

## No Nonsense Filmmaking

"WE'RE SHINING A CAMERA into the invisibility of homeless youth," says Lily Erlinger '10. "These kids construct this invisible identity because they don't want to be seen as homeless, but we wanted to reach down and make it visible."

The appeal of social-cause filmmaking launched Erlinger and Rebecca Cooper '10 into an unusual summer project. Beginning in July, they took part in a three-week summer tour sponsored by the legwear-apparel manufacturer No nonsense (Kayser-Roth Corporation). The firm's Socks for America program partnered with the global charity Kids in Distressed Situations (K.I.D.S.) to send four different teams of film students across the country to distribute socks and shoot documentaries about charities taking steps to "create a world without nonsense."

Erlinger and Cooper's friendship began in a less serious vein. They met as freshmen, but became close only when Erlinger, a visual and environmental studies concentrator, was looking for actors for her senior thesis, a film about a deaf teenage runaway who meets a 40-year-old with a morally ambiguous past. She chose Cooper, a literature concentrator and writer, as the main star. "I looked like a 15-year-old, so she cast me," Cooper says, laughing. "We were shooting these crazy 16-hour days, and we saw each other under extreme circumstances, so it turned out to be an incredible bonding experience." They quickly began providing creative inspiration to one another. "We always kind of ended each other's work," recalls Erlinger. "She sends me stories and I'll send her films. We're both very much on the same page, and we have similar goals creatively."

Their art-based relationship benefited their extensive summer journey throughout the West: from Portland to Los Angeles, with stops in Salt Lake City and Las Vegas. With their short film, *We Were Strangers* (<http://vimeo.com/29721030>), and blogging on the Socks for America website, they documented the efforts of homeless-youth charities and others, such as the Homeless Youth Resource Center in Salt Lake City. Although they touched base with No nonsense representatives along the way, they felt few creative restrictions, one of their main reasons for embarking on what resembles the stereotypical post-graduation cross-country road trip—only with cameras and deadlines. That creative freedom, Cooper admits, created some pre-departure anxiety: "Before we started the trip, we had no idea how to pull our film into a single story line."

Fortunately, they were able to narrow their focus thanks to a friend who introduced them to Austin Allstadt, a youth counselor in Portland who then suggested other social workers to talk to in Las Vegas. "We had no idea that between 20 and 40 percent of youths on the streets identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender," Erlinger says. "[Austin] really opened up and made us aware of the circumstances surrounding homeless youths and what they faced."

The filmmaking connected them not only to people making a difference, but also to the homeless youths they sought to help. Cooper, recalling the first time they distributed socks during a day of shooting, reports, "Lily and I had a cooler full of socks, and these kids would hold the pairs up to their faces and smell the cotton!" They later learned that most homeless young people rarely took off their shoes and socks and would wear down a pair in a week. "We had no idea how important socks were," she adds.

Other encounters proved more sobering. Eighteen-year-old Samantha, who left an abusive home at 13, "shared some terrible stories," Erlinger remembers. At the same time, she notes the dignity of the people they met. "Some of these kids are not making great decisions, but if any of us were in that same situation, 90 percent of us would be making similar ones," she adds. "In another lifetime, this kid could've gone to Harvard."

Looking back on all the disparate individuals they met on their trip, the women draw similar conclusions from the experience. Although they are now pursuing different paths—Erlinger is attending film school in Germany and Cooper is working at an American law firm in Paris—both view their journey as a rare

chance to learn about gratitude. "What I take away is how incredibly grateful and lucky I feel," says Cooper. "I'm coming away with an awareness about my own circumstances and an even greater appreciation for the opportunities I have." With their eight-minute documentary now live on the No nonsense Facebook page, they hope, above all, that it makes visible an issue that receives little attention. "It's remarkable how often we walk past these different worlds existing within individual bubbles," Erlinger says. "We wanted this film to be bubble-breaking."

—QICHEN ZHANG



**Becky Cooper (left) and Lily Erlinger handed out socks and highlighted homelessness.**

COURTESY OF SOCKS FOR AMERICA/NO NONSENSE