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Tribune photo by Charles Cherney

Jeff McCarter, founder and executive director of Free Spirit Media, helps Vance Ellison (left) with his camera angles at a baseball game.

Young broadcasters find their voice on sports show

'HoopsHIGH' offers invaluable training

By Colleen Kane
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Dressed in a black jacket and tie and standing on the edge of a baseball diamond in Garfield Park, Chris Frills takes a brush from his coat pocket and pulls it over his hair. Alicia Hawkins waits with a TV camera.

Nearby in the bleachers sit Myles Webb and Aaron Johnson clutching microphones and studying the field as they deliver play-by-play and color commentary of the day's North

Lawndale baseball game. Just before Frills begins his intro with a "What's up, guys?", a spectator asserts, "That man's going to be a real broadcaster, man."

This isn't ESPN, but Frills and other students like him hope it's preparation.

"HoopsHIGH" is a weekly sports broadcast run by Chicago Public Schools students. Two crews of 20 teenagers do a five-camera setup at a sporting event each week with announcers, sideline reporters, producers, graphics and replays.

The program airs at 8 p.m. Saturdays on Chicago Access Network

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» SHOW Westinghouse success drew big audience

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Television (CAN TV).

The brainchild of Jeff McCarter, a former producer and editor at WTTW-Ch. 11, "HoopsHIGH" started as a youthful way to tell the story of a basketball game. It has developed into a creative outlet for West Side students and invaluable hands-on training for those, like Frills, who want to make sports broadcasting a career.

"It gave me a new path," said Antwone Smith, a 2006 Westinghouse graduate who is a sophomore at Illinois. "It showed me that there was something else I could do besides play basketball and make music—the clichés of my neighborhood.

"It was fun for me, but the communication skills I built and the opportunity to work with professionals in the field and to understand the career were priceless to me."

Eight years ago, McCarter took cameras and students to Garfield Park to film a fall basketball game as an experiment. He was so pleased with the results that he set out to convince administrators and viewers that student sports broadcasts, while different, could be successful.

"It was so exciting because the kids brought so much passion and personal insight," McCarter said. "They made their own connections, and all of a sudden we saw kids using technology and tools of communication to express themselves.

"I think some people are really afraid when you give kids the power to produce and use their voice. They're afraid that the kids are going to do something reckless or disrespectful or that will bring negative attention. For us, it's been a process of developing a program that is continually striving for excellence—to get stronger and more effective, so that we can answer these potential critics by showing them the results."

By the 2000-01 school year, "HoopsHIGH" had a part-



Tribune photo by Charles Cherney

North Lawndale High freshmen Aaron Johnson (left) and Myles Webb broadcast a baseball game in Garfield Park.

nership with CAN TV to broadcast basketball games. Then-Westinghouse coaches Chris Head and Quitman Dillard welcomed the program to televise their games. In a twist of luck, the 2001-02 basketball season was the only one in Westinghouse history that ended with the Class AA state title. Five Public League Red West teams finished in the Tribune's Top 20 that season. It made for some "incredibly entertaining" broadcasts, McCarter said.

Suddenly, "HoopsHIGH" had an audience.

The string of basketball luck has continued with the recent success of North Lawndale, the home of McCarter and "HoopsHIGH" since 2004 and this year's Class 2A state champion. The program followed the Phoenix all the way to the state finals, where it acted as a news crew alongside Chicago media.

"It was a great moment," said Frills, a North Lawndale junior and "HoopsHIGH" producer and sideline reporter.

Frills was one of 40 applicants from 10 Chicago Public Schools who were accepted into McCarter's program, which is part of his not-for-profit organization Free Spirit Media. The crew operates on an annual budget of \$150,000, which comes from grants from programs and companies.

The students hold weekly meetings to critique game tapes. Along with the requirements of a 2.5 grade-point average and manda-

tory school attendance on game days, they face the responsibility of putting out a product that will be viewed by both their superiors and their peers.

"I have to study before every game about who's going to play," said Webb, an announcer and North Lawndale freshman. "You have to run to get the rosters. You have to know their records. You have to talk to the coach 30 minutes before every game."

Frills, who said strangers have recognized him from the telecasts, often practices as he watches TV.

"When we sit at home and watch TV, I'm not watching the game, but I'm looking at the aspects of how the game is being captured on film," he said.

McCarter says students develop communication skills and professionalism from dealing with big-name coaches and media members as well as from performing for an audience that could include their friends, younger siblings and grandparents.

"There's a tendency for our announcers to try to show off for their friends and be a little wild, so we're challenging them to see that having a show is having a responsibility to an audience," McCarter said. "It's really exciting because kids get a lot of feedback from our viewers, and a lot of it has been incredibly encouraging. It's a real sense of pride."

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