

THE BUDDIES PROGRAM

Swaziland

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Website: <http://www.thebuddiesprogram.org/>

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The Buddies Program's mission and challenge was to extend academic and career services, to girls in rural Swaziland, so they can better compete with students from urban schools during the final year examination for the Swaziland General Certificate for Secondary Education. This exam is the sole determiner of enrollment in Swaziland's institutions of higher learning. The services offered by The Buddies Program were mainly divided to two - 1) free academic tutoring services and 2) career enriching programs. These services aim to address the repercussions caused by huge difference in schools resources and parent's income between rural and urban schools in Swaziland. We worked with forty-five girls doing their last year in rural high schools. The program ran for nine weeks and the Davis Peace Project was the only source of income.

The free academic tutoring services were a series of study sessions held for no less than eight hours per week. Academic tutors (university students) used the International General Certificate Secondary Education's (IGCSE) past examination papers and IGCSE textbook to prepare students for their final examination. These sessions were very casual allowing students to have an interaction with their preceptor - pedagogy not common in Swaziland. The career enriching programs were a series of events, usually held on a Saturday, that all forty-five girls from four different schools attended together. These events allowed for a safe space for the girls to discuss and get educated about how they can best navigate a system of asymmetric power and information in Swaziland. Often, during the career enriching programs, we would have outside guests to make keynote speeches or facilitate discussions. Our guests included but are not limited to former miss Swaziland, Beula Dlamini of the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse.

The four rural schools we worked with this past summer were Ngomane high School, Lomahasha High School, Madlangaphisi High School and Madzanga High School. Madzanga High School - our "centre school" - offered us space to host our activities, including the career enriching programs for free. The Buddies hired eleven volunteering college/university students to work as academic tutors. These tutors have excelled in their academics both in University and high school, and they also firmly believed in the mission and effort of The Buddies Program. On average, there were three tutors in each school teaching a class of about ten girls for about eight hours per week. Keeping these tutoring classes small was important and fundamental to the goals of the program. Our tutors were encouraged to have organic relationships with students in and outside class so to allow a space for the students to feel to ask academic and career related questions.

On top of working with tutors, students, and school administration - I developed relationships with Swaziland NGOs and individuals who are interested by girl education. The dialogues I had with people already talking about girl education in Swaziland were very powerful because they constantly reminded me of how The Buddies Program was unique, relevant and how it can be molded. The Buddies Program was invited to different events hosted by other NGOs where they talked about girl education or similar topics.

My day-to-day operations of the buddies program varied differently. For example, when hosting a career-enriching program I would be doing lots of traveling, making phone calls, arranging transport, organizing refreshments, inviting guests, seeking permissions from school principals on behalf of students etc. When not organizing career enriching programs, I would spend some of my time networking with different NGOs and meeting individuals that are doing different social change projects. I would also make unannounced visits to the four different schools, to see how my tutors organize their classes and assess their pedagogy. Some of my time was spent on writing grant proposals to different institutions to fund The Buddies Program next year.

The program was met with great warmth from NGOs, high school principals, parents and students themselves. I received many thank notes from the girls – acknowledging that this experience has allowed them to believe that they can do whatever they put their minds and energy on. Since most of the students do not have educated parents or siblings, this program offered space to “study/do homework” with tutors. The Buddies Program addresses a social chasm that has been ignored for long in Swaziland: achievement gap between the urban and rural schools. I believe that if The Buddies can continue offering high quality mentoring and academic tutoring through sharing stories and working on problem sets rigorously and brilliantly we can significantly see change on university enrollments.

While, in overall, the program went well, some people were skeptic about the intentions of The Buddies Program, and there are areas I would like to polish up when running this project next year. Frequently being called “too good to be true,” my initiative was at times thought as a gimmick to get voters so to run for the parliamentary elections. During my open ceremony, I had about 10 police officers listening to what the program was all about – and to quickly stop it if I am trying score voting points. In future I would like to extensively train the tutors to make sure tutees are getting quality mentoring. Another problem I faced is that the schools were further apart from each other – making it both physically and financially exhausting to coordinate the program in far-apart schools. The biggest problem we had is that there is not enough material on the new syllabus introduced in schools. So, some of our material was out outdated, but tutors worked with teachers to quickly correct that issues. It would be great to collaborate with the Swaziland Ministry of Education – but unfortunately, most of my calls were not answered and my visits to the ministry were not fruitful.

The Buddies Program has been a great way for me to start implementing my ideas on peace. I define peace as a state where people can learn to communicate with each other, learn to understand each other’s differences while celebrating their own uniqueness without fear. Education is a great way to begin creating such a state. My goals for the program is to have it continue year after year – I am hoping that after five years I will be having The Buddies “alumni” be tutors and have them share their own stories to other groups of girls.

Special thank you goes to the high schools (especially Madzanga high School), students and tutors. I would like to thank my family too, for their support and allowing two of our tutors to stay at my home for the nine weeks. Final thanks go to Mrs Davis – through the Peace Projects, you will continuously make a difference to many people for many years to come. RIP. You have left a legacy behind.

“The Buddies Program is important because it educates girls, thereby enabling them to take control of their lives. From running this program I have learned that money is not enough – you need a strategy on how to effectively use it.” Mfundu Makama