

F R E E

Dire: David Collier & Suzanne LaFetra

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Behind a curtain, jittery teens hold hands in a circle. It's opening night. For months they've choreographed, scripted, and rehearsed. Who they are, where they've come from, and what they want to become—their stories shape the show.

What is it like to grow up in one of the nation's most violent cities? Capturing the raw beauty and powerful grace of a dance company for at-risk youth, **F R E E** journeys behind the curtain to spotlight the intimate stories of five teenagers in Oakland, California. This uplifting documentary showcases art's ability to transform violence, poverty and isolation.

Nee Nee shares a bedroom (and a bed) with her mother in a small apartment, along with her brother and his baby. When her mother struggles with breast cancer, Nee Nee takes on more responsibilities than the average teen.

At twelve, Jamany thought guns, violence and drugs were the way to fit in. "Without a father to show me how to live my life," he says, "I turned to the streets."

Omar has lived in eleven foster homes. He recently was adopted and lives with "two Caucasian females," he giggles, describing his moms. "It just sounds funny when I say it out loud."

Alaysia is in the painful process of prosecuting a man who raped her. "You feel gross sometimes. You just want it to all go away," she says, her voice breaking.

Tilly struggles in a turbulent relationship, and the pain causes her to cut herself. "Friends at school, you can't really trust them," Tilly cautions. "You can, at Destiny."

The majority of students who come to Destiny Arts Center live in neighborhoods filled with speeding cop cars, and makeshift memorials for murder victims. Navigating through adolescence is challenging enough, but in a city plagued by some of the highest crime rates in the nation, growing up is even tougher.

Using guided meditations, dance and poetry, Sarah Crowell, the artistic director at Destiny Arts Center, creates a safe space for students to digest the world around them, "so that they can come through adolescence shiny, and not broken," Sarah says.

The newly formed company begins its first team building exercise: if you really knew me...you would know that I have been homeless...that I was shot when I was eight... that my dad verbally abused us...

The process of building the show is intense. The youth are responsible for script writing, costume design and choreography. The show matures through thought-provoking writing exercises. Tilly writes, "I am sitting on a sidewalk because my people don't want me in their house anymore. To them I am old and tattered...there's a sign taped to my

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forehead that reads F-R-E-E." Eyes sparkle; so begins the creation of the show, F-R-E-E: Voices Beyond the Curbside.

Behind the smiles, sweat, and excitement, the young people face issues at home. Alaysia pushes herself to confront her perpetrator. Tilly struggles with loneliness, but bonds with her teacher at Destiny. Jamany walks through streets of his neighborhood. "Without dancing I would be scared of myself," he says, the sun flaring behind him as cars cruise by. Nee Nee, uncertain about what's next, half-heartedly turns to an Air Force recruiter. Omar, who has taken a lead role, suddenly drops off the map. When he finally returns to Destiny, he reveals a devastating secret. Sarah holds his hand. "You have a community, and we aren't going to let you fall," she affirms.

As opening night approaches, the tension builds. Kids trip over each other, fling scripts to the ground in frustration and flub their entrances. Even Sarah worries: will they be ready when the curtain goes up?

It's show time. The show unfolds, and the beauty of their months of work is unveiled, with each teen sharing their story in dance and spoken word. Performing doesn't make their problems disappear, but shining a light on their experiences helps them to find meaning in their struggles. As Sarah puts it, "Telling the truth is better in the long run, even if it hurts coming out."

As the curtain comes down, there are bows and broad smiles, but mostly there is dancing. The kids move--unadulterated and free.