

STATION MASTER: Estefania Alves's signal has been heard round the world



Estefania Alves '07. Photo by Gary Wayne Gilbert

In a converted storage closet on the fourth floor of the St. Mary's Women and Infants Center, in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood, 12 teenage girls run R-LOG 540-AM. Broadcasting "music that respects women," the station's signal reaches 2.6 miles into the surrounding city, Monday through Thursday, between 4 and 7:30 p.m. Estefania Alves '07 came up with the idea for the station while a senior at Jeremiah Burke High School and helped to found it in February 2004.

How does a 17-year-old invent a radio station?

A few years ago, I and a couple of girls got to talking about how most girls in this community, which is mostly immigrant and low income, have the mentality that, "I might as well give up now because I'm not going to make it farther anyway."

We took some ideas to Larry Mayes, head of the Log School [a settlement house], and he arranged a meeting with [Boston] Mayor Menino. I talked about a radio station, and the mayor liked the idea and helped us find funding. Eight months later we were breaking down walls and moving in sound equipment.

What kind of music do you play?

Music from the early '90s, Usher, Alicia Keyes, Avril Lavigne, Sarah McLachlan. We might have Cape Verdean music for an hour, or a Trinidadian music set. We just don't play things that degrade people who might be listening, especially women.

Is there any rap or hip-hop that is respectful to women?

Sure. Nas sings, "I know I can be what I wanna be." Often, artists will have some songs that are positive, some that are negative. Usher is a favorite of ours right now. His song, "Confessions," talks about how he cheated on his woman and got another woman pregnant. But Usher's song is about how much he regrets the mistake, how he wishes he could have done things differently.

Can you really tie community problems to pop music?

Kids here want to be like rappers, want to talk like them. And so many of the lyrics are full of swears, or are about men having sex with women and then dropping them to the side. I'm not saying rap music introduced the word "bitch," but it can make that an okay word to use. Eventually, people begin to feel that that's just the way it is, and they can't do anything to change it.

So how do you compete with commercial radio?

We don't compete; we offer alternatives. We may not reach a wide audience, but I can see changes in the girls who work here. I remember when they came in. They had ideas, but they were scared to voice them. Now, they are so vocal about their thoughts. So many times, ideas never go anywhere, especially in Dorchester. But this one got up and running. And it's reaching farther than Dorchester—I've had calls from Sweden, London, California, New York, and Virginia. They heard about us from programs on NPR, or the BBC, or in newspaper articles.

What kept you from being one of the neighborhood girls who wasn't going to make it?

I always had sports and student government—positive outlets that geared me toward believing in myself. That's what the station is about. We give girls a place to go and something of their own. Then, we make sure the experience is about leadership and empowerment.

What exactly do the girls do?

They run the DJ equipment; they are on the mike; they report community news; they interview people; they write public service announcements. We try to bring in women leaders from the community for the interviews. Recently we interviewed Kathleen O'Toole, the new police commissioner, and a BC graduate actually.

When you decided to take a stand against offensive lyrics, did any of your friends say, "Where does she get off telling us what's offensive?"

Mostly I got support. I guess some people might have thought it was kind of uppity. Even now, I don't go around mentioning the radio station. I let people find out about it and form their own ideas.

You sometimes listen to rap. How do you square that with the radio station's public stand?

That's a sticky issue, because I like the music even if I don't like the message. But until radio stations decide they won't play offensive lyrics, we have to accept that it's out there and popular and our first goal is awareness: We want the girls to be able to say, "I don't have to be what this music tells me to be." They have choices. The music can't tell them who they are.

What was it about radio that captured you?

I've always loved radio. I've always been the type to listen to JAM'N 94.5 and call in to win concert tickets, though I never won any. I've always enjoyed being out in the open. I'm interested in anything that puts me on the spot.

Cara Feinberg is a freelance writer. Alves majors in human development and communication.

Source: "Station Master," Cara Feinberg, October 2004, www.bc.edu