

SIGNALING EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN FOR STUDENT NATION, A NOD FROM NOW

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"Hey Boston, what's good? This is your girl, Melissa, over here holding it down at Radio L-O-G . . . where women are heard and respected."

Melissa Martins, 16, lets go of the microphone and sits down with the rest of the DJs in the tightly packed one-room studio. A young woman at the control board spins the next song, "I Can," by hip-hop artist Nas.

*"If the truth is told, the youth can grow,
They learn to survive until they gain control,
Nobody says you have to be ganstas, ho's,
Read more, learn more, change the globe."*

These are the sounds of Radio LOG, broadcasting messages of dignity and empowerment from the top of St. Mary's Women and Children's Center to the Bowdoin-Geneva neighborhood. The reception radius for the low-power AM station (540 KHz) is a meager 2 1/2 miles, but since the program started in February, word of Radio LOG has reached ears around the world.

This month, Radio LOG's co-founder Stephanie Alves, 19, was given the inaugural "Woman of Action" award by the National Organization for Women at its annual conference in Las Vegas.

"What impressed me the most was that these were women who were still in high school," said Kim Gandy, president of NOW, about the station's founders. The award will be given each year to one woman under the age of 30 who has taken "extraordinary action for women's rights."

"There are not many people of any age who have the gumption to do that," said Gandy, speaking in a phone interview.

Alves says she was stunned to find she was something of a celebrity when several conference attendees in Las Vegas asked for her autograph. She also rubbed elbows with other leaders such as Carol Moseley Braun, who had come to give speeches. "I thought it was very empowering," said Alves. "I never knew about [NOW], but somehow they looked for me and found me. To them, no woman is a stranger."

With the Democratic National Convention this week, Mayor Thomas Menino is working to get visiting politicians to drop by the station and be interviewed.

"I think Radio LOG is a real good example about how young people can make a difference," said Menino, who has supported the project since its inception.

"It wasn't about how they could improve their personal lives," said Menino, explaining his enthusiasm to help organize an advisory board. "They were about the community, 'Let's get our message out there about the positive aspect of young people.' "

National Public Radio, the Christian Science Monitor, and the Guardian, among other news sources, have covered the station, which is sponsored by the Log School, a settlement house that offers educational and social services in Dorchester.

"One, it's all girls. Two, they don't play any music that disrespects women," said Sadie Provenzano, 17, explaining why her station is newsworthy. "It's kind of unheard of."

Unheard of is right but only in Dorchester, it seems. Many of the young women at the station say their friends found out about Radio LOG on television or in the paper, but not on the AM band. Even the DJs are forced to listen to mainstream pop and hip-hop.

"I live a five-minute drive from here and I can't get the station," said Martins.

At the moment, the hope is that simply seeing how the media works from the inside will make it easier for girls to brush off negative stereotypes. The adult staff plan to put the programs, which run from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. during the summer and 4 to 7 p.m. during the school year, on the Internet within the next month.

But ultimately, it is the positive mission, not the celebrity, that matters to these girls, many of whom know the neighborhood's tribulations firsthand. Alves said two of her cousins have been killed in violent crimes, and Martins said the same fate has claimed friends of hers, "people I've grown up with, who I basically consider family.

"I hear gunshots a lot," she said. "I want to try to help stop the violence."

For Martins, Radio LOG is one step forward on a battleground that doesn't stop outside her home. She sometimes finds herself scolding her older brothers for using slurs against women.

"Why would you call them that if you wouldn't want another guy calling me that?" she asks them. "Why are you being a hypocrite?"

Radio LOG's aspiring DJs, some as young as 13, must first complete a 10-week media literacy course, during which they learn the vocabulary of radio, decipher audience analysis statistics, and debate the ethics of which news stories precede others.

Today, Pat Younger, director of the Log School's after-school activities, of which the station is part, is using the lunch break to teach a lesson on tabloids. Students munch on pepperoni pizza and sip drinks while Younger pokes fun at the sensationalist depiction of

Radio LOG in an issue of the National Enquirer. The teens chuckle together over the portrait of one of their classmates, placed next to a sign reading "Rap" with a red slash through it.

The lessons are designed to help students dismantle common mass-media tactics, while the station itself provides opportunities to construct and send their own affirming messages. Out of the classroom, students distill news headlines from other sources, write public service announcements, and host interviews with public officials and local activists.

The girls have a lot to say, and despite their initial stage fright, the airwaves are a powerful outlet.

"My first time, oh my goodness, I might have turned purple," said Akesha Barboza, 18, who is training at the station with her twin sister, Alyssa. But the new hue was fleeting.

"Once you go on the first time, you're not going to want to get off."

Alves never expected so much success in the beginning, and the zeal from all sides seemed like something out of a music video.

"When I introduced this idea, I thought it was unrealistic," said Alves. Larry Mayes, director of the Log School, did not.

Mayes organized the meeting between Menino and the station's founders. His experience as a teenage disc jockey during the 1980s convinced him the program would work.

"I saw what it did for me, being from the projects and being able to go on the air," he said. "It changed my world."

Along with all its energy and rebellion, hip-hop music has often included misogynist lyrics, dating back to the groundbreaking songs that spurred the genre, such as the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight."

"Yo, that's my song!" said Barboza, enthusiastically, though when asked about some of the dicier lyrics of one verse, she skipped a beat. "That's, like, not even bad compared to what they play today," she said after a moment.

As it nears 2 p.m., Martins approaches the microphone for the last time today. She recites the station identification, then adds, "To all my ladies out there, keep your eyes open and your head up, and don't let anyone play you like a fool."

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