maybe God could help us."*

DIDI and **DINO** (siblings) *Bosnia*

DIDI *"…we didn't go to regular school because we couldn't, it was too far and parents wouldn't let their children go that far when the bombing was still there. Then in every, like, four blocks, there was one small basement where children could go to school and one teacher and then you can go to school. It wasn't like real school, but we had to go if you didn't want to lose like three or four years.*

"Dino started his first year of school during the war and I finished one year when the war started. We had one teacher and she teaches everything. She teaches math, everything, science. It was a really small room and a lot of kids. There was one table and like five other peoples around. There was one day that we were in school and the bombing started and we all had to go home, we were running and my mom she was really scared and when she saw us, she was crying because the bombing was there and everything. So most of the time we didn't go to school. Because of all the bombing. When there is no bombing, we go to school for like two days then we don't go for like three or four days. I finished three grades, second, third and half of the fourth grade during the war. Then after the war, we started going to the regular school, even though after the war everything was ruined so everything was really low."

DINO *"I don't remember a lot stuff, but I'll try and explain. I was 4 and a half. I remember when the war start. I remember they sent airplanes. I remember we was living in basement. We changed three basements during the war. When we was living in one building, me and my sister we found under the sofa, weapons. I remember when grenade hit in my house the day we were in the basement. In school we were in basement."*

MOHAMMED What save your life?

DINO *"Basements. We were in basement all war. I remember one man he came downstairs in basement in his underwear. [Because of bombs] he was running downstairs in basement."*

RESETTLEMENT IN AMERICA

ALICE *Sierra Leone*

"Hmmm, I felt different when I first came here [New York]. Different in the way that I see big buildings and I never saw them before. In my country they do have them but it's not like here. …Everybody is walking fast all over the place. And you can talk to this person and say, 'Can you show me this place?' He'll be like, 'Can you go and find out? I can't talk to you right now. I'm running late.' Every time people are running late all the time. No one can even stop one minute and talk to you. …

"…When I came here I was like, 'Is this the America that people were fighting for?' That was the first question that I asked my mom. I was thinking that when you come into this country, as soon as you got off from that plane you would find money all over the place. So when I got off from that plane, I asked my mom, "Where is the money? Where is the money that people were talking about? Where is the

money?"

JELENA *Serbia*

"I remember when I came here, I could just speak one sentence: I don't speak English. People when they talk to me, I just repeat the same sentence again and again: I don't speak English.

I came here in 1999, February 5th. It was night. It was dark. I came with my mom and my stepfather, he wait for us. My first day, I watch TV and maybe a few days later, I register in school and then I went to the doctor and they check every part of me, if I'm okay. The first day in school, it was too many kids. It was just one girl who talk Serbian and I was always just with her, follow her. I was like a dog, just follow her wherever she go. First I was scared of other people, the teacher he introduce me I was new student and all the people look at me like wow. I didn't know what to do. And he asked me something and I look at him and then that girl, she translate for me. And it was difficult. It was very difficult. And sometimes if I understand a question and I don't know how to answer, I don't know how to explain in English. And maybe in ninth grade, it was so-so. I use the dictionary everyday. When I have homework, you had a lot of time, but in school when you had a school or test, it was a big problem. But now, I feel better. I try because my mom, she don't understand English. She understand, but now she's in the same position I was. You know, she understand, but she cannot communicate."

OSMAN *Sierra Leone*

"When I was growing up, I used to do anything I could to put more effort into school...In the war, I miss a lot, about two years of going to school.... Always I try to do something that no one would say I am suppose to do this kind of thing. As for now, I only think of what I have for school that is all I am thinking. .... I want to go back home. I am going to do something. I always think about home. I am being here to achieve what I need. Now what I need is my education. And after it, I leave back for my home. I learn the map of my country very well. I am studying right now history, political science, a lot of stuff. I want to study a lot of things, and I am trying to do that. They ask me in Manhattan, 'You love your country?', and I say yes. I am not an American, I am African. I love my country. I plan to do something in my country."

3. 9/11 & HOME

1. An egg

I saw the destruction from a rooftop about a mile away. I was boiling an egg in a pan for breakfast, and, hearing the too-low sound of a plane, and my boyfriend's reaction when he went to the window, I turned off the stove and ran up to the roof where I could see the gash, like a huge bite, caused by a plane colliding into and disappearing into the first building. I thought it was a freak aviation accident, and waited with horror as I watched the rest unfold. "Like a movie," a neighbor said. Out of all the sensory moments of that early morning (before it became an event, or a scripted movie) --from the gorgeous blue fall day, the fluttering white office paper flying out of the building like so many thousand birds before the black smoke came, the shadow of the second plane, the slow fall of the building antenna like a ship's mast going down -- I return always to the memory of an egg in a pan.

Like Mama remembering her father washing for prayer, or Didi remembering the packed suitcases awaiting their vacation, I remember something everyday and ordinary as the preface to something horrible.

When the egg goes into the pan, it's just a regular day, but when it comes out it's not.

2. The changed landscape

Like Mohamed, people are afraid to see planes flying. Or to be in or near tall buildings. The landscape changes. American flags start sprouting like flowers in a new season called Patriotism. "United we Stand" is written on posters, signs, stickers and even the pizza boxes delivered to us on Fridays. New threats and vulnerabilities are unlayered, and new alert systems and responses are being created and announced to an entire country. The colors we live in are varying shades of threat.

How do we understand this event? Out of the numb shock grows a lot of noise and talk. Dialogue takes place everywhere, from the network news to the graffiti in women's bathroom stalls…

Three months after the event, Ishmael writes in his scrapbook: Today I was in Macy's when somebody scream out loud –everybody stay still trying to find out what happen. The terrorisms affected everybody both American and non-American.

We hear the U.S. government calling 'us' all to support its call to war, saying you're either with us or against us… the nation readies itself, it seems, to bomb Afghanistan.

Meanwhile the wreckage from the Site is still being cleared. For weeks afterwards I can still smell the smoke, and I must close my windows against it.

3. A teachable moment

Nov. 13, 2001 Visit "Ground Zero." It's another beautiful blue afternoon, crisper than that day just two months ago. I watch the cranes clawing into the smoldering pile of the south tower, and felt that same sick feeling in my stomach as on 9/11, and I walked away with unexpected tears rolling down my face.

And then I had to facilitate a session for Seeds of Peace, with youth from international conflict areas. Not ready. Earlier an aide worker from the International Rescue Committee had called 9/11 a "teachable moment," and I nodded then, grabbing onto the phrase as a kind of raft, and agreeing with the sentiment that this event should inspire reflection and not dumb, violent reaction. But before I walk into the room to 'process' this visit to Ground Zero with kids from international conflict areas, I think of this phrase 'teachable moment,' and I feel stuck: teachable?! And a moment? It's like a black hole, or a spiral in time, or a constellation of moments whose light we don't even fully see yet, we the 'teachers'-- and what about being in the moment enough so that it teaches you first?

November 16, 2001: Friday with the refugee group and we start with a brief visualization, picturing that morning of 9/11. All were in school. Chris 'was sad and scared, parents came to take kids out of school.' Loulou started joking with her classmates and 'didn't know why' until a friend started crying next to her saying, 'my father works in that building,' and then Loulou comforted him. Mohamed and Dino say they don't feel safe. Mohamed asks, "Why does God allow this to happen?" And nobody can answer.

They quickly move to discussing war in Afghanistan, and bombing innocent people. Aida M. is against the war. Matter of fact. Said she went through five years of

hell, HELL! It looked like she was beginning to tear up or soon could.

Alice alternates between fatigue and ire; she rises out of her slumped position to lash out at Bush: 'If I had his phone number I'd call and tell him it's not right!' During 'those days', she said, she couldn't watch TV, she went and put herself into another room. 'He's stupid! If only I had his number!' Her small black eyes flash with anger, exasperation.

And I said we have his number and his address. 'Really!?' There was great surprise in the room about this: 'You have his number?! He reads the mail?!' I said she could call, that they could write a letter to Bush. Even though his staff would read it, they could, in some fashion, communicate with the president. Some of them decide they will.

I think about 'the teachable moment,' a phrase I can't get out of my head this week, and feel that this moment is happening now in this group, that the event of 9/11 and this process of discussion and reflection is teaching us to go deeper, take the time, respect our personal experiences and also to take action. That, when overwhelmed, start with something, start somewhere: express yourself.

4. Ishmael's letter to Bush.

December 6th 2001.

Hi President Bush.
I hope everything is fine with you and your family. If so I thank God for you.

I am a refugee from Sierra Leone. The motive of this letter is to ask some few questions that are disappointed to me. First of all before I ask my question, I want to say some things that I know and understand about America. Everybody including me know that the United States of America is a peaceful country. The biggest word that we always see almost everywhere in the United States is United We Stand. How come now you want to fight war or brings division to this great nation? We understand that America is going through a lot of trial and destructions, but all I could say is you should not pay evil for evil. I also understand that the thing that happen September 11th even makes the economy of the country fall. But I know greatly in my heart that whatever people do to make this nation fall it would never fall but always growing because America is a sympathetic country and it is also like a mother country. I mean a mother because a mother would never see her son or daughter perish.

President Bush, I know and understand what I am talking about because I have been in a war country. I know how war can destroy and bring the economy of a country down. I also know how children suffer, die and lost their education and parents, so I am not behind you or support you to go to war. Because if America is in war, where do people whose countries are in conflict or war run to? America is the only country that people from different countries and different colours can live or stay peaceful with freedom and equal right so my own special advice to you as a refugee is I don't want you to go in to war and I want you to always continue to make America a great nation as it was before when President Clinton was in power.

Thank you for your understanding and I know you get and understand my letter. Thank you, all the best.

Your faithfully, Ishmael

5. Home turned upside down

Just over a month after Ishmael wrote the letter to Bush about not going to war in Afghanistan, his personal world is crumbling once again, this time not due to violent attacks against civilians, but because of turmoil within his own family. He and his grandmother, whom he's lived with, can no longer get along. According to

him, she has locked the door to the apartment and he had to sleep in the hallway. The situation's bad, and Ishmael refuses to go back. "I won't go back there," he says, "not the way she been maltreating me." As for other family, he has his father who sponsored his resettlement to the U.S., yet doesn't want Ishmael to live with him. Ishmael has little, if any, contact with his father. So where is Ishmael going to live?

It's a cold day in January when Ishmael tells me more; he says that even if his grandmother or his father were on the street begging he wouldn't stop to help them, that that's how much he doesn't like them after what they did to him. "Why bring me to this country if they gonna treat me this way?" he asks. We're on the way to my place: He'll stay with me one night, and then with Annie from the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and then maybe with a family whose father volunteers for the IRC at Ishmael's school in the Bronx.

We stop at the CVS drugstore to get him a toothbrush and some travel-size toiletries to stash in the backpack I lent him.

I've only recently heard Ishmael's story of what happened to him in Sierra Leone and I can't believe, that after all that, here he is 'in safety,' and yet uprooted once again. And in this vast and unforgiving metropolis, he faces new sets of potential dangers –possibly preyed upon by older men, missing school, having no money, custody issues, foster care… His options seem bleak. When I call to find out about housing for minors, I am told there is a 6-month wait for emergency housing in New York City. 6 months for an emergency in the middle of winter for a young person?! In one of the wealthiest cities on this planet? We walk and talk along these wealthy West Village streets. The social and artistic wealth of this city is what draws me, and what helps fuel our project. But times like this I wonder if any of us really belong –who is this city built for?

6. "My friend is the little house"

The night Ishmael stays over he sleeps late into the morning; the room fills with daylight and he sleeps with the covers over his head. I remember how –during our group retreat at Betty's-- he had slept by himself in a little room in her house. I was annoyed with him a bit that weekend: we had to wake him up for breakfast when the others were outside, he wouldn't sleep in the 'goat house' with the boys, he wanted to be inside more than outside and it was an incredibly glorious warm autumn weekend.

It isn't until now that I put together that Ishmael may have an entirely different view of nature. He's from Freetown, from "the city" as he says not even by name just "the city," and he moved twice, thrice and then spent weeks walking in the bush, digging for cassava and scavenging fruit, sleeping on leaves or stones, gathering wood to sell and survive. Of course he would sentimentalize a solid home -- and less so Nature the way many of the rest of us do who've never had to live at its mercy.

7. Ishmael and Betty

Now that I know a little of what happened to Ishmael in Sierra Leone, I appreciate more his attachment to the house of an old woman. He had, after all, lost his great-grandmother, the woman who raised him, the woman of whom, at different times over the years he would say: "She was

my great-grandmother, my mother, my friend, everything."

The morning in Sierra Leone he woke up hearing gunshots, rebels swarmed the city. Some came to the home he shared with his great-grandmother who told Ishmael to jump through the window and hide while she told the rebels there were no boys here. She knew that they would take him and force him to join them. They didn't believe her when she said, 'I'm the only one living in this house.' And then, said Ishmael, "they were angry, so they shot my great grandma on her chest. So she fall, she fall down."

This is a photo of Ishmael and Betty. Ishmael has no photo of his great-grandmother.

8. Interior/Exterior

I look through his scrapbook and photos he had taken during that weekend at Betty's, and months later, it all begins to make more sense to me.

He had focused his creative energies entirely on Betty's house.

I realize that I've seen only parts of the picture, entirely on the surface.

Ishmael took 36 photos inside Betty's home. Mostly of the study, the kitchen and a model castle; but also: the living room, bedroom, bird and bathroom.

In addition to the photos, he also went around and videotaped different rooms and objects, by himself. On the tape you can hear him describing something or simply reacting in his sing-song voice: "Ooh, look at that. OOH look at this." People laughed at pictures of the toilet, but I think these pictures especially –along with the bed and the lamp— are very basic and honest depictions of home and comfort.

Now that Ishmael is homeless I look at these pictures in a completely different light. And I find the simple, full attention he gives to each frame kind of heartbreaking.

He wrote in his scrapbook: I feel special to live in a nice small house. I like the nice tidy small room with a bed as it size a closet and a beautiful lamp. I like the way the house was built with two bedroom sharing the same bath room, a small living room, a fire place, and a nice memory room of all the handwork of her husband, to remember the work of her beloved husband.

More than just a house, it's an old woman's home, one that –more than any I've seen—contains constellations of memory. Not just objects, mementos and pictures, but ones placed in exact arrangements in particular rooms. A storehouse of memories, of her family, her late husband and his work, her childhood, their children, and visitors who've come through over the years. (One day our group would have its photo placed in one of the renovated barns, and a tree planted outside.)
Not only would all of us return to Betty's but Ishmael would return to the memory/symbol of the house and the old woman, and use it in an artistically and personally rich way in our third film, "Moving On."

9. Back to 9/11…

Loulou and her older sister Momie come over to the apartment to go over scholarship applications for the summer. They trail heavy book bags and were late be-

cause Loulou picked Momie from school. I help Loulou, and Momie falls asleep. When she wakes up, groggy and disoriented, we go up to my rooftop.

The girls first notice the Emperor State Building, and then walk up and around to see the two hazy rays of light where the Twin Towers used to be. As a six-month commemoration these lights have been placed near the site, and the boxy sibling rays angle up into a pool of light under the belly of a cloud. I ask the girls what they think of this. There's a pause.

"It's thoughtful, isn't it?" Momie says, questioningly.

"I don't know. It makes you remember again too. What happened to all those people," says Loulou.

"And their spirits too." Momie rubs her eyes and blinks sleepily.

There's a pause and then Loulou laughs. "When Momie woke up she thought she was at home," she laughs.

Like Ishmael they have no mother or mother-figure in their lives here in NY. Their mother is with their step-father and younger brother in Guinea. For safety and education, she sent the three oldest kids to NY to live with their father in Queens. In her testimony Loulou said little about her mother; Ishmael didn't know his mother growing up.

Later I wonder what home she meant –in Queens, in Sierra Leone, or in her mother's new place. What home may Momie have dozed and dreamed herself back into?

What homes do all of these kids dream of at night?

4. MAKING 'FAMILY'

1. Rooting through transcripts

The story-sharing has drawn to a close, and all of the personal testimonies are in my hand –transcribed from the videotapes by Jean (our amazing intern and editor). The words, for me, crackle off the page. I read and re-read them, looking at them as raw material for some kind of script. I look for visual elements, and for commonalities between the different experiences. And I'm wondering how, in particular, to bring together the Balkan and African experiences, and how, in our film, we'll give shape to the enormity of the refugee experience and bring out their personal particularities….

I find something to start with, something mentioned in most of the stories: hiding during the war. Didi described hiding in a basement, nine people in a small room, for two years without electricity, plumbing or gas. She was six years old when the shelling of Sarajevo began. Serge and Chris also talked about being kept in the basement in Burundi. Everyone had an experience of hiding, fear, and darkness.

2. Rehearsal Plan

From our workshop game-plan: A rehearsal without camera. Explore the basement as a prominent motif in several of their testimonials. Re-enact the scene of the basement in our safe space. Turn off lights. Set up the scene with props and people. Use one person's story as template but add to it from other people's stories. The basement then becomes the group's own specific basement: one that they have created together and now share

control over. Can the painful memory of the basement be reworked into a new type of memory? Can the pain of remembering be processed into a new idea or emotion that is a collective creative one? Does that make it hurt less? Do they own their emotions about it more?

3. Didi directs

Didi directs an improvised scene based on her family's experience in Sarajevo. The others in the group agree to play the roles. Lights off…Visualize being in a basement with others around you, you can't leave, and bombs going off. Everyone gathers together as if eating lunch, plates of food in the middle on the floor.

Aida: Did you hear that? O my god. Bombs.

Loulou: Yeah. It's bad.

Aida: Oh no, what are we going to do?

Aida in her quiet voice projects something so real and fragile in this moment, in the dark, a single bulb on and positioned away from them. Mohamed jokes and laughs but mimics the sound of bombs…ba ba boom! I can see Loulou is affected when this realistic sound is introduced into the scene.

Raeshma: What happens? What happened then, Didi?

Didi: People panic sometimes. Get closer to my mother. Put the dishes and lunch away quickly.

The group mimics picking up plates, about to get up and flee at the sound of bomb; Loulou grows more withdrawn. Mohamed keeps making bomb sounds.
Loulou: I don't know about this, guys.
Soon we stop to process the scene, to talk about how it felt.
Loulou: It's acting it that makes it hard, cuz I've talked about these experiences since coming here [to the U.S.], but now in the dark and acting, it makes me feel what I felt back then. I tried to put those memories away, and now I feel them strongly like it was back then.

We talk about this for awhile, whether it was okay or not okay, and why.

Didi: When we did this [the scene] we had control, we could turn on the lights and make it stop and it stopped; but during the war of course we couldn't do that.

Everyone agrees, and then agrees with Aida when she says that everyone participated and it seemed that everyone cares and wants to know what happened in Didi's scene.

Aida: Nice to know people care.

And we end by talking about if/when the scene is filmed, an audience will probably care as well.

4. Sidetracked by tension
On the day that we are supposed to begin shooting the basement scene, we are sidetracked-- sideswiped almost-- by the severity of the tension between Ishmael and Mohamed. This situation has been slowly escalating.

It's the middle of a Friday workshop in March; the mood is horrible, oppressive almost. Chris and Mohamed left the room, after coming late to begin with. Some say, 'Let's just do our work.' We had started the session talking about the timeline

for the film, and up on the wall on white sheets of paper is written:

"Our Story"
Beginning/Past/Home----------Middle/Present/NY----------End/Future?

No one talks, so Sumitra and I sit down and remain quiet. And then Mama offers up in a quiet but sure voice: "There's a problem in the group, and it's because of Ishmael and Mohamed are fighting, and it's not good for the group." She breaks the ice, and Loulou continues: "Yeah when Mohamed went around shaking hands he did everyone but Ishmael, and it's a problem." Mama continues: "Mohamed say bad thing to Ishmael, and they need to fix it." There are some nods in the group when she says 'fix it.' Ishmael then says he has no problem with Mohamed except for the bad things he says to him, and that he "cuss my parents and since then I don't wanna be friends cuz he cuss my parents."

Ishmael says that this a hard time for him, he's virtually homeless, he's staying temporarily in another family's home. Ishmael starts crying. Jelena says, "You don't have to cry it's okay," and Mama also says, "Don't cry. I hate it when I see people cry because then all my stories come right in my face." She turns physically away in her seat.

We talk about creating a safe space. Loulou adds later that Mohamed is probably still suffering from "everything that he's been through; he doesn't know how to act."

Our timeline for the film remains on the wall untouched.

The group hopes that the next time Mohamed and Ishmael are here, they can talk together and resolve this.

5. Resolution

(From Sumitra's workshop notes): Our original goal was to shoot in Central Park but due to the conflict between Ishmael and Mohammed, the group felt strongly that they need to intervene and resolve the conflict. Our intervention seemed successful. The day ended with Mohamed and Ishmael shaking hands and addressing each other directly. We just hope it will last and it will be more than a temporary lull in their animosity just because of group pressure.

Mohamed was concerned about what the group thought of him and whether they blamed him for everything. Mama, Loulou and Momie [Loulou's sister], especially, struggled with the two youth, using both Krio and English, stating the facts, expressing their support to both and appealing to their reason and sense of fairness. It was a combination of reasoning, admonishing, airing of past grievances, admission of guilt, hurt and anger, and finally an apology from both parties.

6. Spring breaks through

"The new season is coming. It is the most beautiful one. The things are changing outside in the world and they are changing inside of me."

-Aida's scrapbook, 04/09/02

This group 'process' (such a dull word) flows with the season. Now in Spring the group seems to be changing, growing in an organic way, like seeds from within sprouting; a new shoot turning, catching the sunlight; or a caterpillar pushing through its pupal skin into the butterfly it's destined to become. It's spring; it's hard not to be fizzy, pollen-drunk, sing-

ing. I sing the praises of these kids. How they broke or are still breaking through the wall between Ishmael-Mohamed. How Jean showed me today Ishmael's book: Today I feel light and excited because I have release all my sadness that I was having against my friend. I thank God for this group for helping me through for all my sadness and lonely time.

So we planted some seeds in the loam between us, in this fertile circle. We planted in fall, lay still in winter, and now spring comes and the green shoots I see are real and varied, are pomegranate-colored, holly-hocked, ringing.

The fruit is the relationship we all share, a special space.

The fruit, also, still nascent, is the scrapbook, is the short film…it takes time for this sprouting.

7. Shooting the basement scene

Ready to shoot…when we stage the basement reenactment for the camera –scenes in which kids/families are huddled together in the dark space with candles—a question comes up about who would be sitting in the scenes: would the Bosnian kids be in one shot and the African kids in another so that the viewer would imagine Bosnia and Africa through the same lens of the basement, but separately? The youth don't take much time to decide. "Together," they say, "the scene has to be with all of us together." And so they huddle together for the scene, passing around a small piece of bread. "The story is about all of us," they say, and simply go about setting up the scene.

TOGETHER. They had told their stories together, had rehearsed a scene in the dark together, had resolved together a big group tension…and because of all this they could show 'together' in this scene and make it real.

Later, I found it a pretty spectacular choice, one with many aesthetic and political implications that the kids may not verbalize but that they have become cognizant of by doing this work. They wish to be engaged as a group in totality, and are making artistic decisions as a result. Also, in scrapbook fashion, they are writing themselves into each other's narratives, the way one does on one scrapbook page adding images and colors and words.

8. Two Birthdays

A. Mohamed's Birthday: After 4 pm the pastries across the street are 50% off. Even these we cut up into pieces so they go further. (We're always joking about the 'refugee food' we share!). Mohamed scrunches down in his seat, like a young boy hiding from all of the attention now beamed on him as we sing 'Happy Birthday.' Then people say make a wish, and he's already blown out the candles, but wishes afterwards aloud:

I wish for my mother and father be here and my sister
I wish I was in my country playing
I wish I was a little boy

Earlier he talked about age. He didn't want to get old, he is "afraid to be an old man." He wants to be even younger, he says, a little boy. "I wish I a little boy again inside my mother." Mohamed wishes for rebirth, his literal rebirth, he wishes for the childhood that was stolen from him in so many ways.

B. Ishmaels's Birthday

Ishmael's birthday is the following week. He's wearing a new silver-ish chain, thick links dangling some kind of pendant. He's happier lately, Ishmael. At wish time, candles aflame in front of him, he closes his eyes and rocks a bit in a moment that is all his. Sumitra holds out a paper plate with candles stuck into cake bits, and the Wish Moment is pregnant, silent, solemn for this boy turning 16. He blows them out and Sumitra coughs at the smoke up her nose! I ask how he feels about this birthday, and he says good. Good how? Sumitra asks. Good because now I'm grown up, I'm a man, I'm sixteen.

Ishmael in contrast to Mohamed once again: Ishmael stands up to his age, greets the manhood; Mohamed sinks in the chair, away from the passing of years, and into the womb of childhood. Both are transitions and births, perhaps, the current threshold different for each. Both of them racing perhaps too fast and free and unguided, in opposite directions.

9. 1st year anniversary

Sumitra asks what day it is, and Didi says May 2, and pauses thoughtfully and then adds, "You know we came to this country today one year ago. One year exactly." They both smile, and Didi gets a faraway look for a brief moment. "How does it feel?" "Strange," Didi says. We talk about it as we walk to the subway and get jostled in the post-work Midtown crowd. The evening is still overcast and humid. 'The time seems so short that we've been here.' And Dino nods, agrees –he still talks very little directly to any of us, mostly only to his sister. They have an ease with one another that is comforting to be around. She's patient, he's playful and helpful, and then vice versa. He still navigates his world with/through her. He walks alongside. (I have imagined them sometimes as Hansel & Gretel walking through the forest).

It must feel even stranger still to Didi and Dino when we walk into a West Village loft space for a fundraiser for Peace Playground, a project bridging youth here and in Sarajevo, with the purpose of building a playground (and hence community) in a formerly war-ravaged neighborhood.

On their one-year anniversary Didi and Dino skirt the wine-and-cheese table, and look at the photos of their home-town city on the wall. They stick close together.

Someone speaks about the playground, how it's brought people together, and says, "The project's already a success even though the playground hasn't been built." It makes me think the same thing of our project, the 'art' or documentation of it perhaps not manifesting (at this point) in a film, but still there's a growing feeling of success, of something flowering.

I see Didi and Dino point to something in a photograph, smile at each other, and step closer to the image as if they could step right through it and return home.

10. The Crying Shot

May 3: We work on visually filling in the script. For the lines from Aida's story ("I watched TV, I cried everyday, I thought I'd never learn how to live here."), Aida and Mama decide that one of them should cry for the scene. Cry? Aida insists yes one of them must cry and it must be in the film and so they go off, serious and pouty, for their very own mission, waving aside my misgivings about them being sad. It's for the movie, after all. They insist on being

alone together, on the other side of the office space by the windows. Aida can not cry though she tries and tries. Mama does cry.

Saturday when I go with Aida to get her first New York Public library card, she tells me that finally on the way back home that night she is able to cry 'but didn't want to on the train.'

5. "ONE FAMILY"

One Family tells the story of twelve refugee teenagers from Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Burundi and Serbia who have weathered war, the loss of family and friends, as well as geographical and cultural displacement. After reaching their 'resettlement' location of New York City, they come together to share their stories and create media in a post 9/11 landscape. With their voices and images weaved poetically together into a shared story, the film reflects how they have joined as 'one family,' and how they contribute their voices to end armed conflict worldwide.

<VIDEO: One Family>

1. Celebrating World Refugee Day

LOULOU *"Hi Mom, How are you doing? Mom you remember about the Refugee Day screening I spoke to you about? Well guess what? It was a blast.*

Our film was screened in front of the most lovely audience ever. They were willing to listen to us. It was phenomenal. Mom, you don't know what such moments mean in my life. I sit in front of all these important people and they lend me their ears. They listen to me, I mean us. You should see their eyes, Mom. They are fascinated and proud of us. I bet you are too.

"Mom I have to put my pen down now. But remember that I love you and always will. Don't worry we are doing perfect. I'll talk to you more when you call us next week. Extend my regards to all.

Your daughter, Loulou"

2. Refugee Resettlement Crisis

"….this year's world refugee day is very important as it comes at a time of dire crisis in the refugee program. Some of you may not be aware that since September 11th there has been a drastic decrease in the number of refugees arriving to the U.S. Just to highlight…every year federal government designates a certain number of refugees that it will allow into the country for the year. This year the government authorized 70,000 refugees to come to the U.S. As of May 31st only 13,777 of those 70,000 have actually arrived. That means 56,223 refugees are still waiting. …[by this rate] the U.S. would have to resettle about 14,000 refugees per month…. that is going to be impossible."

-International Rescue Committee

6. ACTIVISM & ART

1. The Decisive Moment

I'm at the Open Society Institute for a conference on community and activism. This Institute was the creation of billionaire George Soros who began an activist-philanthropic career by putting his personal millions into 'creating open societies.' I'm taking some notes when the Institute's president says that Soros, as a funder and activist, 'likes to go in at the revolutionary moment,' not later as more conservative foundations do. He places importance in locating the revolutionary moment that occurred, for example, in Eastern Europe, the former USSR, and here in the U.S. as well.

In my notebook I draw an arrow from 'the revolutionary moment' to another term I write that immediately comes to mind: 'the decisive moment.' I see in my mind's

eye this famous photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson. I wonder how the two terms may be related; how the camera shutter is related to social action, as it were. Cartier-Bresson's term describes an opportunity in time when certain elements (light, composition, intent) all line up together in one picture-perfect moment. 20 years after taking this picture Cartier-Bresson described this photographic philosophy: "It is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as a precise organization of forms, which give that event its proper expression."

By 'revolutionary moments' perhaps Soros means something similar: a moment in time when things like history, resources, awareness all line up to produce the perfect door into a better society.

Open the camera shutter at the right time. Open the door. Something beautiful will happen.

This is an artistic theory and social-action theory lining up…and a good omen, I think, as our first film, "One Family," gets screened around town, and our group decides to stay together for a second year of meetings and documentary work. Like the first, I hope our second production will result in something aesthetically and socially powerful and beautiful.

Because being together in these war-torn times calls for many decisive moments…

2. A first political demonstration

Anti-war demonstrations take place all over the world as the U.S. government seems poised to target Iraq next. On a beautiful day in Central Park, Loulou, Aida and Didi –with hand-made signs and a video camera-- attend their first-ever demonstration against war. It's a powerful experience.

<VIDEO: One Family>

3. Autumn crosses into winter

The weather gets colder and so does the political climate. The end of the powerful 'Not in our Name' Pledge of Resistance reads:

We pledge to make common cause
with the people of the world to
bring about justice
freedom and peace
Another world is possible
And we pledge to make it real

I feel discouraged at the end of the year after these few months of intense, pointed political demonstrations. (From one Uptown: *"Protest the poverty draft: targeting Black and Latino youth for military service is a crime. Protest the looting of our schools, hospitals, housing and social programs to fund this unjust war. Protest the continued murder of innocent people around the world."*)

January 18, 2003. Though I'm not sure right now that 'another world is possible' I'm in the nation's capital, Washington D.C., on a bloody bloody cold day. At the Mall, the Capital Building sits at one end in its white imperial charm, and at the other, the needle of the Washington monument, and in between, a sea of thousands of very bundled fools/citizens/activists. This is something. There's a palpably charged energy that's not anxious nor violent nor dismal. I miss the refugee group, and wish that some of them at least could be here, but they are swamped under a load of projects and exams. (Their other reality which sometimes I forget). Despite the cold there's so much energy and to-

getherness and humor (signs like: Dick Cheney before he dicks you, No War for Oil, Axis of Idiots). There are different states proclaiming their anti-war stance, different unions and veterans groups. I talk to a man who flew in from Florida last night and this bitingly cold weather made him feel "physically endangered but otherwise great." There are people from all over. In groups or alone. I feel so much more hope in this country. People who are compelled to come out in the cold.

4. Post-demonstrations: downs & ups

Loulou's all worked up about impending war and its coverage on the news. "What's that 'Firing Line' or something show on TV? It's unbelievable what they're saying about war…" She goes on and on; she says that the protests don't seem to matter to "these people." She remembers how the day after she attended the autumn protest in Central Park, the U.S. government "made some announcement about inspections or weapons or something." As if the protest made no difference.

Going that day meant so much to her and was such a personal step that it's hard to wake up to the 'the day after' phenomenon: the reality of the lack of substantial media coverage of these demonstrations and the people there, the supposed lack of concern in the country. Does it matter, any of it? Do the people really matter?

Loulou has a good point about the inconsistent rhetoric of 'arms inspections.' She says that so many weapons are manufactured in the U.S. and yet the U.S. talks about destroying them. "Like mines." she says, "In Africa they come and try and help with landmine victims and clear it up, but I'm like, who made these mines in the first place? Didn't you?! And now you come here and try to help but why don't you destroy them over there?!"

As for Aida, she reminds us that our first film is screening quite a bit now, and that despite bigger political calculations, we are making a difference. She writes: Right now I'm curious about what is going to happen with the group in the next few weeks. We have a lot more screenings and I'm really happy that we're able to show our video ["One Family"] to more and more people. As the time is passing, we are getting better in educating people about us, about the war and about refugees. I feel that we are accomplishing our goal little by little.

5. Is Kansas on the subway?

Mohamed, the Aida's, Sumitra and I screen "One Family" to a group of high school students from Methodist church groups from Kansas. They are in NYC to learn about different social issues, and they've been hotly debating the war. When our film finishes and our kids have told some more of their personal stories, several of the Kansan kids are in tears. Afterwards they get their cameras out and ask us to be in all their pictures. 'Wow,' Aida says, 'it's like we're movie stars.' The whole evening is an incredible success – the kids really feel the power of their film, their stories, and the timing of telling it right now, in the thick of impending war against Iraq. The kids from Kansas are hearing something firsthand they've never heard, and they have the grace and maturity to honor the experience.

Mohamed thinks they're very nice people. He keeps asking me where Kansas is, if you can get there on the subway. We walk out into the night and it has a strange intensity to it: people are celebrating St.

Patrick's Day in the east side bars and the rest of us carry this feeling of impending war. Mohamed wants to go to Kansas: "They're so nice! Let's go there. Where is it?"

The organizer of the seminar said to our youth upon leaving: "You guys are a blessing. You have to know that now if you don't already how amazing you are… and that you survived through something for a reason, and you're educating people now. You're really educating people."

Despite the strange, thick mood outside, her words leave us all walking home on a high, happy to feel, after so many months of work, that we can reach kids from Kansas!

This is a powerful intersection we're at now: at this moment in time, with each other, with the stories and friendship, and now a completed short film that we can show and say: SEE, please SEE….

6. March 20: WAR: US bombs Iraq

March 21: It's a wet grey day in NY, and the headlines scream: WAR!! !!GUERRA!!!

That same day we have our Friday meeting, and most of it is a discussion of war. We don't get much past our favorite introductory 'high-and-lows' in which we open the meeting with the kids' talking about the high and low points of their week. For everyone the low point is war. What they see on TV triggers past memories. Aida says that hearing sirens going off in Baghdad reminds her of Bosnia. Didi agrees (and adds that her additional low point is getting braces put on her teeth). Alice says that her mother is sick and she wonders who, with upcoming war, will take care of them if anything happens.

Mohamed has two high points: the screening for the youth from Kansas, and a visit to the U.N. where he talked about Sierra Leone. He pauses before stating his low point quietly but surely, "My low is that I don't wanna die. Because I didn't die in my country and I don't wanna die here in this country."

As usual, his point is simple but devastating.

March 24: I hear Chris Hedges on NPR. He's a war correspondent/journalist who has covered conflicts all over the globe. He now has a book out called War is a Force that Gives us Meaning. He says, among many interesting things, that "war is sometimes inevitable but it is always a poison. …The myth of war, that of our goodness, our power, has severed us from the reality of war. War, in the modern age, is impersonal, industrial slaughter."

7. War & Peace.

For the first time, three of the kids who haven't spoken in public have decided they want to speak: Dino, Osman and Mama. Seven days after the U.S. begins this war, the progressive youth organization Global Kids sponsors a seminar called "War and Peace."

They go to the podium together and the audience of 600 New York City teenagers is already silenced after seeing "One Family." Dino speaks [see below] followed by Mama, but Mama is soon overcome by her emotions and starts crying and walks off stage. Dino quickly follows to comfort her. The room is totally still as Osman comes to the microphone with his handwritten pages. He looks up and reads a few words and then puts the pages away and just speaks from his heart. He talks about the

rebels coming to the city and murdering and cutting the hands off thousands of people. His family decided to leave and run for their lives, and they walked 100 miles on foot in three weeks with no food to eat or clean water to drink. Osman tells the audience that they themselves would not like to be refugees, and so they should 'keep their voices up' and demonstrate against war.

Sumitra next to me was shaking, our co-worker Tim 'had adulation in his heart,' and I had tears in my eyes. It's impossible here to write down the power of this moment: the hush of hundreds of city teens (not an easy crowd), the quiet voices on stage coming through so clear and loud.

But here are some of the words that Dino struggled to write even days before he – the most quiet in the group—would stand in front of 600 people, terrified, and speak with strength, and then walk quickly after Mama to comfort her.

DINO *War is something that every human being hates and have some feelings about it. War is enemy of all people even those who start it.*
I think that most of the people will agree with me when I say that war is not right, and war is not an answer. This war in IRAQ reminds me of war in my country "BOSNIA." I remember same gunsounds and bombs dropping all over. I'm not for this war because I lived in one war and I know how is it. I remember seeing kids losing their childhood. I'm not for this war because I ran away from one and I thought that I'm coming in freedom but no I come in another war. When Bush said that IRAQ has 48 hours I knew that something bad is going to happen, I just had bad feeling about it. And there it was "WAR" one big enemy of people. Waiting to strike on Iraq. I live here in NYC and I'm waiting every minute for something to happen.

8. World Refugee Day 2003

This postcard features Loulou's words and Didi's drawing, and announces our biggest public event thus far, celebrating the contributions of refugee youth through their stories and films. On stage are youth from Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Palestine. Some of them share stories with another generation of refugees: an older woman who escaped the Nazis, a man escaping political persecution in Chile, and another who faced religious persecution in Iran. Experts are still discouraged by the difficulties facing refugees and asylum seekers: in the U.S., more than 20,000 non-citizens are held in immigration detention. Thousands of Africans whose applications have been approved are waiting in Africa, held up by the immigration barriers since 9/11.

9. "Let them In"

From Didi's opening speech: "For two years I lived underground with my parents, brother and my aunt's family. We had one room where we slept, ate, cooked, took a shower. I really don't know how we survived through that time. It was a really difficult experience and I never even wanted to talk about it, but [this project] helped me open up, release my fears and talk about what happened to me, and at the same time, to listen and learn from other people's experiences. I used to think that there is no person who suffered more than me, but talking to other refugees like myself, I found out that it's not just me, that it's half of the world. Before I didn't know that there are so many wars and conflicts going on, that there is so much suffering in the world and now that I know I want to do something about it. I want to educate people, to help them understand how it feels to live in fear, waiting to be killed every day. I want ev-

erybody to know that the war is not the answer for anything. I've been through the war, I know what it is and I don't want it to happen to anybody ever again. Unfortunately, there are still thousands of innocent people who are losing their lives because some people just don't care.
While those people are suffering, I was one of the lucky ones who got a chance to come here and start a new life. I wish that this chance is given to other people who are trying to escape the war, but it's sad to know that today not many people are allowed to enter this country. The PSA that you are about to see is produced by our group and it deals with this issue. I hope you enjoy it and thank you very much."

<VIDEO: PSA>

7. PICTURE STORIES

1. Introducing Osman.

Because of U.S. immigration policies after 9/11, few new refugees are allowed into the country, and into the New York area in particular. Our project hoped to fold in more new members, and yet there aren't many teenagers around. A few of us happen to meet Osman in the Bronx the summer of '02, and are amazed at his sensitivity, honesty and quiet, reflective nature. He's already started a journal called 'My Life Story'! We ask him to join the group.

2. Ishmael Gets Lost in New York

The actual experience this essay is based on was longer and more nuanced than this abbreviated version. The way he told it made us see that this city at first experience has huge, unknown dimensions, with little to help orient a stranger. In the subway he asked for help to use a payphone, and was yelled at in a rude way. But then, in the end, as this essay shows, he was helped by a stranger. This story shows dichotomies well: how a new place represents fascination as well as fear; and how people are grouped into either those who hinder or those who help.

3. Loulou's PB&J Story.

Loulou originally told part of this story during her testimony to the group about her experience in the war. I never forgot the image of a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich –something I associated with school-lunches and after-school snacks – as something she began associating with being in a city at siege.
Later, when this photo essay was done, and was shown to a group of young people in Sierra Leone making their own video, they would refer to the "peanut butter and jelly" of the stories they were creating. Loulou and her observations have this kind of influence on people.

4. Alice's Movie in Hawaii.

Alice missed most of the filming of "One Family" because she was working on a much bigger production: she was an extra on the big budget, Hollywood, Bruce Willis film about Nigeria called "Tears of the Sun." She was living in Hawaii for months, with her aunt, and a tutor and the rest of the crew.

Once in our group she talked about how, in her everyday life on Staten Island, even a flashlight would sometimes trigger memories of running away from the rebels. While making "Tears"-- with its realistic sets of burning villages, blood-smeared rebels and piles of bodies – Alice had somehow to deal with all the associations. And yet she said, "It was work. The movie had to be made."

5. Dino's Bittersweet 16th Bday

The happiest day for Dino becomes just the opposite. The sound of Dino's voice always grabs my utmost attention, maybe because he's such a quiet person and it's rare to hear him string together a small story.

6. Aida Celebrates Eid in Queens

Over half of this group is Muslim, and we had many discussions about religious identity, especially the effect of 9/11 on young Muslims in New York. Although this topic didn't directly make it i-nto any of our films, Aida chooses here to deal with the emotional and cultural aspect of celebrating a religious holiday in a foreign land.

7. Why Mohamed Doesn't Like the Rebels.

After one of our group meetings, Mohamed pulls me aside and shows me a large photograph of a pretty young woman. He is beaming because this long-haired African girl is his girlfriend. He wants to make many copies of this picture, but instead I ask him to sit down and finish the text for this essay. We spend some time together on choosing the right words, and for the end, he chooses the word, "love," and it seems to fit now in this story and in his life.

8. Didi's Letter to Minela

Even with internet email so prevalent these days, personal letters still play a big role in these kids' lives, especially the girls from Bosnia. They are in regular correspondence with friends and cousins. There's something special, of course, about the stamps and the handwriting and the Bosnian language; and sometimes the envelopes contain new photographs of friends getting older and looking different.

9. The Two Faces of Mama.

This essay is not the first time that Mama would talk about her 'two faces.' Here she talks about school and home. She mentions having fun in both places but also alludes to underlying emotions that she doesn't quite spell out. When our group moves into doing its third film, "Moving On" [see next section], these underlying emotions would come through. (And would also feature her loving and strong mother, Mary).

10. Serge's Poem: I Remember.

Serge is the only one who writes a poem. He spends part of the session alone and quiet (rare!), and pens most of this in one sitting. This short video in and of itself wins an award from the Hampton's International Film Festival, and Serge proudly attends with his father and brother Chris.

Chris's photo essay, however, makes it only to the storyboards --although it had the potential to also be amazing in its own way. Chris told the story of how he used to wear tight white pants when he first came from Africa, and people made fun of him, but he thought he was cool. He made all of us laugh with his quirky humor and feigned outrage. The story is also a great illustration of how kids have to quickly change (in this case, into the big baggy outfits that young men wear in the city) in order to fit in into the teenage urban landscape.

Both stories illustrate something deeper about these two brothers: occasionally, as in Serge's piece, they reach something deep and meaningful, and are 'successful.' Other times, as in Chris's case, a good idea never makes it. As the years

go on, those of us around both brothers watch, worry and wonder as the tension between these two impulses pulls them into the future.

8. THE FUTURE

1. A warm June

This is a good June for Didi. Not only does she give the opening speech at World Refugee Day 2003, setting an intelligent and passionate tone [see Chapter 6, Section 9], but gives another one as well as a teen selected as Urban Hero (from the Catalog for Giving Foundation). It's wonderful to see her proud family gathered around the banquet table on a Manhattan pier, seated near Loulou and Mohamed from Sierra Leone, listening to their daughter to speak in public about their experiences in Bosnia during the war.

And when Didi soon graduates from high school, she is the first one in our group to do so!

Later this month, Mama is featured in *ELLE Girl* magazine as part of a feature on teenagers who "Dare to be Different." At the photo-shoot, with makeup and hair specialists touching her up, Mama seems in her element, soaking in all the light and attention. There's something glossy and surreal about this.

2. Existentialism

The flipside of this public glitter quickly becomes apparent. Having worked so hard to adjust themselves to their present lives in NY, the fear of a difficult future now sets in –finding jobs, helping their families, planning for college.

Osman drops in one day, frustrated. Osman needs $120 for two pairs of tennis shoes, one for each brother. He needs to get some shoes for his brothers. His summer job (checking store inventory) gives fewer hours than he expected. He simply needs more money than he is getting, and he feels the pressure of being the responsible, eldest son. "My father said something to me," he says, "that why my sister working and me sitting at home." His sister works in a fast-food restaurant and she helps take care of the younger two sisters. Osman is expected to do the same with his two younger brothers.

He also started paying back a portion of his airline ticket from Sierra Leone – after a certain grace period, refugees are required to pay back their airfare to this country. "That's $60 a month, and the phone bill is under $40 a month."

Reading is one of the things that keeps Osman somewhat happy and not "thinking about things in this way." I ask what he's reading now and he says that Tim gave him a copy of Camus' The Stranger and that he'll probably be finished this week.

Didi also drops in the office the same day. She is on break from her prep course for the real estate exam! She had mentioned the possibility the afternoon of her graduation but I didn't know she had already enrolled. She has a Styrofoam container of French fries and we eat together in the back and talk. I try not to say what I really feel which is: WHY are YOU taking real estate?! I'm thinking about her photographic talent –how she has the best eye in the group, how her stills for Aida's photo essay display a storytelling documentary composition that comes easy to her. Instead I ask her about real estate, and whether she likes it. In her own

measured way she says, "Yeah, it's OK. Welll…." (she has this great drawn-out thoughtful 'well'). "Weelll, I thought maybe I would try it and see. Weelll, I guess I don't really like real estate."

Oh thank god! I'm thinking, but just grab a fry and nod.

"It's kind of boring, and every time I'm always late for the class and sit in back."

And so we start talking about the future and college, which she is putting off for right now. I proceed carefully because I sense how completely overwhelmed she feels about her future. Didi is also in the photography class I enrolled her and Alice and Loulou in, and she wants to continue but feels like it's too hard to "get a job with it." Even still, our talk segues easily into photography, f-stops, and printing pictures.

I reflect on these two visits by Osman and Didi and see part of the immigrant/refugee reality: two artistic smart kids whose interests in black-and-white photography and existentialist literature are squeezed tight and strangled by the overwhelming financial pressures here.

3. Back to the Future

Didi's been writing about the future for awhile. A collage in her scrapbook from a year ago reads at the top: *"FUTURE? HAPPY? TIME IS RUNNING OUT."*

Another time she wrote…

I'm standing at my window and everything is white. Streets people cars everything is colorless. It is winter, and it is so cold. I feel very cold outside but inside I'm warm. Something is giving me heat and hope.

Right now I am at the point of my Life where I have to decide about my future, about the rest of my Life. I feel really confused and there is too much pressure on me…I hope that I'll find a way to cope with all my problems and that I'll find solution for everything that bothers me. But I just hope and I pray it happens soon.
I'm at a crossroad in my life.

As if to illustrate, a page from her brother Dino's scrapbook (done at another time) shows three images torn from a glossy magazine: a road curving into the distance, a complex mathematical formula, and the words: WHERE IN THE WORLD DO YOU WANT TO GO…

4. A trilogy

And so the theme of the future lends itself naturally to our third film. We will find that the arc –PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE-- we started developing within our first film, has actually manifested into three separate short films over three years. And with this last one, we'll have made a trilogy. The group likes the word, trilogy: they say it and nod seriously with pride.

They know the word because of the Lord of the Rings movies that have been so popular worldwide. We see the first one on video on one of our retreats to Betty's. The youth were riveted, entertained and sincerely moved. Their response was so visceral, it was beyond anything I expected. They understood forces of darkness and light, painful journeys through strange places, and the faith of staying together in a small, powerful community. They could relate as young people, perhaps, to the hobbits: seemingly insignificant creatures charged with a special task –no less than saving the world. We see the other two when they come out in

the theaters, splurging our group money to sit in the dark together with popcorn, to hear Alice scream 'Oh no you won't!' to a nasty Wraith swooping down to snatch the hero, to hear Serge scream and Mohamed punch his arm and giggle, as the rest of shudder and laugh.

Over these years, the youth were shown all kinds of films: youth-made, political, international, experimental etc., but I've never seen people respond so strongly to film, as I saw them experience the 'Rings' trilogy.

We all waited for this final film…we waited with the innocence that tells us that everything will be all right, that long hard journeys are not for nothing, and that good in the end will prevail over evil.

5. Making our third film

As for our final film, we get to work. The pictures come before the story. We work backwords. We shoot before we know what the story is. On an incandescent autumn day, we shoot Ishmael, Aida and Mama as undefined 'characters' in different locations on Betty's farm. The three crews work together better than ever, finishing as the sun sets.

This footage excites us! A storytelling/film exercise ends up yielding rich stuff: moody, mysterious, beautiful. When we watch it together (after sharing a homemade dinner together at the farm, the crickets chirping outside), there are hoots and hollers, congratulations and commentary:

"It's like waking up from dreaming."

"All three characters are trying to find something."

"I like how the character walks into a house and we're not sure what he finds, but he finds himself in his reflections."

"I liked how the director chose different ways to portray the actor's mood. This leaves room for changes, form/shape of the story."

"The past is what's behind Aida, and the camera stays behind her until it gets to a clearing in the field and then it moves."

This footage is character-driven, mood-driven. But can these pieces evolve into a story? Back in the city, this is the big question. Autumn deepens, and school projects start taking more of the group's time: as they advance in high school, the pressure increases and the stakes are higher.

Our Friday workshops are devoted to figuring out the Big Picture of the story. Around us the trees go bare, and as the weather gets colder, so our mood goes from the warm flush of inspiration to the sober chill of the task at hand. It feels like we're working with found-footage, trying to match personal and group stories to it. Still we want to keep the footage, which has some kind of mysterious underlying meaning to it. We try scriptwriting, free-writes, role-plays and games, to coax out some kind of unifying narrative.

6. Marriage

"The last shots show emotional distress from changing from one African costume to the Western world." So someone described the footage of Mama's character who stands in a field in a black chador, alone. Eventually she walks into a room and changes into jeans and a tight shirt.

The inspiration for Mama's character comes from the tensions she's talked about in her life-- feeling like two people sometimes in one; one more African, one American; one traditional, one modern; one a girl, and the other a woman. The others in the group feel these same tensions (though less acutely), and so Mama's 'character' represents not just her story, but the others' as well.

We workshop different narratives for this part of the movie: perhaps the farm footage is a dream sequence, and we shoot a scene of Mama shopping for clothes in the Bronx. But this story doesn't quite feel right.

One cold winter night Mama's own real story catches up with her. Mama walks into our workshop tired and withdrawn. She sits next to me. The group puts some scenes together and tries a script exercise, but Mama just writes in her scrapbook. Later, as we get ready to leave, she nudges it in my direction:

"How will you feel about thinking about your regen [NY State Regents Exam] at the same time you family is talking about you getting marry when you not ready to marry. And they tell you to marry or leave the house… you know what I'm thinking right now is if they keep talking about it, I will find a way to leave my family house because I don't want to put myself into problem…

"I need help from everybody."

The next week the whole groups talks to Mama about her problem. We capture it on tape. A few of us go to her Bronx apartment and tape a discussion with her mother, Mary –a strong sweet, traditional Muslim Madingo woman struggling to raise her children.

Everyone in the group intuitively realizes that the 'character' we filmed a couple months ago–the black-robed young woman alone in the fields-- is now matching up with Mama's current story, and we direct it into a conversation and scene we can edit. The group also talks about how this gives an opening for the 'group process' to be in the film –something that hasn't overtly been part of the first two. In this last film, they want to show how the group works for them, how they talk to each other and support each other.

At the same time as we make the film, we give Mama emotional support.

Mama tells us, "I am different from all the daughters they had before." Not only does she rebuke marriage, but she wants to dance. She loves dancing, and in a strange example of art and life mirroring each other, she has found herself the youngest member of a contemporary African dance troupe. Their show this year is called "Afrodiziak, " described as "a Congolese satyre on arranged African marriage…(for mature audience)."

7. Dreams

"I like how the character walks into a house and we're not sure what he finds, but he finds himself in his reflections."

So someone describes the character Ishmael plays in the film, a young man who walks into a house looking for something. For the truth of himself, everyone thinks. As we all talk about the future, we all see that the future is a mirror, and like Ishmael's character in the film, we want to walk into a room and see the self we

dream fully there.

"The future frightens me because I don't know what it holds. And I have so many fears: I am afraid of not having money, I'm afraid of not being able to achieve my dreams. How much can I make an influence, to build the life ahead of me?"

And so the 'character' represents his own fears but also Didi's and the others'.

But what voiceover or script to use? We toy with the framework of an audition, because one of Ishmael's dreams in life is to be an actor. A monologue of 'To be or not to be?" But thankfully it's another type of dreaming that gets us closer…

I like to think that as much as you want to make a film, the film also wants to get made. And somehow the collective energy of the group makes things happen. Even in the unconscious. One night we're talking about dreams, literal night-dreams…Alice and Mohamed talk of snakes. All of us are in that vivid charged space when personal night-dreams are traded. As soon as Ishmael starts talking I envision our footage of him. In the dream he describes, he's chased by men with guns, he flies into the air and then finds himself in a house trying to hide, but snakes come out of the walls…

And so we work with the actual dream, modifying it and combining it with another one to produce a monologue that the character Ishmael might recite at an audition –to land the role of his dreams.

8. The Money Shot

"She wants to see beyond the grass; she's in a dream," said Serge about the sequence with Aida in the grasses that he helped to shoot.

If Ishmael's sequence represents (literally, through dreams and mirrors) the individuals' self-reflection, than Aida's represents the individual's relationship to the group. In her family's kitchen in Queens, she stirs Turkish coffee at the stove for Sumitra, and reflects on the group: "This is our third year now, and we're not as close as we used to be….I guess the more time passes, the more you change. In the beginning we were all lost. We just got here and we were happy to have each other…. Now, I have been living here for three years, and I don't feel lost any more."

As much as it's good to hear she's not as lost, it's hard to hear the group is not as close. But it's true. Perhaps it's a necessary blessing that makes it easier to move on… It's Aida's soft but strong honesty that gives the group its necessary discussion at the end, a conversation about what the group means and how to move on.

Aida's beautiful scene shot in the tall reeds at Betty's farm gives us incomparable beauty: her character, wearing white, walks alone along a path, the reeds rustling and the wind sighing, as the camera follows her, catching the touch of her hand gently sweeping aside the grass.

The day we shot it we knew we had something breathtaking. We all laugh at the idea of Aida, a quiet young woman of strong faith, at the center of 'the money shot:' the crass term that filmmakers use to describe a shot or footage that's so great it guarantees the movie's success. As we edit, we laugh about where to place 'the money shot,' and it finds itself natu-

rally at the film's end.

"The past is what's behind Aida, and the camera stays behind her until it gets to a clearing in the field and then it moves." She stops in the sunlit clearing, and the camera moves around her right shoulder slowly, eventually catching halos of light against her flowing hair… the camera, like the past, shifts position –it no longer follows her so closely. It steps aside, allowing Aida to stop and rest and soak in all the light, before continuing on.

9. Circling the Ring

It strikes me later, the similarities between the ring in Lord of the Rings and in Ishmael's story: Ishmael can not look at the ring (a gift from his great-grandmother) --he keeps it close and travels with it through life, and in our film's dream sequence he searches for it, but he can not really face its heaviness. In 'Lord' the ring has the power to draw someone's mind/body literally to the dark side; Ishmael cannot, like Frodo, be mesmerized by it, and yet he must carry it. Ishmael's ring is about The Past, and the family, childhood and home he lost; and yet, I believe, its force is what powers a unique, sensitive, strong Future. It's a gift and a burden.

Symbolically, everyone in this group carries such a shiny, heavy ring.
Months after ending, at a screening of 'Moving On' in Ohio, my older sister will ask me why we didn't SHOW the ring in the film. Because, I say, it's something Ishmael couldn't bear to see. And although the group was divided on whether to show it or not, the film, in the end, takes Ishmael's side…. It leaves the ring up to the viewer's imagination.

Months after ending, the U.S. still wages war in Iraq. And armed conflict of all types still ring this planet.

Months after ending, the stories in the trilogy circle back to Africa, and win a Paul Robeson award (for outstanding African Diaspora stories) at the Pan African Film & TV Festival in Burkina Faso. Our work has received dozens of awards and accolades, and this one makes me incredibly proud. Though we can't attend the festival, I think of the proud voice and memory of Ishmael's great-grandmother. I remember the dream I once had –just before one of our shoots—of hugging Loulou's mother and other African women. I think of the last line of Serge's poem, "These are dreams of Africa," and am proud and humbled that these stories come back to war-torn Africa and honor its dead and its living.

"The ring represents the relationship we once had," Ishmael says about his great-grandmother… and so our trilogy of films does the same for us; it's the substance foremost of our relationships. It's a gift to each other, a gift to the millions of unheard refugees in the world, and a gift to the audience.

And for the 'one family' that is now 'moving on,' the trilogy –like the ring-- is not something we will look at everyday but something we can never lose.

9. "MOVING ON"

Learning from the past, living in the present, and looking into the future, the Documentary Project for Refugee Youth presents its third and final video, completing their eloquent trilogy of war, survival, community, memory and transcendence. This multi-layered, self-reflective narra-

tive discovers this family of youth producers now searching for a new identity as they move past survival of wars and into survival of the everyday: balancing tradition and modernity, dreams and reality, and the group and the self.

<VIDEO: Moving On>

A. Where we are now
B. Credits