**STUDENT DOCUMENTARY SHINES LIGHT ON APPALLING CONDITIONS AT EAST COUNTY’S MT. EMPIRE HIGH SCHOOL**

***Senior project hopes to raise awareness and funds for new campus***

A documentary was release recently that shows the run-down conditions plaguing Mountain Empire High School in San Diego’s East County. “Rebuild Mountain Empire High” sheds light on the profound challenges faced by this institution and its community members, while highlighting their unwavering determination to transform their circumstances.

Directed by former senior Mannix Gonzalez, this student-led project embarked on a seven-month journey to document the lived experiences of the Mountain Empire community. With technical assistance from the Institute for Public Strategies, the team aimed to raise awareness of the public health crisis plaguing their school and document the student voices advocating for building a new, sustainable campus.

The film is more than just a documentary. It is a poignant narrative that delves into how the dilapidated state of the school’s infrastructure negatively impacts the physical, emotional, and behavioral health of students and staff. The documentary exhibits how deteriorating conditions like broken bathrooms, crumbling walls, and recurrent E. Coli contamination in the water, are not just inconveniences. The film shows how these daily battles hinder educational success and erode the pride students and staff hold in their school and identity.

“Rebuild Mountain Empire High” is rooted in the voices of those who face these challenges daily. In the initial stages of the project, students from the leadership class conducted a comprehensive walking assessment of the campus. They meticulously documented the structural imperfections and hazards, providing a raw and authentic insight into their daily realities.

The film poignantly captures the dichotomy of physical and non-physical conditions at Mountain Empire High. On the one hand, it highlights the campus’s visible decay and technical failures. On the other, it delves into the less visible, yet equally damaging, emotional and behavioral impacts on students. The documentary reveals the trauma and embarrassment students feel due to their school’s condition, which compromises their health, safety, and educational aspirations.

Mannix Gonzalez immersed himself in the process, visiting the IPS office regularly to collaborate with staff. This hands-on experience enriched the film’s quality and empowered Mannix with valuable technical skills. The culmination of this laborious effort is a compelling 20-minute documentary that debuted to resounding applause and emotional reactions at its premiere on June 6, 2024, at Mountain Empire High School. The response from the audience, whose story the film so powerfully tells, affirmed the team’s success in capturing and conveying the community’s experiences with authenticity and respect.

The ultimate goal of “Rebuild Mountain Empire High” is to demonstrate the need to accelerate the funding process for a new campus and bring much-needed attention to a community often overlooked. The documentary is a powerful tool to emphasize the urgent need to address the structural and public health crises hindering the community’s potential.

The premiere was a significant milestone, but it is just the beginning of a broader movement to rebuild and renew Mountain Empire High School. Students involved in the project feel the documentary stands as a call to action, inviting viewers to join them in advocating for change and supporting the community’s journey toward a better future. By highlighting issues such as substance use disorders and promoting awareness and prevention of alcohol and other drug misuse, the film also underscores the broader public health challenges faced by youth and their families in rural communities.

“Rebuild Mountain Empire High” exhibits the resilience and strength of the Mountain Empire community. It is a story of struggle, but more importantly, it is a story of hope and determination. With community members rallying for a new, functional, and sustainable campus, the documentary ensures that their voices are heard, their experiences acknowledged, and their dreams supported.

Community members are invited to set up viewings with their friends and colleagues. To schedule a viewing of the documentary, please visit: <https://forms.gle/HdbA67LzR3cb7qzS9>

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