



## Raw Material: A program draws on the creative energy of homeless youth.

*By Joel Topcik December 19, 2005*

Michelle Corporan's portfolio says as much about her talent for survival as it does about her gift for drawing. The manga-inspired figures and sketches of her couture designs, many drawn on the backs of discarded flyers fished from trash cans, testify to the passion that sustained the 21-year-old Queens native through an unstable childhood in a hostile family environment that drove her to a New York City

homeless shelter.

That passion is now helping Corporan find stability and pursue a career in design. She is one of several young homeless artists chosen to participate in Proof of Concept, a new national mentorship program that pairs at-risk youth with design, media, and fashion professionals in the hope of opening a channel between the design world and a source of neglected talent. The program is part of the Reciprocity Foundation, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit started by Taz Tagore and Adam Bucko to foster the wealth of untapped creativity they found in the homeless shelters they had worked in. "Survival is a creative act," says Tagore, a designer and former investment banker. "I think the design community would benefit from people who've had such extraordinary life experiences."

Tagore and Bucko established a network of some 50 shelters in New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Las Vegas, and Orlando to locate 17- to 23-year-olds with what Tagore calls "raw design talent." With the help of the AIGA they have enlisted mentors from firms such as Pentagram, Masius, and Publicis Groupe who will spend a year working with the young men and women to develop that raw talent and guide them into internships, college-level design programs, and ultimately full-time jobs. Tagore and Bucko will also work with them closely, providing support on their journey to stability.

Reciprocity is at the beginning of its own journey, with ten mentorships under way and another five in development as of October. Funding has yet to be secured; apart from small donations from fellow travelers, the foundation operates on Tagore's limited 401(k). Eventually she hopes to fund the program largely with the proceeds from a line of sustainably designed gift baskets and other items produced by Reciprocity's sister organization, the Appreciate Network. As the mentorships progress, participants will contribute their own design ideas to the gift line.

Pentagram partner Lisa Strausfeld was already impressed with Corporan after their first meeting. "I saw in Michelle this energy and spirit that can go not just a long way but all the way," Strausfeld says. The feeling was mutual. "It made me excited to think that I could do that," Corporan, who now lives with her twin sister, says of her mentor's work. "It's a long road,"

Tagore cautions, noting that Strausfeld's career shows the importance of process. Corporan smiles. "I don't want to be patient," she says.