

THE SPARK NEVER LEAVES YOU

How Participation in
Creative Youth Communities
Cultivates Lasting Impact
on Work, Civic and
Cultural Engagement

Principal Researcher and Author: Melinda Faber,
Executive Director, Convergence Design Lab



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Lead Researcher and Author:

Mindy Faber

Contributing Writers

Margaret Conway, Dennis Pierce

Outcomes Framework and Annotated Bibliography

Yonty Friesem, PhD, Columbia College Chicago

Design

Kate Burgener Creative, LLC

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THE SPARK NEVER LEAVES YOU

How Participation in Creative Youth Communities Cultivates Lasting Impact on Work, Civic and Cultural Engagement

spyhop | YOUTH
MEDIA
MATTERS



CONVERGENCE DESIGN LAB

Report by:
Convergence Design Lab

Lead Researcher:
Mindy Faber

ABSTRACT

This alumni study examines the long-term impact of Spy Hop, a creative youth development organization serving young people in Utah since 1999. Drawing on survey and interview data from multiple generations of participants, the study finds that creativity functions not simply as an artistic or technical skill, but as a formative developmental experience that shapes identity, agency, and long-term patterns of contribution.

Alumni describe Spy Hop as far more than an arts program: it operates as a trusted creative community where young people are taken seriously as creators, collaborators, and cultural participants. Through public-facing media projects guided by practicing artist-mentors, youth engage in meaningful work with real audiences—developing technical mastery alongside confidence, responsibility, and a sense of voice. These experiences foster enduring capacities, including self-efficacy, adaptability, and purpose, which alumni carry into their educational pathways, careers, communities, and civic lives.

Over time, Spy Hop alumni contribute as adaptive innovators in the workforce, engaged participants in civic life, and cultural catalysts within creative ecosystems—often regardless of whether they pursue careers in the arts. The findings demonstrate that Spy Hop's long-standing pedagogical model reliably generates transformational outcomes that extend well beyond adolescence, positioning creative youth communities as vital social infrastructure with lasting impact on individuals, communities, and culture.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This alumni study conducted by Convergence Design Lab is an independent analysis grounded in creative youth development, learning sciences, and media education research.

This study's principal researcher, Mindy Faber, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Convergence Design Lab, brings more than thirty years of experience as a youth media practitioner and researcher. A former video producer and teaching artist, she has spent her career documenting how participatory media, youth voice, and creative learning shape adolescent development and life outcomes. Her work bridges practice and research, with a focus on understanding how creative communities function as developmental environments.

The research and writing were strengthened by contributions from several Convergence team members. Margaret Conway, Co-Founder and Director of Learning, brought a learning experience design lens to the study's recommendations. Dennis Pierce, writer and editor, collaborated on the alumni transformation stories and narrative framing. Dr. Yonty Friesem, Associate Professor at Columbia College Chicago, conducted a landscape scan of scholarship on youth media, creativity, and civic identity, informing the study's conceptual framework.

The survey instrument was co-designed with Adam Sherlock at Spy Hop, whose vision for examining *transformative impact* shaped the study's analytical focus and produced rich, illuminating data.

This report represents Convergence Design Lab's independent interpretation of the evidence. Its goal is to offer a clear, rigorous, and nuanced understanding of the long-term developmental outcomes associated with Spy Hop's youth media programs.

FOREWORD

by Larissa Trout



On behalf of Spy Hop's Board of Directors, staff, and students, I am pleased to present Spy Hop's most comprehensive alumni study to date, *The Spark Never Leaves You: How Participation in Creative Youth Communities Cultivates Lasting Impact on Work, Civic, and Cultural Engagement*, authored by Convergence Design Lab (CDL). For decades, it has been widely understood that community-based youth arts programs provide important, engaging, and empowering experiences for young people. What has been far more difficult, and far more rare, is demonstrating and measuring the long-term impact of those experiences over time. This study is our response to that challenge.

This alumni study has been a long time coming, not because the question lacked urgency, but because it demanded care. It represents a commitment we made to ourselves as part of our responsibility to provide high-quality arts programming that helps young people find their voice, tell their stories, and effect positive change in their lives, their communities, and the World. Like many arts organizations, our greatest challenge was capacity. Unlike large institutions with dedicated alumni infrastructures, our relationship with former students has always been rooted in trust. We wondered whether that connection would endure, whether alumni would still feel connected enough to respond and share what Spy Hop had meant in their lives.

What we wanted to know was not simply where our alumni landed, but who they became. This question, and the hope behind it, was first articulated by our former Executive Director, Kasandra VerBruggen, who helped bring this effort to life:

- “I'm hoping to see that our kids are resilient, that they're now leaders.
- I hope they are engaged in their communities... that they're good
- human beings. They're healthy, and they have strong bonds, families,
- and relationships. They have a job that gives them joy, satisfaction,
- and money. They're teaching somewhere. I would love to see artists
- who are still doing their artwork. I want people to feel like they have
- a voice and can stand up to the harm being done. I want to know they
- feel strong and powerful and that they built that level of confidence
- and self-worth through their work here... through what we did.”

Parallel to our students-to-alumni pathway, Kasandra passed the baton to me in 2025. We shared a desire to demonstrate to our community that what we have long known to be true is, in fact, a North Star for why arts education, especially in the third space, matters. This study affirms that Spy Hop's long-term impact is transformational. Alumni shared their honest experiences, grounding us in the understanding that when youth-powered spaces are paired with caring adult mentors, creative community, and real-world context, young people use the media arts to share perspective, create meaning, and drive lasting positive change.

This study is our commitment to learning more, doing better, and continuing to hold ourselves to a high standard. It does not close the book on Spy Hop's impact, nor was it ever meant to. The spark indeed never leaves you, and neither does our responsibility to listen, learn, and remain accountable to the young people who trusted us with their stories. We offer this study as an invitation to share these stories with teachers, artists, fellow alumni, institutions, and communities of learning, and to continue investing in the people and places that ignite the spark within us all.

With gratitude,



Larissa Trout
Spy Hop Executive Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“They gave me space to feel. To learn. To find purpose. They championed me, believed in me, and helped me build a better sense of self and direction during times where I was alone and had no one. Spy Hop—that community became an identifying piece of my DNA. How lucky was I to have had the chance to actually be me and be seen for it!”

Across hundreds of alumni voices, this idea surfaces again and again: Spy Hop is not just something young people participate in—it is something they carry with them across their lives. Long after leaving programs, alumni describe lasting confidence, creative agency, and a sense of responsibility to others that continues to shape who they are and how they contribute to the world.

This alumni study examines the long-term impact of Spy Hop, one of the longest-running creative youth development organizations in the United States. While many programs document short-term outcomes, it is rare for youth media organizations to have the longevity, scale, and relationships required to look meaningfully at adult outcomes over time. This report asks a fundamental question with implications beyond any single program:

What happens to young people who grow up in a sustained creative community—and what do they carry forward into work, civic life, and culture as adults?

For more than twenty-five years, Spy Hop has provided young people with access to professional tools, mentorship, and real audiences—while centering youth voice, belonging, and meaningful creative work. Alumni consistently describe entering Spy Hop with an inner spark: curiosity, passions, creativity, and a desire to express themselves. What distinguishes Spy Hop is not that it creates that spark, but that it recognizes it, nurtures it, and helps it grow. Over time, that spark becomes internalized as self-belief, agency, and permission—to pursue interests, take risks, and imagine futures that feel possible.

This study explores how those early experiences unfold across the unfolding arc of adulthood. It looks not only at individual success, but at broader patterns of contribution: where alumni work, how they engage with community, and how they participate in creative and civic life. In doing so, it reframes youth media impact as something that extends outward—shaping the creative workforce, strengthening communities, and sustaining cultural ecosystems over time.

Three core findings emerge from the study. Taken together, they suggest a powerful and cyclical pattern of impact: young people who experience belonging, high expectations, and creative agency grow into adults who contribute those same qualities back into their workplaces, communities, and cultural spheres—often creating new spaces where others can find their own spark.

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

This alumni study examines the long-term impacts of participation in Spy Hop's creative youth development programs. Across survey, interview, and focus group data, three enduring patterns emerged in alumni's adult lives—shaping how they work, engage civically, and contribute to cultural life.

Key Finding 1: Youth Media Experiences Cultivate Adaptive Innovators Who Thrive Across Diverse Careers.

What we saw

Alumni consistently described Spy Hop as the first environment where they experienced themselves as capable contributors and professionals. Through real-world projects, deadlines, and feedback from working artists, participants develop capacities that persist into adulthood and across fields.

Evidence

- 92% of employed alumni report regularly applying creativity and innovative thinking in their work
- 90% feel confident learning new technologies
- Nearly 80% of alumni are employed; 15% are self-employed in creative professions
- Alumni apply these skills across film, music, design, education, nonprofits, technology, law, and social services

Alumni voice

“It gave me a mindset that has shaped my entire career and continues to guide me today.”

Why it matters

Creative youth programs help build durable, transferable capacities that support lifelong learning and adaptability—not just entry into creative careers.

Key Finding 2: Meaning-Making Through Youth Media Cultivates Public Voice, Purpose, and Enduring Civic Identity.

What we saw

Through storytelling, interviewing, and collaboration across difference, alumni learned to see from multiple perspectives and to understand the ethical responsibilities of having a public platform. Mentors treated young people as authors of their own work, reinforcing a sense of agency and responsibility that extends into adult civic life.

Evidence

- 97% felt their perspectives were taken seriously by mentors
- 92% report exposure to people from different backgrounds and viewpoints during participation
- 92% are registered to vote; 84% voted in the past year
- Over 80% regularly discuss social issues and keep up with current events
- Over 40% of alum contribute time or money to community causes or mentor others

Alumni voice

“Spy Hop taught me that if you have a platform, you can use it to support your community.”

Why it matters

These outcomes point to youth media as a pathway for cultivating informed adults who draw on creative practice to exercise civic responsibility and community participation.

Key Finding 3: Participation in Supportive Youth Arts Communities Cultivates Cultural Contributors Who Sustain Creative Ecosystems.

What we saw

Most alumni continue to create artistic work—often in the same media explored during their time at Spy Hop. Beyond personal practice, alumni remain active participants in cultural life by attending events, supporting local artists, experimenting with new tools, and building creative spaces of their own.

Evidence

- 76% regularly create their own art
- 58% frequently share their work with others
- 71% regularly attend cultural events
- 74% support local or independent artists
- 46% frequently experiment with new creative technologies

Alumni voice

“Spy Hop didn't just teach me how to make things—it taught me how to keep making.”

Why it matters

The impact of youth arts participation extends beyond individual outcomes, contributing to the vitality and sustainability of local creative and cultural ecosystems over time.

ABOUT SPY HOP

Founded in 1999, Spy Hop is a nationally recognized creative youth development organization that provides young people with opportunities to explore their identities, build meaningful relationships, and express their ideas through film, audio, music, and design. From its earliest days—when co-founders Rick Wray and Erik Dodd transformed a small afterschool film project into a youth-centered nonprofit—Spy Hop has remained rooted in the belief that young people are inherently creative and capable, and that creative media production not only helps them make sense of their world but also opens space for them to share their experiences and perspectives with public audiences, using the media forms and language of their own youth culture.

The name “Spy Hop” comes from the behavior of whales and dolphins that rise above the surface to look around, to tune in, and orient themselves within their pod. It is a fitting metaphor: Spy Hop offers young people a safe community where they can surface, take stock of what lies ahead, understand their surroundings, and begin to articulate who they are and what matters to them.

Today, Spy Hop serves thousands of students ages 8–19 (and up to 25 through Phase 2 Productions) across Utah. Its programs blend positive youth development, media arts education, and career readiness. Mentors—many of them practicing artists and several of them alumni—guide students through real-world creative work that cultivates collaboration, responsibility, critical thinking, and confidence. Two alumni currently serve on the Board of Directors, reflecting the organization’s enduring relationships and the long-term impact of its approach.

Across more than two decades, Spy Hop has grown into a cultural anchor and developmental resource for Utah youth. Its programs help young people discover their creative voices, understand their communities, and build the skills and agency that support thriving into adulthood. (Lerner, 2004)

Who Spy Hop Serves: The Participant Landscape

Spy Hop serves young people primarily from Salt Lake City and the broader Salt Lake County region, including youth who travel considerable distances to participate in its on-site afterschool programs. While alumni in this study largely reflect those core pathways, Spy Hop’s broader portfolio—such as *Voices of the West* and numerous school and community partnerships—extends its reach across multiple regions of Utah.

Within this regional landscape, the alumni population reflects a wide spectrum of lived experiences. A majority of survey respondents identified as White (71%), consistent with Utah’s demographic profile. Yet taken together, nearly 30% identified as youth of color, with a notably strong representation of Latino alumni (16%). Smaller numbers identified as Black or African American, Asian or Asian American, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander, and several described multiracial identities.

Beyond racial and ethnic identity, alumni reported diverse cultural, social, and personal experiences. Many navigated strong religious environments; others identify as LGBTQ+ (27%); some grew up in immigrant or refugee households; and many described feeling creatively or socially “out of place” in

traditional school settings. A substantial share also reported challenges with depression (48%), anxiety (45%), or learning disabilities and neurodivergence (33%)—revealing forms of diversity and resilience not captured by conventional demographic categories.

Across these varied backgrounds, Spy Hop has functioned as a **creative refuge and identity-building environment—a place where young people express themselves freely, gain confidence, build supportive relationships, and imagine new possibilities for their futures.**

WHY THIS STUDY?

Youth Voice Matters: Self-Representation and Transformative Experience

Young people rarely see themselves represented accurately in the media that surrounds them. Too often, their lives are filtered through adult assumptions, deficit narratives, or even hypercriminalized portrayals that flatten and distort their lived realities. As Smirnov and Lam (2019) observe, **young people navigate “complicated environments” in which dominant media frames tend to obscure their perspectives rather than illuminate them.** For adolescents—especially those navigating marginalization—these portrayals shape not only how others see them, but also how young people begin to see themselves.

Spy Hop was founded on the belief that creative media-making can serve as a powerful counterweight to these conditions. When young people make films, design games, compose music, or produce audio stories, they are doing far more than learning technical skills. They are expressing what matters to them, making sense of their experiences, and experimenting with how they want to be seen and heard. Through the act of creating media, young people test ideas, explore identity, and begin to imagine possible futures. **Creative production becomes a developmental space where adolescents can say, in effect, “This is who I am—and this is who I might become.”**

These experiences are especially significant because adolescence is a pivotal period of identity formation, marked by heightened sensitivity to belonging, social context, and opportunity (Dahl, 2004). Having the chance to create meaningful work, collaborate with peers, receive mentorship from trusted adults, and share one’s perspective with real audiences helps young people build confidence, belonging, and a sense of agency. Research shows that experiences like these do not fade when a program ends; they shape enduring patterns of participation, influencing how young people engage in work, community life, and civic culture well into adulthood (Holland et al., 1998; Youniss et al., 1997).

This alumni study asks: What becomes of these early creative experiences once young people leave Spy Hop? Do the dispositions, values, and capacities cultivated during adolescence endure into the domains of work, civic life, and cultural participation?

Alumni studies in creative youth development are rare, making this a meaningful contribution to the field (Montgomery, 2017; Pepler et al., 2025). Drawing on survey data from 75 alumni and a rich set of interviews spanning multiple decades of programming, this study offers a longitudinal view of Spy Hop's impact. What emerges is a clear developmental throughline: early experiences of voice, agency, creative challenge, and authentic community continue to shape who alumni become—and how they contribute to the worlds they inhabit.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this report, we use three distinct but related terms to describe long-term alumni outcomes. "Adaptive innovators" refers to how alumni contribute professionally through creativity, learning agility, and problem-solving. "Civic multipliers" describes how those same capacities extend into community engagement and democratic participation. "Cultural catalysts" reflects alumni's sustained participation in creative ecosystems as makers, supporters, and amplifiers of culture. These roles are not stages or categories, but overlapping expressions of a shared developmental foundation.

METHODOLOGY AT A GLANCE

Method	What We Did	Purpose
Alumni Survey	75 respondents across 1999–2023 cohorts	To learn broad trends in education, career, creativity, civic life, cultural engagement
Interviews & Focus Groups	31 alumni participated in one-on-one interviews and group sessions; former mentors and one local business executive were also interviewed.	Deep narrative insight; multi-perspective understanding of impact
Participatory Design Sessions	Question design with Spy Hop grads	Ensures tools reflect youth voice and relevance
Landscape Scan & Outcomes Framework	Grounded in learning sciences & connected learning; annotated bibliography	Places Spy Hop within national research; defines long-term outcomes
Historical Evaluation Data	Drawing from 2017–2024 program evaluations	Allows triangulation between short-term and long-term impact
Triangulation	Synthesized across survey + interviews + mentors + historical data + literature + logic model	Strengthens validity and coherence of findings

THE RIPPLE EFFECT: FROM INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION TO COMMUNITY IMPACT TO CULTURAL CHANGE

Spy Hop's long-term impact can be understood as a developmental progression that begins with personal transformation and extends into community and cultural life. This pattern aligns closely with Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which posits that developmental experiences within a young person's immediate environment reverberate outward across broader social and cultural systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Early experiences of belonging and engagement in purposeful work shape not only personal development, but also patterns of later civic participation and contributions to cultural ecosystems.

Research on connected learning and participatory media further supports this view: when young people engage in meaningful creative work within supportive, networked communities, they develop social and civic identities, dispositions, and habits that shape how they learn, relate to others, and make meaning in the world (Ito et al., 2013; Rheingold, 2012).

Adaptive Innovators

At the center of this developmental process is the young person discovering agency, voice, and creative confidence. Through real-world media projects, mentorship, and collaborative problem-

solving, Spy Hop students develop adaptability, technological fluency, critical media literacies (Hobbs, 2010), and persistence—capacities that shape who they become as adults and how they navigate complex professional environments.

Civic Multipliers

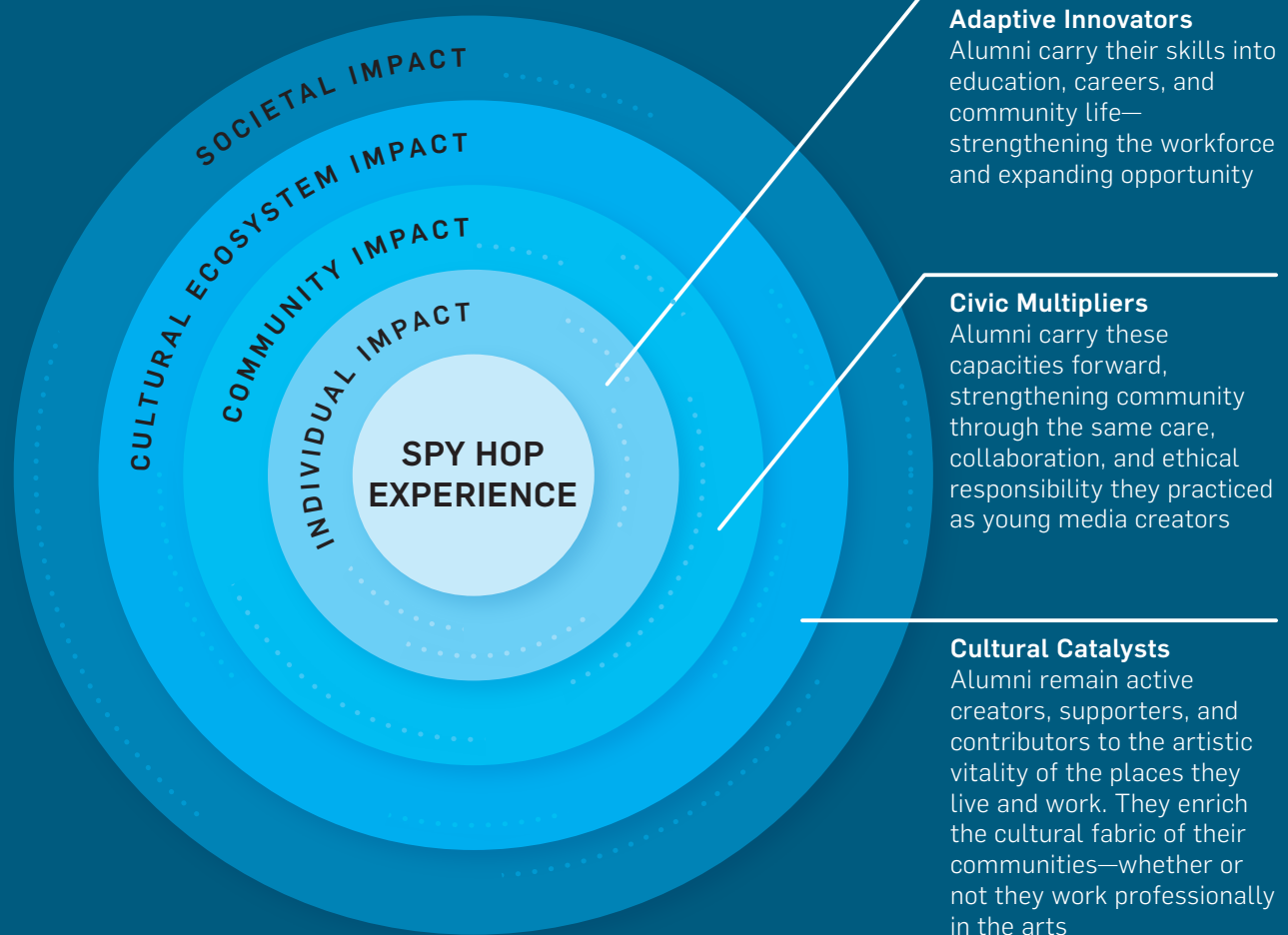
These same capacities often extend into civic and community contexts. Exposure to diverse peers, practice in perspective-taking, and opportunities to express personal beliefs cultivate empathy, ethical awareness, and a sense of responsibility to others. As adults, alumni describe themselves as listeners, collaborators, communicators, voters, mentors, volunteers, and community contributors—individuals who strengthen the civic fabric of the places they live.

Cultural Catalysts

Over time, alumni contribute to cultural life as makers, supporters, and creative leaders. Whether or not they work professionally in the arts, many continue to create, attend cultural events, support local artists, experiment with new technologies, and amplify diverse stories. Their sustained engagement enriches local cultural ecosystems and helps shape the narratives and creative vitality of their communities.

The Ripple Effect

Alumni influence extends outward, creating a ripple effect that drives broader societal change



A Coherent Developmental Arc

Across these domains—individual adaptable/durable skill development, civic engagement, and cultural participation—the alumni outcomes observed in this study reflect a coherent developmental arc. What begins as creative agency and belonging within a youth-centered learning environment becomes, over time, a set of civic and cultural orientations that extend far beyond adolescence. In Bronfenbrenner’s terms, these outcomes represent the outward movement of developmental influence across ecological systems: the individual shaping, and being shaped by, the communities and cultures they inhabit.

FINDING 1

Youth Media Experiences Cultivate Adaptive Innovators Who Thrive Across Diverse Careers

The first pattern to emerge from the alumni study is not simply that former Spy Hop participants find jobs or pursue creative careers, but that they **develop the capacity to adapt, learn, and contribute across a wide range of professional contexts**. Alumni describe entering adulthood with confidence in their ability to figure things out, navigate unfamiliar tools and environments, collaborate with others, and persist through uncertainty. These are not narrow technical skills; they are core capacities rooted in self-efficacy, agency, and creative confidence—qualities shown to support adaptation and contribution across changing professional landscapes (Bandura, 1986; Callahan et al., 2019).

Across survey and interview data, alumni report strong career outcomes, sustained creative engagement, and a positive sense of personal and professional satisfaction. These patterns align with existing research demonstrating that early arts engagement contributes to long-term flourishing and social wellbeing (EpiArts Lab, n.d.). Alumni interviews further reveal consistently optimistic career outlooks, with many participants explicitly describing how Spy Hop's early support continues to shape their confidence, occupational identities, and perceived ability to succeed in adult life (Callahan, Ito, et al.).

For this reason, we use the term **adaptive innovators** to characterize alumni whose early experiences creating meaningful work at Spy Hop have translated into a resilient self-concept—one grounded in confidence in their

ability to learn continuously, adapt to new contexts, and apply creativity across sectors throughout their careers.

As adults, Spy Hop alumni are employed across creative industries, education, nonprofit leadership, technology, law, and service-oriented fields. Many continue to work directly in media and the arts; others **apply the same innovative and creative mindset in non-arts professions**. What unites these varied pathways is not a single career trajectory, but a shared capacity for creative adaptation and contribution—one that reflects the long-term influence of Spy Hop's learning model rather than short-term training alone. As this 33 year old interview participant described it, "To be in a room with professionals who respected our ideas at such a young age was huge for me."

Spy Hop as a Springboard for Professional Confidence

Alumni consistently describe Spy Hop as the first environment in which they saw themselves as capable contributors. Working with industry-standard tools, meeting deadlines, managing complex projects, and receiving feedback from practicing artists cultivated an early sense of professionalism that has carried into their adult lives.

One alum reflected: "Having mentors who treated me like a professional gave me the confidence to walk into any room and feel that my ideas had value."

Finding 1 in action: See *Cody's Story* (next page)

SPY HOP ‘CHANGED MY LIFE COMPLETELY’: CODY’S STORY

Seventeen-year-old Cody first came to Spy Hop looking for a paid apprenticeship. Interested in design and hoping to earn some extra money, she applied without knowing how profoundly the experience would shape her sense of self—and her capacity for leadership.

The apprenticeship focused on video game design, but Cody soon realized she was more drawn to storytelling through film. She eventually enrolled in Reel Stories, a summer intensive documentary class led by Paige Sparks. **“That changed my life completely,”** Cody says.



At the time, Cody was struggling with severe OCD and feeling deeply isolated. That summer at Spy Hop became a turning point. Through creative work and collaboration, she formed close friendships and began to feel like herself again. **“I was laughing again... it was really healing,”** she recalls. “Being able to do something creative was really cathartic.”

In *Reel Stories*, Cody made a documentary exploring what it means to raise a child as an immigrant in the United States while preserving cultural identity—a story deeply personal to her as the daughter of Mexican immigrants. It was her first experience working with professional equipment as part of a collaborative team. Screening her film publicly in a theater, and discussing it afterward, was a powerful affirmation. “It made me feel validated as a filmmaker,” she says. “It wasn’t, ‘Make your cute little videos.’ It was, ‘You are a filmmaker, and we’re giving you a platform to share your story.’”

If *Reel Stories* helped Cody find her voice, PitchNic helped her discover her leadership. Enrolling in early 2021, she pitched a story that was selected for production. Naturally shy, Cody found herself in an unfamiliar position: directing a crew. “People were looking to me for direction,” she says. “That hadn’t really happened before.”

The experience reshaped how she understood leadership and her own capacity to lead:

“It’s not like people are just inherently leaders. It’s like a muscle that you have to work on, and it’s something that anyone can be regardless of who you are... That really helped me feel ready to take on more responsibilities.”

Cody’s film [Sol](#) went on to receive multiple accolades, and the following year Cody returned to Spy Hop as a peer mentor. She later studied graphic design at the University of Utah and is now pursuing work in the creative arts.

Reflecting on her time at Spy Hop, Cody describes its impact simply: “It helped me feel like I can do anything. I’m so much more comfortable in my own skin, and so much more excited about life.”

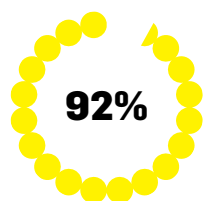
Another alum—a PitchNic participant who is now an attorney—described how mentors emphasized the importance of being intentional and responsible about what you are “putting out there.” She explained that this lesson has stayed with her, especially as a lawyer, where “**what you say, how you say it, how you write things really matters... I learned that at Spy Hop.**”

These experiences align with longstanding research on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) and with the learning sciences literature showing that competence, productive struggle, and authentic work are key drivers of long-term agency (Farrington et al., 2012). Spy Hop’s emphasis on real-world creative production also reinforces the durable skills identified as critical for career and civic success—including communication, problem-solving, responsibility, and emotional self-regulation (America Succeeds, 2025).

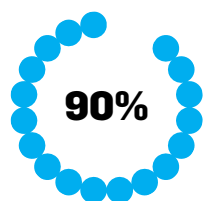
Through these experiences, alumni develop resilience—a sense of self-efficacy that enables them to navigate new fields, take on unfamiliar challenges, and trust in their ability to learn, adapt, and contribute. This professional confidence is a direct outcome of Spy Hop’s relational, mentor-driven pedagogy and its commitment to treating young people as capable makers from the start.

Alumni Are Competent and Confident Colleagues

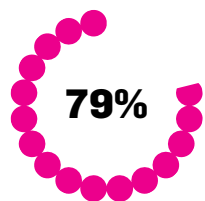
Survey data shows clear patterns:



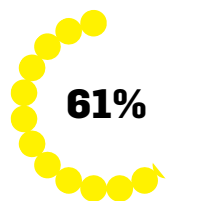
of employed alumni regularly **apply creativity and innovative thinking** to their work.



report confidence in **learning new technologies.**



strongly agree they **work well with colleagues.**



work in creative industries, while many others thrive in education, nonprofits, government, and service professions.

Nearly **80% are employed**; **15% are self-employed** in creative professions.

These outcomes demonstrate that Spy Hop’s model produces adults who can adapt quickly, collaborate effectively, and think imaginatively—qualities increasingly essential in the innovation economy.

Two alumni said it this way:

“Spy Hop didn’t just train me in technical skills; it gave me a mindset that has shaped my entire career and continues to guide me today.”

“Spy Hop taught me early technology and media skills that I have transferred to all my subsequent employment.”

Skills That Endure Across Sectors

Whether alumni work in film, education, social services, design, or business, they rely on the same core capacities nurtured at Spy Hop:

- Collaboration & communication: listening, negotiating ideas, giving and receiving feedback
- Creative problem-solving: iterative thinking, experimentation, learning from failure
- Confidence & authentic expression: believing their voice matters
- Digital fluency: comfort with unfamiliar tools, workflows, and emerging technologies

As this alum wrote;

“My communication and collaboration experience got its first trials at Spy Hop. My confidence with problem solving, technology, building things, taking on new challenges were all things that found space to flourish.”

Several alumni describe these not as isolated skills but core capacities developed through project-based learning. One alum summarized how formative her PitchNic experience continues to be in her career:

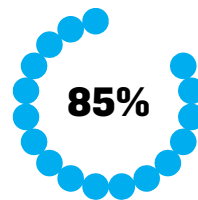
“Before Spy Hop I never thought of myself as being a strong public speaker, but I found how to channel my passion into presentation while taking PitchNic.”

This alum goes on to explain that her growing competency in communicating with others not only helped her during her student years, but in

her current role as a teacher. After she stopped taking classes, she worked at Spy Hop teaching the elementary school summer camp program. “This laid a massive foundation for my teaching career that I have continued to build for the last 10 years.”

Meaning, Purpose, and the Drive to Contribute

Spy Hop does more than prepare young people for jobs—it helps them find meaningful work.



Over 85% of alumni report their **work feels personally satisfying** or purposeful.

Many describe a connection between the values they formed at Spy Hop and the paths they chose as adults.

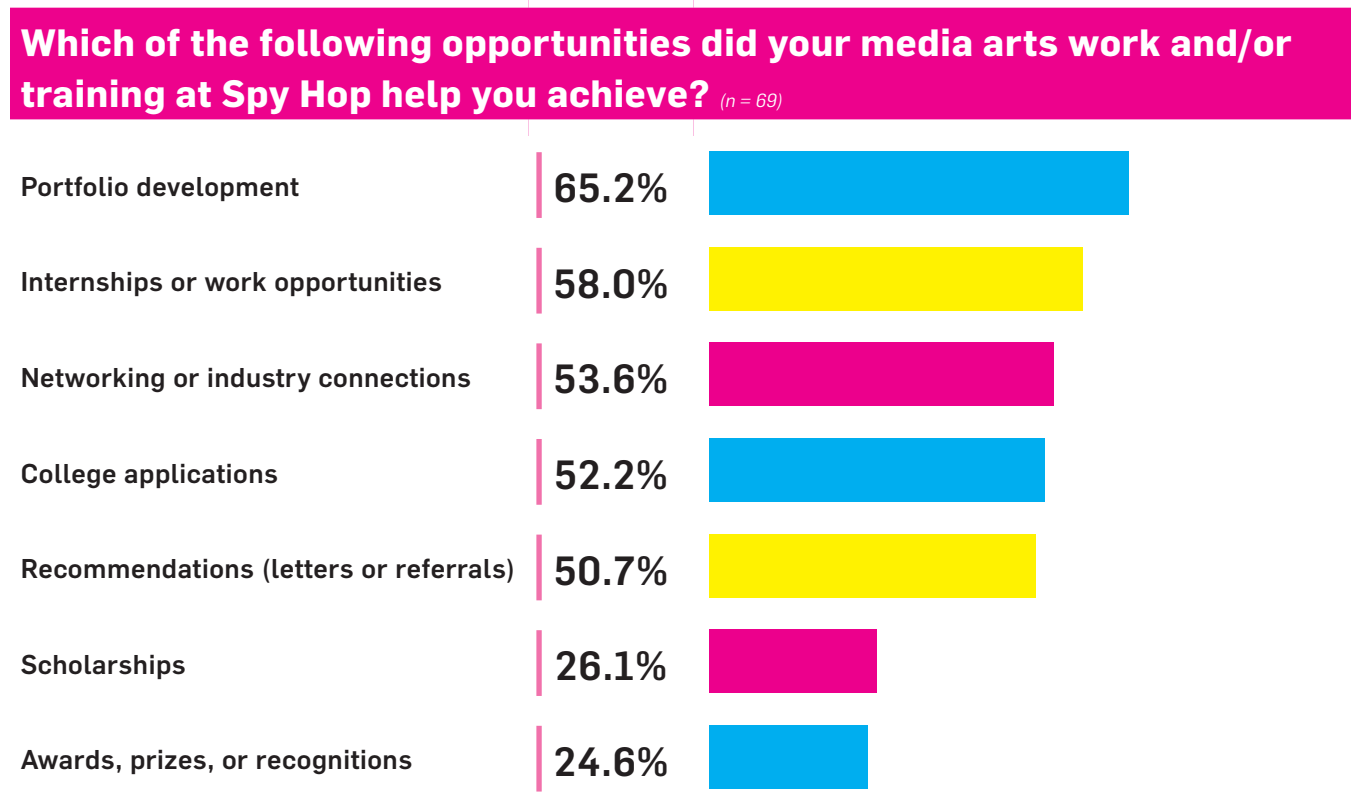
As one alum wrote: “They championed me, believed in me... helped me build a better sense of self and direction.”

Another explained: “Spy Hop allowed me to use my skills in a meaningful way... to become something more than a simple nine-to-five employee.”

The desire to pursue meaningful, socially grounded work is a hallmark of Spy Hop alumni, reflecting patterns of occupational identity development in which early experiences of agency, competence, and purpose shape long-term career direction and satisfaction (Callahan et al., 2019; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

From Capacity to Opportunity: Early Career Supports

Although Spy Hop’s afterschool programs are not designed as formal college-access or career pathway initiatives, alumni report that participation helped unlock critical early educational and professional opportunities.



As shown in the figure above, a majority of alumni indicate that their Spy Hop experience supported portfolio development, access to internships or work opportunities, professional networking, and college applications. A smaller but notable share also report scholarships, awards, or formal recognition tied to work produced during or shortly after participation.

These are significant results, particularly given that Spy Hop does not position itself as a formal college-access or credentialed workforce preparation program. Even so, participation frequently opened access to meaningful—and in some cases life-changing—educational and professional opportunities. Rather than being programmatically prescribed, these career-opening opportunities emerged organically through authentic production within Spy Hop’s creative community. Together, these patterns point to a clear opportunity to extend and strengthen what is already working—an idea taken up in the recommendations at the close of this report.

FROM FILMMAKING TO COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP: STEVEN'S STORY

For Steven, filmmaking wasn't just a creative outlet—it became **a pathway into college that otherwise felt out of reach**. As a first-generation student pursuing an elite film program, Steven needed more than talent and drive. He needed access, guidance, and credibility. Spy Hop provided all three.

At Spy Hop, Steven built a **professional-quality portfolio** that made college feel possible. Through sustained project-based filmmaking, he developed the technical skill, authentic voice, and self-belief to apply to competitive universities. "It helped me build my portfolio to get to where I wanted to go," Steven shared, describing Spy Hop as the boost that allowed him to imagine himself in higher education at all.

Spy Hop helped me build my portfolio to get to where I wanted to go.

Just as important were the additional supports that surrounded that work. Teaching artists offered close mentorship, helping Steven navigate creative challenges and professional expectations. Spy Hop provided **letters of recommendation and institutional credibility**—forms of social capital that are often decisive, yet unavailable to students whose families have not navigated college or creative industries before.

Steven also encountered moments of isolation as "one of the only Latino students in the program." At times, he felt his lived experience didn't fully resonate with peers. Spy Hop mentors supported him through those moments, helping him build perseverance and practical production skills—what Steven describes as learning "logistics": how to work within constraints, collaborate, and carry an idea through to completion. Most critically, he learned how to take ownership of his own voice and identity through filmmaking.

That learning culminated in *Miguelito*, the first bilingual fictional narrative in Spy Hop's PitchNic program. The film became a finalist in the Utah Short Film of the Year student competition and helped Steven earn an **Adobe Creative Scholarship**—making it financially possible to attend Loyola Marymount University's film program. As Steven put it simply: **"Without that program, I would not have been able to go to college."**

Today, Steven works with The Cinema Project, bringing film education to students in under-resourced public schools—extending the same access, voice, and opportunity that once opened doors for him.

FINDING 2

Meaning-Making Through Youth Media Cultivates Public Voice, Purpose, and Empathic Civic Identities That Endure Into Adulthood

Spy Hop's influence on how young people come to understand themselves, others, and their place in the world develops not through formal civics instruction, but through the practice of participatory youth media—creating meaningful work with peers, mentors, and public audiences in ways that mirror youth culture and networked learning (Jenkins et al., 2009; Rheingold, 2008). Alumni consistently describe Spy Hop as the first place they encountered perspectives unlike their own, articulated what they believed, and felt their voice carried weight. These early experiences form **a foundation for social awareness, responsibility, and engagement that extends well into adulthood.**

Creative Media-Making as Groundwork for Social Engagement

Spy Hop's model is anchored in purposeful creation. When young people make films, podcasts, music, games, and design projects, they are not only learning technical skills; they are **participating in social practices that connect creative work to broader forms of community life.** Across alumni narratives and survey data, two interrelated capacities consistently emerge as the bridge between creative practice and later civic engagement:

Perspective Taking: empathy, theory of mind, and moral reasoning

Public Voice: ethical communication, agency, and expression with intention

These capacities emerge organically through the processes of interviewing subjects, shaping narratives with peers, negotiating meaning collaboratively, and preparing work for real audiences.

Perspective Taking: Learning to See Beyond Oneself

Media production at Spy Hop requires young people to engage deeply with others' lived experiences—not as abstract subjects, but as collaborators, interviewees, audiences, and co-authors of meaning. Alumni consistently describe this exposure as transformative:

“Spy Hop introduced me to so many different kinds of people and stories... which I believe builds empathy and inherently drives you toward being engaged in your community.”

“I met people from all walks of life—it changed my worldview.”

“Spy Hop exposed me to diverse backgrounds and cultures that were otherwise hard to come by in the monoculture of Utah.”

SEEN, HEARD, AND UNDERSTOOD: SAM'S STORY

Sam still remembers standing in front of a panel of professional filmmakers to pitch her documentary idea. She was nervous—but it was what she calls “fun nerves.” “I remember feeling really prepared to get up there and be in front of people,” she said. What could have been intimidating instead felt affirming: a young artist realizing her ideas mattered, and that she was entering a space where her voice would be taken seriously.

Sam came to Spy Hop during a turbulent period in her life. “I was really angsty.” She was living with clinical depression and craving an outlet. What she found was not just a creative program, but a community that treated her emerging ideas, emotions, and identity with care. At Spy Hop, creative expression wasn't dismissed as distraction—it was honored as necessary work.

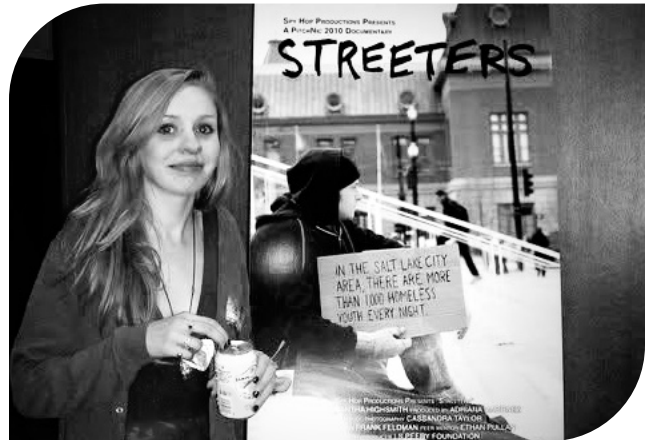
That ethos came into focus during PitchNic, Spy Hop's advanced filmmaking experience. Working under real expectations, Sam received sustained feedback from mentors and peers. She grew to trust her ideas and learn how to stand behind them. Rather than feeling exposed, she felt supported—part of an ethos of care and accountability that shaped how young people engaged with one another.

Just as importantly, Sam learned how to be in community. She learned how to listen closely, offer critique without diminishing someone else, and stay present when ideas conflicted.

“I learned how to have conversations about people's work that's really dear to them... respectful, but still constructive,” Sam reflected. **For the first time, she understood what it meant to treat creative work as something “very precious,” and to respond with the empathy required when someone shares a part of themselves.** That practice became internalized within Sam.

“On the days when the motivation was lacking, the responsibility to be there is what kept me going,” she said. Today, as a Lead Project Manager at LAIKA Animation Studio, Sam sees a clear throughline. Showing up, being dependable, and supporting others are civic acts that strengthen a community.

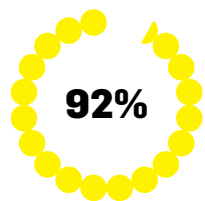
Spy Hop has shaped her world view. “You give me space, I give you space to exist and be yourself,” Sam said. That ethos—rooted in care, listening, and mutual respect—continues to guide how she shows up in the world. “I am going to be there for others,” she reflected. “I like that about myself.”



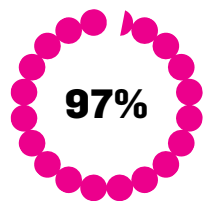
Sam standing in front of the poster of her documentary on teen homelessness at the PitchNic premiere (photo courtesy of Sam)

“**I learned how to have conversations about people's work that's really dear to them... respectful, but still constructive**”

Survey data confirms these relational shifts.

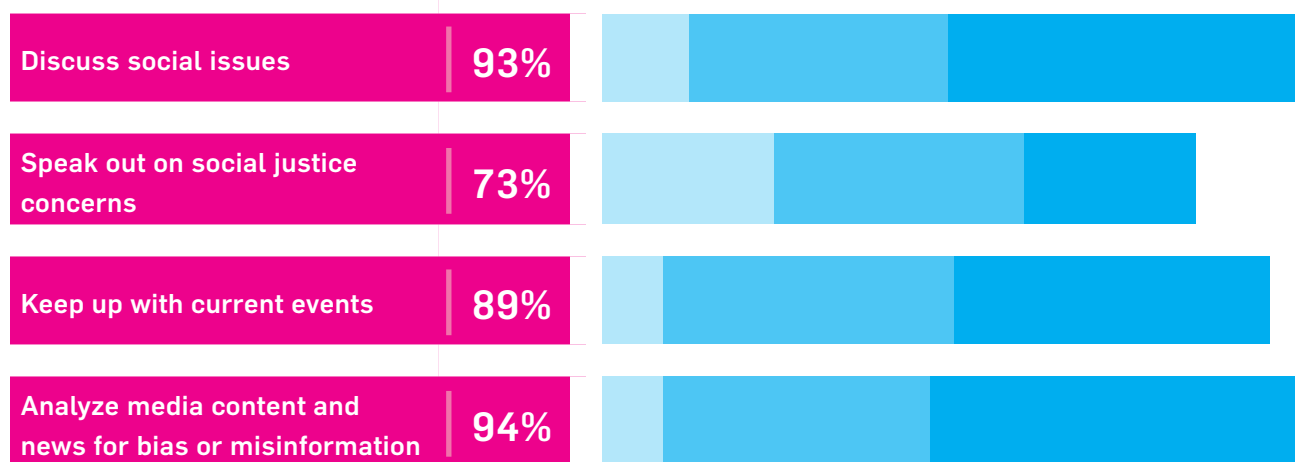


of alumni felt **exposed to different people** and diverse ideas.



felt their **perspectives were taken seriously** by mentors.

These experiences align closely with research on **participatory media and public voice**, which emphasizes that perspective-taking develops through *practice*—by listening, representing others ethically, negotiating meaning with peers, and anticipating how work will be received by real audiences (Rheingold, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2009). In this view, empathy and social awareness are not taught as dispositions but cultivated through repeated acts of collaborative media-making and public storytelling. As the table below illustrates, surveyed alumni report high levels of socio/political awareness and media/news literacy.



Legend: = Occasionally, = Frequently, = All the time.
remaining percentages answered either as Never, Rarely, and Prefer not to answer

Together, these patterns suggest a clear developmental through-line: young people who practice seeing, listening to, and representing others through creative collaboration are more likely to remain engaged with the wider world as adults. Perspective-taking, in this context, is not a generalized moral trait but a learned civic practice—one shaped through participatory media, public audiences, and shared responsibility for meaning-making.

Public Voice: Learning to Speak with Purpose and Care

This public-facing creative work is supported by a distinctive mentor stance. At Spy Hop, **mentors position young people as authors of their own experiences rather than directing them toward predetermined messages**. This form of guided but non-prescriptive participation allows youth to develop voice, agency, and ethical orientation through practice rather than instruction—a process that research identifies as central to identity formation and enduring civic agency (Holland et al., 1998).

Creative work at Spy Hop is inherently public. Young people present their projects, explain their choices, and encounter how audiences interpret their work. Alumni describe this as the moment their ideas began to feel consequential:

“*Spy Hop gave me the confidence to invest in myself and what I cared about.*”

“*If you have a platform (or a camera), you can—should—use it to support your community.*”

“*I was not being told what to do; I was being asked what I wanted to do.*”

Through these experiences, expression becomes an ethical practice: youth learn that their voice matters—and that it carries responsibility (Hobbs, 2010; Rheingold, 2008). Adult behaviors reflect these dispositions.

As one alum reflected: “I learned what I have to say is important... Spy Hop gave me the tools to keep speaking up.”

Voter Participation and Civic Engagement

Nationally, approximately 74% of U.S. adults are registered to vote, and voter turnout among adults ages 25–44 averages around 60% in presidential election years, with lower participation among younger adults. In contrast, **92% of Spy Hop alumni are registered to vote and 84% report voting in the past year, indicating markedly higher levels of civic participation than is typical for same age peers.** While only about 47% of young adults ages 18–29 voted nationally in 2024, Spy Hop alumni report substantially higher participation across comparable age groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025; CIRCLE, 2024).

From Making Meaning to Critical Media Literacy

One of the most overlooked outcomes of creative youth media programs is how media-making reshapes young people’s understanding of how meaning is constructed. Media literacy scholar Renee Hobbs shows that critical thinking deepens most when learners move beyond analysis into production—when they must make intentional choices about message, audience, and language (Hobbs, 2013).

Mickey, a Spy Hop alum, experienced this shift in the PitchNic program, where filmmaking demanded clarity of purpose. “You really learn how central your idea has to be for your film to work... part of this is you,” she explains.

Once students take ownership of meaning-making, critical questions become unavoidable. Creative choices are no longer neutral—they shape interpretation, emotion, and power. Over time, these practices become habits of mind.

For Mickey, they shaped a career. She earned a PhD in Film Studies and now teaches critical media literacy as a university professor. As she reflects, “I would say it certainly made an impact on my life.”

“*Spy Hop taught me to critically analyze and question media content and news sources for bias or misinformation.*”

“*I was taught to never take anything at face value.. I should be digging deeper into the facts.*”

Finding 2 in action: See *Jonny’s Story* (next page)

COMING INTO SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS: JONNY'S STORY

When Jonny entered Spy Hop in 2019, he carried a familiar mix of excitement, self-doubt, and **a quiet belief that he might not belong**. That assumption was disrupted almost immediately. In a simple opening activity—sharing the last song on their phones—audio mentor Myke's genuine curiosity and warmth signaled something different. Here, adults weren't policing taste, talent, or identity. **They were interested in who young people actually were.**

What might seem like a small moment proved foundational. At Spy Hop, mentors intentionally challenge the *naive acceptance* many young people bring with them—the belief that their insecurities or experiences of exclusion are personal failures rather than reflections of broader social forces. Jonny began to sense that his perspective wasn't something to hide, but something worth examining.

That awareness deepened when Jonny entered the PitchNic program and chose to make *I'm Human Too*, a documentary exploring racism against Latinos and the experience of immigration. The topic emerged directly from his lived experience as a second-generation Mexican American. As he later wrote, the project was “near and dear to my heart... something that was beginning to take a toll on my mental health.”

Through interviews with his subjects, Francisco and Vicky, Jonny began to articulate not only his own story, but the broader social and political



Poster for Jonny's film, *I'm Human Too*

conditions shaping Latino lives—moving from personal narrative toward critical understanding of racism, resilience, and structural harm.

The editing process surfaced another essential lesson: responsibility. Jonny listened to the interviews again and again, driven by a desire to “get it right.” Over time, the emotional weight of the material and the pressure he placed on himself led to burnout. “I became extremely numb to everything we had captured,” he later wrote. The rough cut reflected that overwhelm. “I’ll admit it was pretty bad.”

At the rough-cut screening, mentors didn't soften their response. Lead mentor Adam Sherlock addressed Jonny and his cinematographer directly: “I’m going to be honest... this isn't a film yet. Your message doesn't make sense, and you're doing not only yourselves a serious injustice, but your subjects and your people. **Don't let your people and your community down.**”

Jonny left the room in tears—not because he felt shamed, but because he suddenly understood **the ethical stakes of the story he had chosen to tell**. The moment echoed what Paulo Freire describes as *conscientization*: the realization that awareness carries responsibility, and that storytelling is a form of action, not expression alone (Freire, 1970).

What followed was the work. Jonny, his cinematographer Jeff, and mentor Paige returned to the editing room with renewed clarity. Through dialogue, reflection, and iteration—the **Spy Hop Push**—they reshaped the film to foreground the humanity and lived experience of the people whose stories Jonny was carrying. He describes the process as **“ingrained in my brain,”** a lesson he will never forget.



Jonny and fellow crew members with Francisco's family at PitchNic Premiere



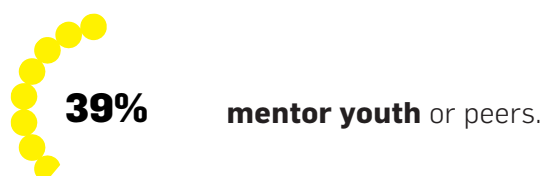
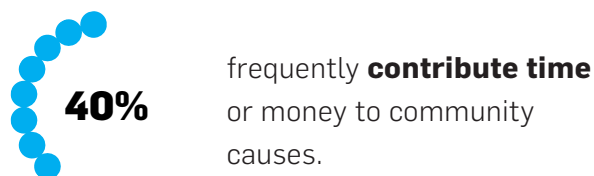
Jonny (far right) with his PitchNic crew at premiere of *I'm Human Too*

When *I'm Human Too* premiered, families cried in recognition. Posters sold out. The film went on to screen internationally and win awards. What mattered most to Jonny was simpler and deeper: **the people whose stories he carried felt seen—and honored.**

While causal claims cannot be made, **alumni civic participation rates are notably higher than national norms for adults in their age range, underscoring the durability of the civic dispositions alumni associate with their Spy Hop experiences.**



Similarly, national data from the U.S. Census Bureau and AmeriCorps show that about 28% of Americans volunteer formally through organizations in a given year, with additional informal help not fully captured in formal surveys. In comparison, 40% of Spy Hop alumni report frequently contributing time or money to community causes, suggesting alumni engagement remains robust relative to broad national patterns. While national surveys do not provide a direct benchmark for mentoring peers or youth, the 39% alumni rate reporting mentoring reflects another dimension of civic participation that aligns with recognized forms of community engagement.



Belonging, Validation, and the Roots of Social Responsibility

Spy Hop is not a conventional classroom; it is a creative youth development community (Pepler, 2025) designed as a real-world learning ecology where young people engage with professional tools, diverse collaborators, and public audiences beyond the boundaries of school or home. Within this environment, alumni consistently describe feeling known, respected, and connected to something larger than themselves.

“Spy Hop was the first place where adults and peers validated me and accepted me... still meaningful 20 years later.”

“Spy Hop helped me learn the value of community, which became central to the way I see the world.”

Belonging and voice reinforce one another. When young people experience a community that listens to them, they learn to listen to others.

When their own perspectives are valued, they are more likely to value difference.

Developmental research suggests that such experiences support identity formation, moral reasoning, and the emergence of social responsibility through participation in meaningful collective work (Youniss et al., 1997; Hobbs, 2010).

Across open-ended survey responses, 54 of 75 alumni explicitly described how Spy Hop shaped their values, ethics, or community commitments—demonstrating how participants

themselves link early experiences of voice and belonging to their adult civic identities. **Alumni connected their current roles—organizers, educators, filmmakers, nonprofit leaders, and public servants—to habits formed in Spy Hop’s collaborative creative culture.**

“It [documentary filmmaking] informs the organizing, volunteering, and social justice work I do as an adult.”

From Teen Agency to Adult Engagement

Across qualitative and quantitative data, alumni consistently portray Spy Hop as a place where they learned how to connect—creatively, socially, and ethically. As teens, they practiced critical listening, collaboration, shared authorship, and public expression. As adults, they continue to:

- stay informed
- mentor youth and emerging creatives
- volunteer and contribute to causes
- use creative and professional platforms to address inequities
- participate in the cultural and communal life of their communities

“Spy Hop taught me that film is a powerful tool for creating connection, empathy, and change.”

Together, these findings indicate that creative youth development fosters the relational and communicative foundations that support a lifetime of social engagement. What begins as collaborative meaning-making in adolescence becomes, over time, an enduring commitment to community, responsibility, and connection. Rather than being taught “what media ethics is,” youth at Spy Hop encounter ethical responsibility through the consequences of making work they care about and sharing it with others—an experiential process long recognized as foundational to moral learning (Dewey, 1938; Hobbs, 2010).

“Spy Hop class discussions often included current world events, which I think has made me more aware of local ways to get involved in the community.”

“Spy Hop helped me think more of myself as within my community rather than from an individualistic mindset.”

“The importance of real community informs organizing, social justice work, volunteering, and all the work that I do now as an adult.”

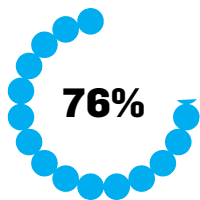
FINDING 3

Participation in Supportive Youth Arts Communities Cultivates Cultural Catalysts Who Enrich and Sustain Local Creative Ecosystems

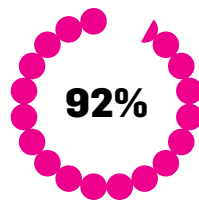
Spy Hop's long-term cultural impact does not rest solely on how many alumni become professional artists. Rather, it lies in the sustained creative presence alumni bring into the world—not only as professional artists, but as makers, collaborators, mentors, audience members, technologists, and cultural participants. Even alumni who do not identify primarily as artists carry forward a creative sensibility. In doing so, they act as cultural catalysts who strengthen the creative infrastructure of their communities.

Lifelong Creative Identity and Practice

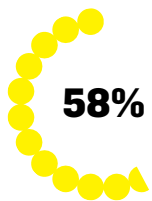
One of the most striking findings in the alumni survey is the persistence of creative practice long after participation in Spy Hop has ended. Alumni do not simply remember making art as teenagers; the majority continue to create as adults—often in the same media forms they explored at Spy Hop, including film, music, sound production, design, games, and live or digital performance.



regularly **create their own art** (film, music, writing, digital media, design, or other creative forms).



of employed alumni **apply creativity and innovative thinking** in their professional lives.



frequently or always **share creative work with others** through exhibitions, performances, online platforms, radio, social media, or collaborative spaces.

These patterns suggest that Spy Hop cultivates an enduring creative identity—one in which creative expression functions as an ongoing orientation toward meaning-making, participation, and contribution rather than a discrete career outcome (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Ito et al., 2013).

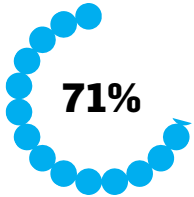
Alumni describe this continuity in personal terms:

“My confidence with problem solving, technology, building things, taking on new challenges were all things that found space to flourish at Spy Hop.”

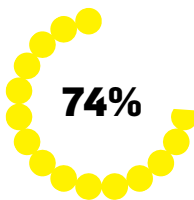
“Spy Hop didn't just teach me how to make things—it taught me how to keep making.”

Active Participation in Arts and Cultural Life

Spy Hop alumni are not only creators; they are active participants in arts and culture as audiences, supporters, collaborators, and community members.



frequently **attend cultural events** such as film screenings, concerts, live music events, exhibitions, or performances.



frequently **support local or independent artists,** musicians, or creative producers.

These behaviors are essential to the health of creative communities and align with research on communities of practice, which emphasizes sustained participation, contribution, and mentorship as the mechanisms through which cultural practices endure over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Many alumni connect this commitment directly to their experiences at Spy Hop, where their own work—whether a film, song, radio segment, design, or performance—was taken seriously and shared publicly.

As one alum recalled:

“Audiences engaged with works I created... that really encouraged me.”

Another reflected:

“It gave me the confidence to take up space and the belief that creative work deserves to be seen.”

Experiencing one's art as meaningful and worthy of attention reinforces a lifelong commitment to sustaining the arts for others.

Amplifying Diverse Voices and Expanding Cultural Narratives

Spy Hop's cultural impact is not only about volume of creative activity, but about the kinds of perspectives alumni choose to express and support. Across interviews, alumni describe an early awareness—cultivated through media-making across multiple popular cultural forms and styles—that **representation matters and that creative expression carries ethical responsibility.**

“Spy Hop taught me not only the technical skills to tell stories, but the responsibility that comes with having a platform.”

“Everyone brings something different to the table, and that makes for better art and better solutions.”

“Hearing my peers' stories definitely influenced my perspective on life.”

These reflections point to a form of cultural literacy: alumni understand that whose voices are heard—and how they are expressed through music, sound, design, games, film, or other

media—shapes public understanding. Many continue to apply this awareness in their creative and professional lives.

One alum described this trajectory clearly:

“Today, I work primarily in documentary filmmaking with a focus on uplifting marginalized voices... Spy Hop gave me the awareness that whose stories get told—and how they’re told—matters deeply.”

This orientation distinguishes Spy Hop alumni not just as creators, but as cultural stewards, people who use creative forms of engagement to foster dialogue and build new forms of meaning and understanding.

Creative Technologists and Cultural Innovation

Spy Hop alumni also contribute to cultural life through early adoption and experimentation with new creative tools and platforms.



frequently or always **try new creative technologies**, including emerging digital platforms and AI tools.

Comfort with experimentation reflects Spy Hop's emphasis on iteration, risk-taking, and learning through doing. Alumni describe carrying this mindset into adulthood:

“Spy Hop taught me how to be flexible with technology... skills I use every day.”

“They gave me the confidence to learn tools on the fly and apply them creatively.”

This adaptability positions alumni as contributors to evolving creative fields, helping communities navigate technological change with curiosity and experimentation.

Embedded in Creative Communities

Many alumni remain deeply connected to creative networks—local music scenes, film collectives, radio stations, afterschool programs, arts nonprofits, and educational spaces. Some recreate the very environments that once nurtured them.

“I went on to run afterschool programs offering art and multimedia opportunities for youth. Much of that was influenced by my experiences at Spy Hop.”

Others describe ongoing collaboration and mentorship, sharing skills and opportunities with peers and younger creatives. These behaviors help sustain cultural ecosystems across generations.

FROM STUDENT TO CULTURAL CATALYST: MALLORY'S STORY

When Mallory opened her art shop and studio in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, the space quickly filled with creative energy—families painting together, neighbors exchanging ideas, and local artists sharing their work. Part gallery, part makerspace, and part teaching studio, the space reflects her guiding belief: **“Art is for everyone.”** It also represents the next chapter of a creative life that began years earlier at Spy Hop.

“Spy Hop was the reason I started teaching,” Mallory said. “My mentors were the first to tell me, ‘I think you can run this camp by yourself.’ That changed everything. It was the moment I shifted from being the student to becoming the teacher.”

As a teen, Mallory immersed herself in two capstone experiences at Spy Hop—**Loud & Clear** for radio production and **PitchNic** for filmmaking. She learned to edit, direct, collaborate, and persist through long nights of creative problem-solving. Just as importantly, her mentors modeled how to take an idea seriously, break it into parts, and make it real. **Those experiences taught her that creative communities flourish through structure, collaboration, and shared purpose.**

The confidence and adaptability Mallory developed at Spy Hop carried forward into every phase of her life—from teaching stop-motion animation and costume design to leading arts programs in San Francisco. When she eventually launched her own business, she found herself drawing directly on the mentorship practices that had shaped her.

“I’ve always wanted to create the kind of environment Spy Hop gave me,” she reflected—*supportive, joyful, and collaborative*. “The mentors there set the bar high, and that helped me become the kind of adult I wanted to be.”

Her Phoenixville art shop is intentionally inclusive: a hybrid community space and retail studio offering workshops, creative classes, and original work by local artists. It functions as both a gathering place and a creative marketplace, lowering barriers to participation while elevating local voices.

Today, Mallory is doing what Spy Hop once did for her—**creating spaces where people feel welcome to make, share, and belong.** “All the things I’ve done have led to this point,” she said. “It’s my turn to create that environment—for others to find what I found.”



Mallory leading a maker workshop at Art Shop, the studio and gallery she launched in Pennsylvania

Cultural Catalysts

In this sense, Spy Hop alumni function as cultural catalysts—individuals whose sustained creative participation, mentorship, and support contribute to the maintenance and evolution of local cultural ecosystems over time (Ito et al., 2013; Peppler et al., 2025).

Spy Hop functions as a generator of cultural infrastructure. By validating youth voice across multiple media forms, supporting creative risk-taking, and offering real experiences with public audiences, the program produces adults who:

- Continue to create and innovate
- Support and participate in arts communities
- Amplify diverse perspectives and forms of expression
- Experiment with emerging technologies
- Mentor and teach the next generation

Even alumni who do not identify primarily as artists carry forward a creative sensibility that enriches the communities they inhabit. Through everyday practices—making music, designing, performing, producing media, attending events, supporting creators, and building programs—Spy Hop alumni help shape a more vibrant, inclusive, and connected cultural landscape.

Creative Voice: A Way of Being in the World

In interviews and survey data, alumni describe creativity not as a hobby or a job but as a way of engaging with the world. This lifelong creative identity supports vibrant local arts ecosystems and fosters intergenerational cultural participation. Alumni serve as makers, mentors, collaborators, and cultural stewards whose contributions strengthen the creative life of their communities.

“I see filmmaking as a way to contribute to a more inclusive and representative community.”

THE CLASSROOM IS THE SCENE

How Spy Hop Helps Youth Become Good Citizens of Music Communities



I thought I was teaching kids how to be in bands. But really, we were teaching them how to belong—to each other and to their community.”

—Jeremy Chatelain, Former Spy Hop Mentor and Musician

When Matt Mateus first started teaching at a small nonprofit media arts center in Salt Lake in the early 2000s, he had no idea he was laying the foundation for one of the most creative and influential youth education programs in the region.

Spy Hop's first staff, including co-founders Rick Wray, Erik Dodd, and Programming Director Kimberly Schmit, had been given some recording gear but didn't know what to do with it. They asked Matt, a recording engineer with roots in Utah's punk rock scene, to set up a studio and "see what might happen." Matt built Spy Hop's first music recording space from a converted janitorial closet, teaching teens how to record their own and others' music.

"It was chaotic but full of heart," he recalled. "We didn't have a roadmap. The idea was: Show them how to do it, and then step back. Let them figure it out."

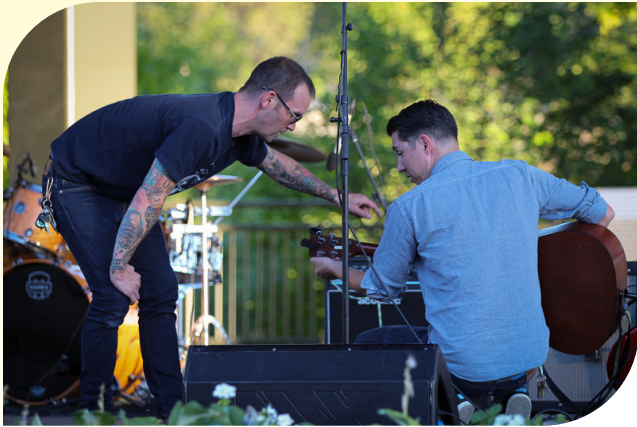
What emerged from these early experiments is what might best be described as a form of *punk pedagogy*: trust over control, access over gatekeeping, community over hierarchy, and learning by doing. The approach aligned perfectly with the DIY ethos Matt had come of age within—a world built on moxie and self-reliance, where everyone mattered and authority was flattened, not top-down.

Trusting students, empowering them with access to high-end recording gear, showing them how to use it and then getting out of their way: This authentic, hands-on approach to learning became Spy Hop's *modus operandi*. Students weren't learning about music; they were making it. They wrote songs, recorded albums, and ran shows. **Mistakes weren't failures—they were how learning happened.**

When **Jeremy Chatelain** returned to Utah after years touring with bands like Handsome and Jets to Brazil, his old friend Matt invited him to help shape the youth music program at Spy Hop in



Spy Hop mentor, Jeremy Chatelain (far left) with Mystique, one of the earlier bands formed in the Musicology class. Photo by David Newkirk.



Spy Hop teaching artists, Jeremy Chatelain and Matt Mateus setting up for Spy Hop's Heatwave Concert, 2015. Photo courtesy of Slug Magazine.

2008. "Matt told me, 'We're going to teach kids how to be in a band and start a label,'" Jeremy said. "I didn't understand it at all—but it sounded like something I wished I'd had as a kid."

Their time at Spy Hop would see the creation of **Musicology** and **801 Sessions** (now Music Promotion Apprenticeship), programs that merged performance, production, and real-world collaboration. Together with youth mentors like **Cathy Foy and Allyson Katana** (a former student herself), they would turn Spy Hop into a vibrant hub for youth culture and connection—and a key workforce pipeline for Utah's music scene.

From DIY Spaces to Large Concert Venues

The first iteration of Spy Hop's music programs, **Spy Hop Records**, taught students to form bands, write original music, record EPs, and promote their own releases. Within a few years, however, it was clear that youth wanted faster production cycles and more public connection. So Matt and Jeremy redesigned the model: Instead of year-long recording projects, students

would produce monthly live shows—booking youth bands from the community—then record, film, and publish the performances online.

That became 801 Sessions, a hybrid learning lab and live production house. Students learned sound engineering, multi-camera filming, lighting, social media promotion, and artist management by producing every aspect of the shows themselves

"We were teaching real work," Jeremy said.

"They were booking **Kilby Court** [an all-ages music venue in Salt Lake City], running cables, mixing sound, interviewing bands. The classroom was the scene." And the community was the curriculum.

The changes worked. Youth engagement exploded. Spy Hop students were not just learning in isolation—they were **shaping the local music community in real time.**

Creating a Safe and Supportive Artistic Community



Left to Right: Allyson Katana and Elliot Emery perform at Riot for Reproductive Rights Festival at Diabolical Records. July 13th, 2019. Photo by Spy Hop Alum, Amber Rose-Dwyer, now a full time photographer living in Southern California specializing in weddings and elopements.

Being a young person who's artistically inclined is already hard. Creative people tend to be sensitive, feeling things more deeply than others—and they do not always feel like they fit in with their peers. That's especially true in environments shaped by strong normative expectations, where young people who feel different can struggle to find spaces of belonging. Spy Hop meets a key need by offering a constructive outlet—one where youth can channel their creativity and find community among peers who share their passions.

Reflecting on when he was a teenager, Matt remembered the first time he discovered the youth music scene at all-ages shows in the city. "I thought: I found my spot," he recalled. "From then on, that was my therapy."

In growing Spy Hop's music education programs, one of his main goals was to help local youth find *their* spot—to fashion a secure and welcoming space where teens could just be themselves, explore their creativity, and forge or discover their own identity within a safe and supportive community. "We intentionally built a space for young people to express themselves," he said—and interviews with Spy Hop mentors and alumni suggest the program is filling this critical role.

Aspen Hinkle, an alum who was there for the launch of Spy Hop Records as a teen, credits Spy Hop as the place she started to develop her sense of self. "Seeing so many [people] becoming comfortable with themselves ... made a huge difference," she said, noting that it led her to embrace her own identity "to become the person I am today."

As Jeremy put it: "I thought I was teaching kids how to be in bands. But really, we were teaching them how to *belong*—to each other and to their community."

Teaching by Trust—and Building Durable Skills

Across the interviews, a shared educational philosophy clearly emerged: Spy Hop trusts young people with real tools and responsibilities.

"They hand you expensive equipment," said Allyson Katana, a Musicology alum and now the program's mentor. "That's how you know they believe you can do good work. It backs up their words with trust."

That trust, paired with professional standards and artistic freedom, allows students to see themselves as capable creators. **Cathy Foy**, another longtime instructor, described it as "**teaching by stepping back.**"



Musicology band, **Flat Moon Theory**, performs from their album, *The Great Typhoon* at Diabolical Records, Salt Lake City. Photo by David Newkirk.



Spy Hop mentor Cathy Foy (in black and white tee) introduces the Musicology band, Stage Fright, at Heatwave 2022. Photo: By Mindy Faber.

"You have to let them mess up a little," she said. "That's where confidence comes from. When they solve problems on their own, they start to see themselves differently—not just as kids, but as artists."

Spy Hop's welcoming and inclusive culture helps nurture a sense of community, in which students learn to be supportive of each other and work together effectively.

"Students don't just learn how to record a song," Cathy said. "They learn how to communicate, collaborate, and show up for people. Those skills last a lifetime."

Supporting the Creative Economy

The impact of Spy Hop's music programs reverberates all over Salt Lake City's professional scene, and their effects can be felt throughout the city's creative economy.

Nic Smith, CEO of S&S Presents, oversees many of the city's major music venues—including Kilby Court, Urban Lounge, and Metro Music Hall—as well as events like the Twilight

"It's good for business, but it's also what keeps our scene special"

Concert Series and Kilby Block Party. He sees Spy Hop alumni everywhere in the city's music ecosystem.

"Spy Hop-trained people show up prepared," Nic said. "They understand what it takes to make a show work—respect for artists, communication, problem-solving. That's hard to teach, but they already have it."

S&S hires Spy Hop graduates as talent bookers, festival coordinators, and sound engineers. One alum now runs the main stage at **Kilby Block Party**. And Aspen Hinkle is a Regional Marketing Manager for **Live Nation**, overseeing promotion for major music venues and festivals.

Nic believes Spy Hop's impact is structural: it supplies both the talent and the values that keep the local music scene thriving. "They bring this mix of professionalism and community spirit," he said. "It's good for business, but it's also what keeps our scene special."

Cultural Vibrancy and Civic Engagement

Spy Hop's alumni haven't just joined the Salt Lake City music scene—they've expanded it.

When COVID shuttered many small venues, Allyson responded by creating **Fairyland, a free, all-ages venue in her basement**. It's a whimsical, inclusive space for femme, queer, and emerging musicians to play without barriers.

"I wanted to make the space I needed when I was 17," she said. "A place that felt safe and magical."



Allyson Katana at the 2026 Spy Hop Annual Benefit

Every Fairyland lineup features at least one femme or queer performer. The venue runs on community support—volunteers, potluck snacks, and goodwill. “It’s exactly what Spy Hop taught us,” Allyson said. “You build the thing you wish existed, and you make it open to everyone.”

Not only has Spy Hop contributed to the city’s creative economy; it has also fostered a long-term civic impact. The organization helps youth develop a sense of cultural citizenship—the understanding that creative work carries social responsibility.

In her work for Live Nation, Aspen carries Spy Hop’s ethos of community and inclusion into the corporate world.

“I try to find creative ways to give back,” she said. “We donate tickets to nonprofit fundraisers, partner with local businesses, and spotlight small, independent brands. It’s a way to keep the corporate machine grounded in community.”

Aspen calls Spy Hop’s influence “permanent.” “They taught us to care about things that don’t directly affect us,” she said. “That’s stayed in my bloodstream.”

Producing Connection

Fostering this strong sense of community has become Spy Hop’s most enduring composition.

You can hear it at Kilby Court, where youth-created bands share bills with touring acts. You can see it at Fairyland, where young musicians found a safe stage. You can feel it when Live Nation partners with local artists, or when S&S hires another Spy Hop grad.

It’s the sound of a generation who learned that creativity is not just self-expression—it’s a means of *connection*.

“When I step back and watch a show I helped make happen,” Aspen said, “I still think: This is why I do what I do.”



Aspen, Spy Hop alumnus and Regional Marketing Director for the Rockies at Live Nation. Photo by Vanessa Holt

HOW TRANSFORMATION HAPPENS: THE CONDITIONS THAT PRODUCE LASTING IMPACT

Creative youth development programs are often evaluated on **short-term outcomes**: skills gained, products produced, or educational milestones reached. *Far less is known about their long-term effects.* What happens to young people years after they leave these programs?

The findings presented in the previous sections describe what endures in the lives of Spy Hop alumni. This section shifts the lens from what persists to how those outcomes are produced, examining the developmental experiences and pedagogical conditions that make Spy Hop's impact both powerful and consistent over time.

Across the alumni study, Spy Hop's influence extends well beyond the acquisition of technical skills or the completion of creative projects. What emerges is **a deeper and more enduring form of transformation**—one rooted in *how young people come to understand themselves, their voices, and their place in the world.*

Regardless of profession, alumni consistently describe shared orientations: comfort with learning new tools, confidence in expressing ideas publicly, an ability to work across difference, and a commitment to contributing to something larger than themselves.

Spy Hop's impact lies in the way alumni carry forward a way of being: curious, expressive, empathetic, and engaged—deep-rooted dispositions seeded in early experiences of creative agency, belonging, and purpose.

This shift—from outcomes to dispositions—raises a central question: what conditions give rise to this way of being over time? Below we identify two key mechanisms that help answer this question.

Mechanism 1: How Being Taken Seriously Shapes Identity and Agency

In this study, transformation does not refer to remediation or behavior correction. Rather, it describes **a developmental shift in how young people understand their own capacities, identities, and agency**—particularly during adolescence and later teen years, a period when identity formation, motivation, and future orientation are actively taking shape.

Transformational experiences are those that alter self-perception (“*who I am*”), expand a sense of agency (“*what I can do*”), and influence life choices over time (“*what feels possible and worth pursuing*”). Alumni consistently describe Spy Hop as the place where these shifts first took root.

They recall being trusted with real responsibility, encouraged to pursue their interests, supported by caring adults and near-peer leaders, and welcomed into creative communities where their ideas mattered. Over time, these experiences became *internalized*—not simply as memories, but as enduring ways of seeing themselves and engaging with the world.

At its core, Spy Hop offers young people scaffolded experiences that combine creative challenge, meaningful responsibility, and genuine belonging. When adolescents are trusted with real tools and invited into collaborative creative communities, **they begin to see themselves differently—coming to understand themselves as capable, expressive, and worthy of being heard.**

Research on maker-centered and arts-based learning helps explain why these experiences are so powerful. Erica Halverson’s work emphasizes that making involves not only creating work for

real audiences, but also the development of “**identities of participation**” through practice, recognition, and public contribution—shaping agency and self-concept well beyond the learning environment.

Alumni repeatedly describe Spy Hop as the first place they felt taken seriously—not as students completing assignments, but as **creators, collaborators, and contributors.** That experience of being seen and respected does not fade; it becomes an internalized sense of agency they draw upon years later when navigating professional challenges, civic responsibilities, or personal transitions.

Alumni articulate this shift not in abstract terms, but as a deeply felt change in how they saw themselves. They speak of finally having “*a voice*,” of being given “*space to feel. To learn. To find purpose.*” Across responses, alumni return to the same realization: **being trusted, believed in, and respected as creators fundamentally changed what they believed was possible for their lives.**

“Spy Hop gave me a sense of purpose and passion that invigorated me.”

“Spy Hop helped me grow from a lonely and lost 15-year-old to an adult with a very strong community and a belief that I could do hard things.”

Mechanism 1 in action: See *Cecelia’s Story* (next page)

GROWING INTO VOICE, IDENTITY, AND PURPOSE: CECILIA'S STORY

When Cecilia first arrived at Spy Hop at age twelve, she wasn't sure what to expect. She knew she loved film and storytelling, but what she found was something far more influential: a creative community where she could grow—not just as an artist, but as a person. Spy Hop became a place where she could try things, say things, and be things without fear of judgment or misunderstanding.

Adolescence is a time of exploration and emerging self-understanding. What made Spy Hop meaningful for Cecilia was that it offered the support, mentorship, and psychological safety that healthy identity development requires. As she put it simply, “I could freely share my opinions, who I was... and had total confidence it would not be spread.”

Growing up in school environments where expressing her identity felt risky, Spy Hop offered something different: *a space where she could be open, honest, and real*. Importantly, Spy Hop did not dictate how young people should think, identify, or create. Mentors listened. They respected boundaries. They made room for youth to explore their ideas without pressure or predetermined outcomes.

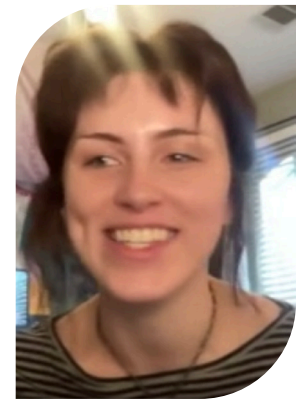
This mattered deeply to Cecilia. Like many young people, she was beginning to understand aspects of her identity, including her sexual orientation. What she needed was not direction, but a stable, trusting place to think, talk, and create. Spy Hop provided that quietly and without fanfare. “Going to a third space where religion wasn't talked about,” she shared, “I felt safe to be myself.”

That sense of safety gave Cecilia the confidence to speak openly with peers in ways she hadn't been able to elsewhere. “The first people I told were my PitchNic group,” she said. “Knowing I could tell them and wouldn't have to worry about it getting back to my family—that sense of security was everything.” Her peers responded with simple acceptance. No drama. No judgment. Just care.

That affirmation didn't define Cecilia—it strengthened her. It allowed her to continue developing as a filmmaker, collaborator, and leader with a clearer sense of who she was.

Today, Cecilia speaks with confidence about her goals and her future. Spy Hop helped her build creative skills, but just as importantly, it helped her trust her own judgment, communicate with intention, and enter new spaces with courage. She captures it best herself: **“I have a whole building of people who would stand behind me and say, ‘You're perfect the way you are.’”**

Cecilia's story reflects something larger: creative communities can be developmental havens. Spy Hop did not shape her identity—it honored it. It provided what every young person deserves: a place where voice, belonging, and self-understanding can flourish.



Mechanism 2: Meaningful Work, Real Audiences, and Belonging

Developmental research identifies adolescence as a period of heightened sensitivity to experience, during which identity and motivation are shaped by social context, relationships, and opportunity. For many alumni, Spy Hop functioned as more than a learning environment; it served as **a stable, affirming “third space”**—distinct from school or home—where young people could show up authentically, take creative risks, and form trusting relationships with peers and adults.

Learning scientist Kris Gutiérrez’s research helps explain why such spaces matter. In these “*third spaces*,” learning is not simply the acquisition of skills, but an identity-driven process shaped through participation, dialogue, and shared meaning-making—allowing young people to integrate lived experience with new practices in ways rarely supported by formal schooling.

Alumni consistently describe Spy Hop in precisely these terms: as a place of refuge and belonging. Many refer to it as “a safe and welcoming space,” “the only place I felt comfortable sharing,” or “a place to breathe.” Again and again, alumni return to the language of belonging—“*a place where I could be myself*” and “*a community that became an identifying piece of my DNA*.”

Survey data from this study corroborates these accounts. A strong majority of alumni report feeling both safe and connected to something larger than themselves. Mentors listened, took youth ideas seriously, and held high expectations grounded in care—reflecting **an asset-based view of young people as capable, expressive, and worthy of responsibility**, especially significant for those navigating stress or marginalization elsewhere in their lives.

Small Mastery: The Power of One “Spark”

One Semester, Lasting Impact

Spencer is a thriving young filmmaker who owns a production company in Utah. He collaborates easily with other creators and is known for a calm, patient leadership style on set—one that makes people want to work with him again.

Yet, Spencer did not spend years at Spy Hop, moving through a sequence of advanced film programs. A single after-school class—one semester in seventh grade—was all the spark he needed to imagine a future as a filmmaker.

Now, two decades later, Spencer still recalls walking into his classroom—nervous, excited, and “blown away” by the professional equipment and teaching artists who “knew what they’re doing.” They brought real tools, real roles, a real set—and “real respect for my ideas.”

“At that age, that is huge.” Being treated like a creator helped him believe he could be one.

“I finally had someone explain editing to me in a way that clicked.” Years later, when he began editing professionally, “all those lessons... came flooding back... like it was my guiding star.”

What mattered most was the low-stakes space to try, fail, and improve; a culture of creative collaboration; and mentors who took his creative voice seriously.

Researchers often expect outcomes to correlate most strongly with years of participation. Spencer’s story suggests something equally important: **small mastery, achieved through a single powerful learning experience, can shape an entire future.**

Mechanism 2 in action: See *Alisha’s Story* (next page)

HEALING THROUGH CREATIVE COMMUNITY: ALISHA'S STORY

When Alisha talks about Spy Hop, she doesn't begin with cameras or projects. She begins with a feeling—the feeling of walking into a space where she could finally exhale.

As an adopted refugee and person of color growing up in Bountiful, Utah—an overwhelmingly white community—Alisha spent much of her childhood feeling out of place. In an abusive and unstable home environment, she learned early how to stay quiet, small, and unnoticed. She was often shown, directly and indirectly, that she didn't matter. Spy Hop was the first place where adults looked her in the eye and expected—even wanted—her to take up space.

“Spy Hop gave me a voice. They made me feel like I mattered. They cared so much,” she wrote.

For Alisha, the Spy Hop classroom became a refuge. After difficult nights at home, she would come into the building and sit with her equipment or her peers, letting the hum of creative work calm her nervous system. Mentors noticed when something was wrong. They gave her room to work at her own pace. They believed her when she spoke. **These moments may seem small, but for a young person navigating pain and instability, they were life-changing.**

Just as important was the community itself. Spy Hop was the first place Alisha was surrounded by people who shared parts of her lived experience. “It was the first place I finally got to be around other people of color—especially women of color,” she explained. Working side by side—sharing ideas, giving feedback, laughing together, troubleshooting—she felt something new: real belonging. Creativity became the common language that connected people across difference.

As Alisha experimented with media-making, she also began to experiment with being seen—not as a problem or a burden, but as a creator with something meaningful to say. “Spy Hop gave me technical knowledge for sure,” she reflected, “but it gave me so much in identity and soft skills that impact my life every single day.” She learned to communicate clearly, collaborate with others, and trust her own voice—capacities she credits with sustaining her decade-long career in live events.

Spy Hop's care extended far beyond the classroom. When her mother died at seventeen, staff sent flowers, attended the funeral, and welcomed Alisha back as often as she needed. For someone who had long felt invisible, this was unmistakable proof that she mattered.

That sense of belonging didn't fade when Alisha graduated—it became part of who she is. **“I would not be who I am today without Spy Hop,” she wrote. Her devotion says it best: “I am like a preacher on the hill for this place.”**

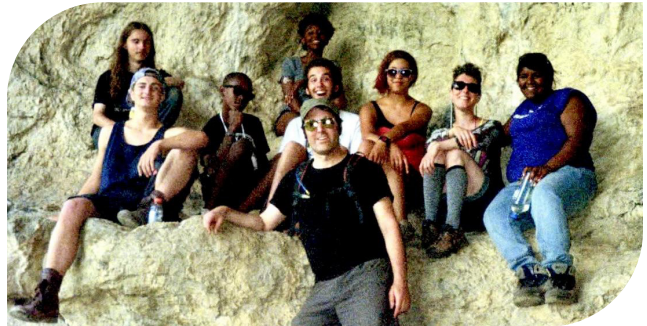


Photo courtesy of Alisha, pictured far right with her Spy Hop crew

Crucially, the work young people do at Spy Hop is not hypothetical. Youth create films, music, stories, and designs that are completed, shared, and received by real audiences. Moving from idea to execution to public presentation creates a powerful feedback loop, in which development happens through interaction and shared responsibility.

Through sustained participation in these trusted creative communities, young people learn not only technical skills, but how to see themselves as capable contributors whose ideas matter. As James Gee's work suggests, learning is inseparable from becoming recognized as a certain kind of person; at Spy Hop, youth take up identities as creators, collaborators, and cultural participants through meaningful work and social recognition.

Over time, these experiences reshape motivation and aspiration. Alumni often describe seeking work not only that is successful, but that feels meaningful and aligned with their values. Together, these findings suggest that **the quality of even short-term experiences—being trusted, challenged, supported, and heard—can matter as much as dosage** in shaping long-term trajectories.

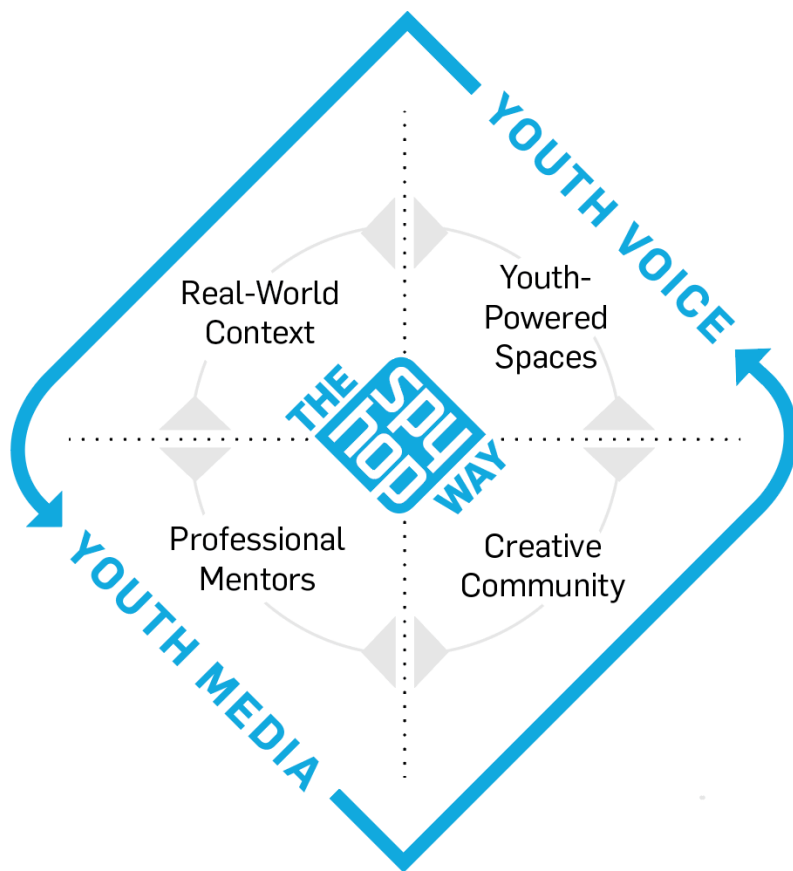
THE SPY HOP WAY: FROM PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE TO CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM

Across more than two decades of programming and eight years of continuous external evaluation, Convergence Design Lab has documented a consistent set of learning experience design principles that define what Spy Hop does and how it works. This alumni study provides the strongest evidence to date that these principles are not only effective in the moment, but transcendent in impact.

Our findings confirm that **The Spy Hop Way** is not a collection of discrete program components. It is a **youth-centered pedagogical approach that reliably produces deep developmental short and long-term outcomes**. Alumni data demonstrate that four core pedagogical drivers, each present since Spy Hop's early years, are the primary mechanisms through which transformation occurs.

The Pedagogical Drivers That Make Transformation Reliable

These drivers are not additive. They are mutually reinforcing, working together to create the conditions through which young people internalize confidence, creative identity, and a sense of responsibility to others.



YOUTH-POWERED SPACES

Safe, inclusive learning environments provide access to state-of-the-art technologies that foster youth ownership and belonging

PROFESSIONAL MENTORS

Experienced artists deliver training in media arts and literacy grounded in best practices of youth development

CREATIVE COMMUNITY

A culture of collaborative media production offers the opportunity to cultivate the habits, mindsets and confidence that inspire creative risk-taking and the pursuit of mastery

REAL-WORLD CONTEXT

Youth participate in a real-world process of creating professional-quality media projects that connect them to public venues and audiences

1. Professional Mentors: Teaching Artists at the Center of Learning

At the heart of Spy Hop’s model are its artist-mentors—practicing filmmakers, designers, musicians, technologists, and sound engineers who serve simultaneously as educators, trusted adults, creative role models, and guides. As one alum put it, they were “friends and guides — Obi-Wan Kenobi status.”

Alumni consistently describe mentors as:

- trusted adults who saw and believed in them
- creative practitioners living the lives youth aspired to
- guides who challenged, encouraged, and cared for them
- allies who provided stability during vulnerable periods

What distinguishes these relationships is not warmth alone, but authenticity. Mentors teach from lived creative practice, making learning concrete and credible. Their transparency about process, struggle, and revision transforms mentorship from instruction into apprenticeship—supporting identity formation alongside skill development.

2. Real-World Context: Creative Practice with Public Stakes

Spy Hop's curriculum is rooted in making real things that matter: films, podcasts, music, design projects, documentaries, and community stories. Youth work with professional tools, under professional guidance, on projects intended for real audiences.

This approach reliably cultivates:

- creative courage — the confidence to experiment, revise, and persist
- technical fluency — comfort with professional tools and workflows
- ownership and pride — making work that is meaningful and public
- purpose-driven learning — understanding creative work as cultural contribution

Alumni credit these experiences with building habits and self-belief that later support college success, creative careers, entrepreneurship, and leadership across sectors.

3. Youth-Powered Spaces: Identity, Belonging, and Authentic Voice

Spy Hop is more than a program; it functions as a creative home. Alumni describe it as:

- a refuge from environments where they felt out of place
- a peer community grounded in shared passion
- a creative laboratory free of judgment
- a space where they discovered and developed their authentic voice

For many, Spy Hop was the first place they felt genuinely seen and valued—and also held to high expectations. Belonging fostered confidence; confidence enabled risk-taking; risk-taking drove growth. This sequence appears repeatedly across alumni narratives and survey data.

4. Creative Community: Critical Conversations and Collaborative Learning

Spy Hop's pedagogy intentionally makes space for dialogue—about art, media, culture, justice, and lived experience. Alumni emphasize that sustained conversation and collaboration with peers across difference expanded their worldview and strengthened their ability to navigate complexity.

This culture supports the development of:

- empathy and perspective-taking
- communication and teamwork
- civic awareness and ethical media practice
- the capacity to contribute meaningfully to communities

These capacities are directly reflected in alumni outcomes, particularly their leadership roles, creative entrepreneurship, and ongoing civic and cultural participation.

BEYOND PEDAGOGY: WHY SPY HOP'S IMPACT ENDURES

What this alumni study makes newly visible is not only what Spy Hop does well, but why its impact has remained stable across decades. Alumni describe Spy Hop not simply as a collection of strong programs, but as a coherent learning environment shaped by consistent pedagogical practices and relational norms that persist over time.

In learning sciences research, this kind of durability is often described as **infrastructuring: the ongoing work of building and sustaining relationships, routines, and shared expectations** that allow learning communities to remain coherent and resilient through change (Penuel, 2019). Rather than relying on isolated programs or individual staff members, infrastructuring embeds values into daily practice and distributes responsibility across a community.

Alumni accounts suggest that Spy Hop functions in precisely this way. Across generations, young people describe learning about Spy Hop through parents, teachers, counselors, local artists, and employers who knew and trusted the organization. Many alumni recall being surprised—sometimes struck—by the level of professionalism, care, and expectation they encountered once enrolled. At the same time, the study reveals a notable consistency of experience over time: Spy Hop is understood within the community as a reliable place for creative youth development, one that young people are regularly directed toward because it has proven to be dependable and credible.

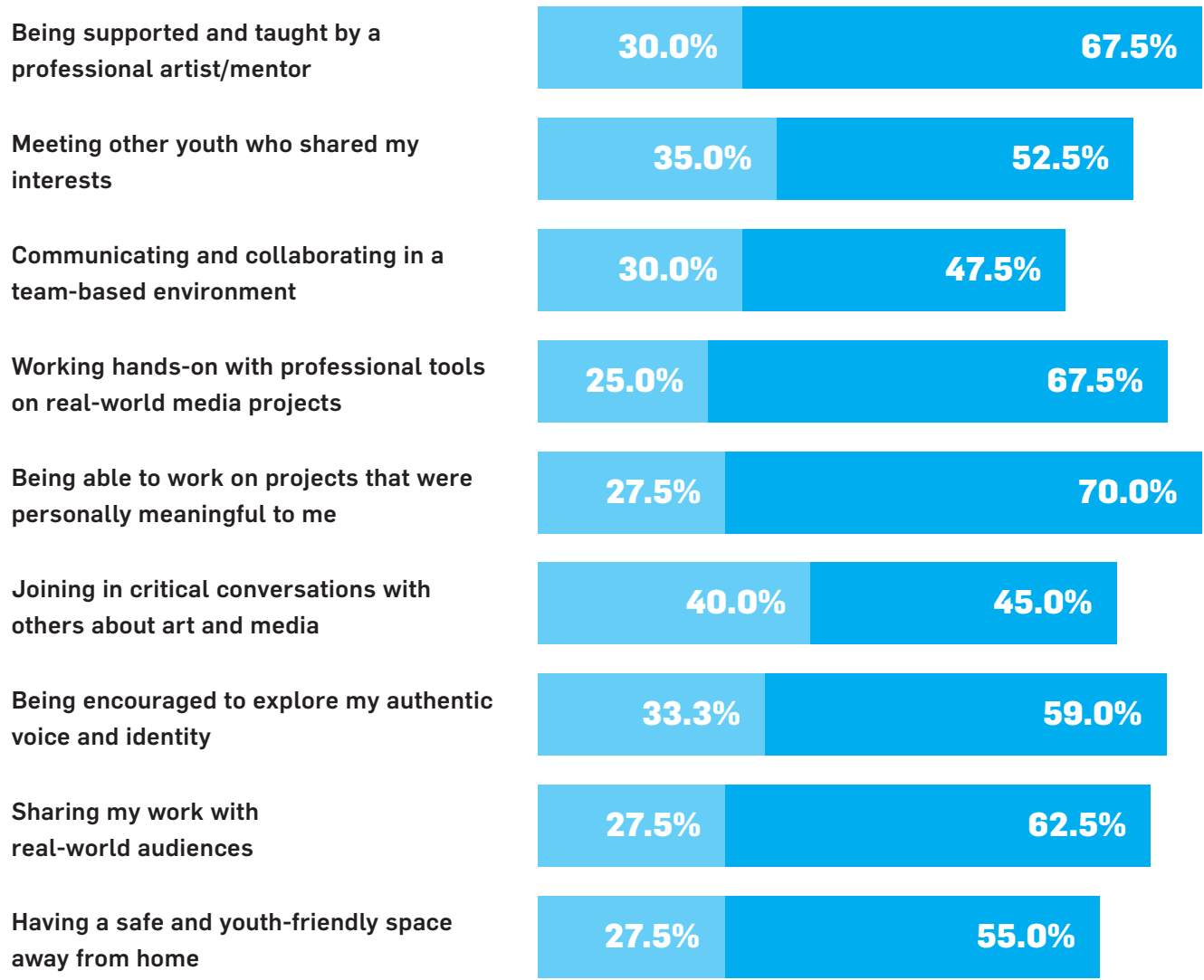
Just as consistently, alumni describe Spy Hop as a place of joy and playfulness. They recall classrooms marked by shared humor, collaborative experimentation, and moments of levity that helped build trust and reduce isolation. For young people navigating stress, trauma, or disruption—including during the COVID-19 pandemic—this combination of seriousness and joy supported sustained engagement. Research on adolescent learning suggests that **positive affect and play are central to exploration, risk-taking, and relationship-building**, particularly during adolescence.

Beyond individual development, alumni describe Spy Hop as shaping the kinds of stories that enter public space. Across cohorts, youth-produced films, audio, music, and designs take on complex issues—identity, migration, mental health, inequality, justice—through lived experience rather than abstraction. Alumni consistently describe learning to approach these topics with care, craft, and ethical responsibility, countering reductive narratives about young people with more nuanced and human accounts.

One of the most striking findings of this study is the consistency of alumni experience across generations. Participants who attended Spy Hop decades apart describe environments that feel similar in tone and expectation: warm relationships paired with high challenge, meaningful work with real audiences, and a strong sense of safety and belonging. This stability cannot be explained by curriculum alone. It reflects an institutional culture that has been intentionally maintained, even as technologies, staff, and youth contexts have evolved.

The discoveries from this Alumni Study suggest that *The Spy Hop Way* operates not only as a pedagogical model, but as **a creative ecosystem**—one that stabilizes access to opportunity, supports identity formation, and amplifies youth voice over time. **By positioning young people as artists and meaning-makers, rather than consumers, Spy Hop has cultivated a learning ecosystem that continues to shape lives, communities, and public narratives long after participation ends.**

Spy Hop Program Components Impact on Creative Youth Development (n.=75)



Legend: = Great Deal of Impact, = Transformational Impact.
 Remaining percentages answered either as Not Much Impact, Some Impact, A Fair Amount of Impact, and I did not have this experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS: EXTENDING IMPACT THROUGH ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

The findings in this report demonstrate that Spy Hop's impact does not end when young people complete a program. Instead, alumni carry forward the habits of mind, values, and creative-thinking capacities they developed at Spy Hop into their adult lives—strengthening the innovation workforce, contributing to civic life, and enriching cultural ecosystems. These outcomes unfold over time and across sectors, often becoming most visible years after participation.

At the same time, **many alumni described the transition out of Spy Hop as feeling more like a cliff than a bridge**—a sudden shift from an intensive, supportive creative community into a landscape where pathways, connections, and next steps were far less visible. This experience does not diminish Spy Hop's impact; rather, it underscores the strength of the learning environment and the opportunity to extend its influence beyond program participation.

Importantly, the findings also show that while Spy Hop is not designed as a formal college- or career-pathway program, alumni frequently accessed early educational and professional opportunities through portfolios, mentorship, peer teaching roles, and professional networks connected to the organization. These organic supports suggest that even light-touch, intentional structures could meaningfully extend the launch opportunities already emerging from Spy Hop's learning environment.

Seen together, the evidence points to a clear strategic opportunity: **Spy Hop can deepen and extend its long-term impact by intentionally positioning alumni as both a core audience to serve and a strategic asset to engage.** The recommendations below outline how Spy Hop might build on its existing strengths to do so, while remaining grounded in its youth-centered, experiential approach to learning.

This developmental pathway mirrors what ecological and learning sciences theories find: experiences in rich, youth-centered creative environments shape not only individual trajectories, but also how those individuals later participate in community and cultural life.

Recommendation 1: Position Alumni as a Core Audience and Strategic Asset

Primary Strategic Recommendation

Across all three findings, alumni consistently emerge not as passive beneficiaries of Spy Hop, but as active changemakers—adaptive innovators in the workforce, civic multipliers in their communities, and cultural catalysts within creative ecosystems. They are already doing the work that Spy Hop set out to nurture.

Currently, however, alumni are not consistently positioned as a primary audience of the organization. The evidence suggests that elevating alumni to this role represents the single most powerful strategic move Spy Hop can make to extend its impact.

Recommendation

Spy Hop should formally recognize alumni as a core constituency—alongside current students and community partners—and treat alumni engagement as an intentional dimension of its mission and impact model.

This shift acknowledges alumni not only as former participants, but as:

- Living embodiments of Spy Hop's long-term outcomes
- Contributors to creative, civic, and cultural life
- Potential mentors, educators, collaborators, and ambassadors

By leaning into alumni as a strategic asset, Spy Hop opens new possibilities for strengthening the very outcomes the study documents so clearly—rather than attempting to create new ones from scratch.

Recommendation 2: Build an Alumni Continuum Through Tracking, Connection, and Ongoing Engagement

The study makes clear that Spy Hop's most significant outcomes often emerge over time, as alumni navigate early adulthood, career formation, civic identity, and creative participation. Many alumni reported that they only fully recognized Spy Hop's influence years later. At the same time, the research acknowledges that Spy Hop does not yet have a comprehensive system for tracking alumni or maintaining long-term connection.

Without such infrastructure, the transition out of Spy Hop can feel abrupt, even when the experience itself was deeply formative.

Recommendation

Spy Hop should invest in a lightweight but intentional alumni engagement continuum that supports ongoing connection, reflection, and contribution over time.

At a strategic level, this means:

- Improving longitudinal tracking of alumni
- Establishing regular communication and points of connection
- Creating clear pathways for alumni to re-engage with Spy Hop in different roles as their lives and careers evolve

This continuum transforms the “cliff” into a bridge—supporting alumni as they move forward while strengthening Spy Hop’s ability to understand, document, and amplify its long-term impact.

Recommendation 3: Activate Alumni as Learning Partners for Current Students

Alumni interviews and survey data consistently indicate that Spy Hop provided deeper, more applied, and more meaningful preparation for media-making and creative work than many formal educational pathways, including college and community college programs. Alumni now occupy a wide range of roles across creative industries, education, nonprofit leadership, technology, and civic life—often through non-linear, evolving pathways that current students are likely to encounter.

Alumni also repeatedly expressed interest in giving back, particularly through mentoring, teaching, and sharing real-world insight with younger participants.

Recommendation

Spy Hop should intentionally engage alumni as learning partners for current students, extending its educational model through alumni-led mentorship, skill-sharing, and pathway visibility.

Strategically, this means:

- Viewing alumni as near-peer educators and credible guides
- Creating opportunities for alumni to share lived experience, career journeys, and transferable skills
- Using alumni engagement to broaden students’ understanding of what creative, civic, and cultural futures can look like

This recommendation reinforces all three of Spy Hop’s core impact areas simultaneously and builds directly on strengths already evident in the findings.

Recommendation 4: Explore Pathways-Based Credentialing and Recognition Models

A notable pattern in the data is alumni's comparison of Spy Hop learning to formal education. Many alumni report receiving more rigorous, relevant, and professionally meaningful training at Spy Hop than in subsequent college or community college programs. At the same time, the broader education landscape is shifting, with growing emphasis on pathways-based credentialing and recognition models that value skills, experience, and applied learning alongside—or instead of—traditional degrees.

Organizations such as Education Design Lab and their partners have demonstrated how non-degree credentials, often developed in collaboration with community colleges (including those serving rural regions), can expand access, validate learning, and create more flexible postsecondary pathways.

Recommendation

Spy Hop should explore whether pathways-based credentialing or recognition approaches could extend the value and reach of its learning model—without compromising its identity as a youth-centered, experiential organization.

Such exploration could:

- Support alumni who do not pursue traditional college pathways
- Strengthen transitions into postsecondary education or creative work
- Expand Spy Hop's reach beyond Salt Lake City, including regions served through programs such as *Voices of the West*
- Position Spy Hop as a trusted partner within emerging education and workforce ecosystems

This recommendation is not a call to become a school, but an invitation to consider how Spy Hop's well-documented strengths might translate into new forms of recognition and access in a changing educational landscape.

Looking Forward: Strengthening What Already Works

The findings of this study are clear: Spy Hop alumni are already performing as adaptive innovators, civic multipliers, and cultural catalysts. The recommendations outlined here do not propose a fundamental shift in mission or pedagogy. Instead, they invite Spy Hop to lean more fully into what the evidence shows is already working—and to imagine new ways of strengthening those long-term outcomes through intentional alumni engagement.

By serving alumni, engaging them as partners, and supporting their continued growth and contribution, Spy Hop can advance its theory of action into a sustained, intergenerational cycle of creative, civic, and cultural impact.

CONCLUSION

Spy Hop does not just create artists but develops creativity and meaning-making as a lifelong, transferable skill set that fuels thriving across multiple dimensions of life. Creativity emerges in this study not as a specialized talent, but as a core human capacity with broad societal payoff. Spy Hop delivers not only as a youth arts program, but as a cultural and civic force for good.

What struck us as researchers was not only the consistency of alumni outcomes across decades, but the depth of loyalty, gratitude, and purpose alumni attribute to their Spy Hop experience. Alumni do not simply point to discrete achievements; they describe a lasting orientation toward curiosity, expression, empathy, and civic engagement. These dispositions—rooted in early experiences of creative agency, responsibility, and belonging—continue shaping how alumni navigate complexity, contribute to community life, and imagine their ability to effect change long after formal participation ends.

Viewed in this light, Spy Hop functions as a resilient creative learning network that extends well beyond its program years. Alumni actively strengthen the cultural and civic fabric of their communities as creators, mentors, educators, organizers, and advocates. In a climate marked by polarization and eroding trust, these capacities are not incidental; they are essential.

The implications for the creative youth development field and philanthropy are significant. This study affirms that creative youth programs are long-term investments in civic and cultural infrastructure, not short-term interventions. When youth voice, authentic responsibility, and meaningful audiences are consistently prioritized, programs like Spy Hop generate exponential returns in workforce readiness, civic participation, and cultural vitality—returns that accrue over decades through intentional pedagogical and relational design.

The findings also point to opportunities for Spy Hop to extend its impact by deepening alumni engagement, strengthening post-secondary pathways, and embracing alumni as collaborators, mentors, and cultural agents. These recommendations build directly on the organization's existing model, recognizing alumni not as endpoints, but as integral participants in an ongoing creative and civic mission.

By undertaking this longitudinal alumni study, Spy Hop demonstrates leadership within the field—modeling reflective practice, institutional learning, and a willingness to examine long-term outcomes that are often difficult to capture. Over nearly a decade of partnership, Convergence Design Lab has observed the organization's steady evolution and the remarkable consistency of its results. That consistency, sustained across leadership eras and shifting contexts, is itself a central finding.

The core message of this report is clear: when young people are entrusted with real tools, real responsibilities, and real audiences, they become contributors to civic and cultural life in the present—not merely citizens-in-waiting. Spy Hop's alumni exemplify what becomes possible when creativity is treated as a public good and creative youth development is understood as a commitment to our collective future.

— Mindy Faber,
Principal Researcher and Author



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This report is built from the voices, memories, and generosity of Spy Hop alumni. We extend our deepest gratitude to every alum who completed the survey, shared their stories, participated in interviews, or entrusted us with their reflections. Your experiences give life to the data and illuminate the enduring impact of creative youth development across decades.

We also acknowledge the extraordinary community of teaching artists, mentors, and staff—past and present—who have made Spy Hop what it is: a place where young people are trusted, challenged, and supported to find their voice. Alumni consistently name these relationships as formative, often recalling specific moments of care, challenge, and belief that continue to shape their lives. Collectively, this community of practitioners forms the backbone of Spy Hop's developmental impact.

This study was strengthened by the insights of many individuals who shared institutional knowledge, historical context, and care for Spy Hop's mission. We are grateful to all who contributed their time and perspective in support of this work, helping us understand the organization not as a static program but as a living, evolving creative learning community.

We extend particular appreciation to Spy Hop's Board of Directors, executive leadership team, mentors, and support staff for their trust, collaboration, and stewardship of this alumni study. Their ongoing work ensures that the values, practices, and commitments documented in this report are not only part of Spy Hop's history, but are actively carried forward into its present and future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Methodology

This alumni study was designed to explore the long-term impact of Spy Hop's creative youth development programs on participants' adult lives. Because Spy Hop's outcomes are developmental, relational, and unfold over time, the study employed a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. This design allows for both breadth—identifying patterns across alumni—and depth—understanding how participants make meaning of their experiences years later.

Conceptual Framework and Study Design

In 2024, Convergence Design Lab engaged Dr. Yonty Friesem, Associate Professor at Columbia College Chicago's School of Communication and Culture, to support the development of a conceptual outcomes framework for this study. Drawing on research in creative youth development, media literacy, civic engagement, and identity formation, this framework articulated key developmental domains—including creative competencies, civic identity, cultural participation, belonging, and resilience.

These domains informed the design of the alumni survey and interview protocols, ensuring that data collection aligned with both Spy Hop's program model and relevant scholarship in the field. The framework served as a guide for identifying outcomes that extend beyond technical skill acquisition to include identity development, community engagement, and long-term participation in civic and cultural life.

Study Design and Data Collection

The study combined an online alumni survey (n = 75) with in-depth interviews conducted with a diverse group of former participants. Alumni represented

multiple decades of Spy Hop programming, a range of program areas (film, music, sound, design, and multimedia), and varied lengths of participation.

The survey captured data across several domains, including educational and career pathways, creative practice, civic engagement, media literacy, belonging, and well-being. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on alumni reflections on their experiences at Spy Hop, how those experiences shaped their development, and how they continue to influence their lives as adults.

As part of the qualitative research, Convergence Design Lab conducted interviews and focus groups with 31 alumni and mentors. From these conversations, we developed several Transformation Stories that appear throughout the report. These stories serve as narrative case studies that illuminate and deepen the quantitative and thematic findings. They illustrate how Spy Hop's core pedagogical elements—authentic mentorship, real-world creative practice, and a strong sense of belonging—unfold in the lived experiences of participants.

While each story is unique, together they highlight the multi-dimensional nature of Spy Hop's long-term impact. Many reinforce not just one finding but all three, demonstrating how the ripple effect plays out across creative, civic, and cultural dimensions of alumni lives.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends across alumni outcomes. Interview transcripts were reviewed and coded thematically through an iterative process, allowing key themes to emerge from alumni narratives. Particular care was taken to preserve alumni voice by using direct quotes. Findings were triangulated across quantitative survey data,

qualitative interviews, and prior program evaluation data collected by Convergence Design Lab over nearly a decade of partnership with Spy Hop.

Research Partnership and Context

Convergence Design Lab has served as an independent evaluation and research partner to Spy Hop for nearly nine years, supporting annual program evaluation, learning design, and continuous improvement efforts. This long-term relationship provided valuable contextual understanding of Spy Hop's pedagogy, culture, and program evolution, while the alumni study itself was designed to surface perspectives that extend beyond any single program year.

This combination of longitudinal familiarity and independent data collection strengthened the study's ability to interpret alumni outcomes with nuance, humility, and care.

Ethics and Care

This study was conducted with attention to ethical considerations and respect for alumni experiences. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and alumni were given agency in how their stories were shared. Quotes are presented accurately and with care, recognizing that alumni narratives reflect deeply personal experiences of identity, creativity, and belonging.

Limitations

As with all alumni studies, findings reflect self-reported data and retrospective reflection. The sample represents a subset of all Spy Hop alumni and may include some self-selection bias. The study does not make causal claims but instead identifies consistent patterns across multiple data sources. Despite these limitations, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence provides strong support for the findings presented. The findings should be understood as identifying consistent developmental patterns across alumni experiences rather than estimating effect sizes or isolating program impacts from other life influences.

Appendix B: Participant Demographics: Who Was Represented in the Study

The alumni survey (n = 75) and interviews (n = 31) reflect a broad cross-section of young people who participated in Spy Hop programs between 1999 and 2023. Given Spy Hop's historical enrollment patterns and annual evaluation data since 2017, the study sample is reasonably representative of the larger alumni population across program areas, ages, and backgrounds.

Age and Geography

46.7% of respondents were ages 20–28

26.7% were ages 29–35

26.7% were ages 36–45

64.5% currently live in the greater Salt Lake City region, reflecting Spy Hop's longtime geographic footprint.

Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality

71% identified as White

16% identified as Hispanic/Latino

Roughly 13% identified across Black/African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, or multiracial groups.

48% identified as women, 37% as men, and 15% across non-binary, gender-fluid, transgender, or other identities.

27% identified as LGBTQ+.

These patterns align closely with the demographic landscape of Spy Hop's enrollment over time, shaped by the broader racial and cultural profile of Utah.

Religion and Cultural Context

Alumni reflect a wide range of belief systems. The largest group identified as Agnostic/Atheist (39%), followed by None of the above (24%), with others identifying as Christian, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jewish, or secular/spiritual traditions.

Socioeconomic Background

Alumni reported varied economic circumstances during adolescence.

47.6% experienced some level of financial hardship growing up.

7.1% reported frequent difficulty meeting basic needs.

Neurodivergence and Learning Conditions

33.3% were diagnosed with a learning disability or condition that affected school performance.

Alumni described Spy Hop as a place where neurodivergent students were able to thrive creatively even when school environments felt limiting.

Mental Health

A significant share of respondents reported mental health challenges during adolescence:

47.6% experienced depression

45.2% experienced anxiety or panic attacks

14.3% experienced eating disorders

9.5% reported addiction-related challenges

At the same time, 38.1% reported no significant mental health challenges. These patterns reflect national adolescent health trends and underscore Spy Hop's role as a psychologically safe and identity-supportive environment for many youth.

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Kahlert Youth Media Arts Center
208 West Harvey Milk Blvd.
Salt Lake City, UT 84101
801.532.7500 | spyhop.org



CONVERGENCE DESIGN LAB

convergencedesignlab.org
hello@convergencedesignlab.org