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ON YOUTH

By ERROL LOUIS

Kids have the write stuff

Mags give city's teens a voice, and it's time we started listening

Those who think the city's teenagers are a headache — too lazy, too irresponsible, too damn loud on the subway — should visit www.youthcomm.org, the Web site of Youth Communication, for a reality check.

The organization, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary of teaching print journalism skills to teenagers, publishes two first-rate magazines written by and for youth.

New Youth Connections, which is distributed to every city high school, crackles with passion, insight and first-rate essays.

"I was born in a homeless shelter in New Jersey and then moved on up to the East Side — to a rat-infested city-owned building inhabited mostly by the elderly," writes Hattie Rice in the current issue. "I lived across from a park infested with rats the size of rottweilers [I call them ratweilers] and saw little kids on the street, no shoes, with just popcorn for dinner. I knew what their mom and pops were on."

Also in the current issue is an essay by Lily Mai about growing up in a tiny Chinatown apartment with busy parents. "My parents grew up in poverty, and they worked hard so I wouldn't experience the same thing," Mai writes. "I had so many things. The only thing missing was my parents."

Not only do the teens have a knack for punchy phrasing, they often nail social issues that we grown-up newspaper working stiffs miss. In 2004, Represent Magazine, a publication from Youth Communication written by kids in the city's foster care system, put out a special



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Antwaun Garcia's personal account of being called "crack baby" graced the pages of Represent.

issue challenging the idea that thousands of aggressive, brain-damaged so-called crack babies born to addicts in the 1980s would flood the city's schools, hospitals and jails.

A kid named Antwaun Garcia and other teen writers — many of whom were so-called crack babies themselves — wrote about being endlessly stigmatized and examined the skimpy evidence on which the crack baby myth rested.

Writers at mainstream papers, including my colleague E.R. Shipp, picked up on the story and joined medical professionals in pushing for newspapers to drop the phrase altogether.

The program has offered the city's often-forgotten youth a chance to have a voice and, in the process, educate the rest of the city. At Youth Communication, the bylines of gang members have a place alongside articles written by kids headed to Ivy League schools.

An impressively long line of New Youth alumni has gone on to greater things, including novelist Edwidge Danticat and reporters like Rachel Swarns of

The New York Times and Warren Woodberry and Lion Calandra of the Daily News.

But the heart and soul of the paper is the way it matches adult editors with teen writers and teaches the youth to talk about whatever's on their minds, be it sex, racism, mental illness or fashion.

They have a lot to say, and they say it well. It's up to the rest of us to start listening.

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