

Williams College
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“Esperanza de Todos” After-School Youth Center
July 10, 2014 – August 25, 2014
Cartago, Valle, Colombia

Proposal

My Peace Project will renovate a house that will function as an after-school youth center in Cartago, Colombia and that will target severely at-risk children and adolescents from the Carlos Holmes barrio. I will recruit a volunteer team to run the program. Through this program, and in collaboration with the Happy Kids Foundation, which owns the house, I will facilitate a space of community development and individual intervention through fun, artistic, and educational strategies for 40 children. The volunteer team will assist the children with their academic responsibilities while also teaching them artistic expression such as dance, theatre, and music. Through artistic learning, they will discover hidden talents and strengths, and realize they have the capacity and confidence to create something beautiful. Most important, the after school program will promote a new environment that teaches non-violence, respect for each other's differences, gender equality, and social justice. My goal is to help change the children's perception of and attitudes toward aggression, intolerance, injustice, and social exclusion – the type of behavior and attitudes they have witnessed all their lives in the Carlos Holmes barrio. My hope is to empower the children of Carlos Holmes to begin breaking Cartago's vicious cycle of violence, drugs, and sexual exploitation. We will name the after-school youth center “Esperanza de Todos,” which means “Hope of All” because the youth represent Cartago's hope for becoming a more peaceful community.

Background Information

Poverty, violence, prostitution, drug addiction and trafficking, gender inequality, and social exclusion riddle the Carlos Holmes barrio of Cartago. The children of Carlos Holmes have few options to fill their free time, and most spend their afternoons in the dangerous streets of the barrio. The lack of alternatives increases their chances of becoming involved with dangerous activities such as drug use or prostitution. These children do not have access to quality education, nor are their parents usually educated. Therefore, they usually lack a support system that would encourage positive and productive life goals. Many children drop out of school at very young ages in order to work and support their families. The Carlos Holmes barrio is one of the most dangerous and high-risk barrios in Cartago. The majority of its residents live in poverty, generally in the two lowest levels in Colombia's official five-level standard-of-living scale. Located on government-owned land, most of the barrio's structures are built – rarely with regard to safety standards – by its residents, housing families that have lived in poverty, high unemployment, and social isolation through generations.

Project Partnership

The Happy Kids Foundation is run by a mother-son team, both of whom are very close friends of mine, with deep roots and connections in Cartago. The foundation has worked with the target population since 2004 when it was founded, overcoming the community's initial doubt that anyone would want to genuinely help them. It currently manages a small daycare center that is run by Happy Kids' volunteer team. Two years ago, and with financial support from a local church, Iglesia Cristiana Presencia de Dios, the foundation purchased the house that will be the primary location of the afterschool center. In 2013, the Foundation assembled a team of volunteers who live near the Carlos Holmes barrio and have dedicated their time to help the resident children. My own qualifications include knowledge of the city and ability to speak the local language and navigate the culture. I also have extensive experience working with children and adolescents. I have two younger sisters with special needs for whom I cared growing up. I volunteered at an elementary school throughout middle school, and I taught Sunday school to children ages 8-15 at my local church throughout high school. Through these experiences, I gained confidence and developed the skills and attitudes necessary for this project: patience, public-speaking skills, determination and, most important, compassion. Furthermore, this January term I volunteered for the organization Colombia Vision at their foster home for young girls in Cartago, teaching dance and other extracurricular activities. During this month I created strong ties to the directors, social workers, and other staff members of the organization. I visited another well-known shelter in Cartago with 40-year history in the city, bonding with the director. My extensive interactions with these leaders provided me with inspiration and confidence about my Davis Peace proposal; I can rely on an extensive network of potential collaborators experienced with humanitarian work in the city.

The Project

With the support of a Davis Project for Peace grant and in collaboration with the Happy Kids staff, I will plan, facilitate, and oversee the renovation of a house currently owned by the Happy Kids Foundation. The house is located on Calle 10, Barrio El Rosario, close to the Carlos Holmes neighborhood, and next door to the church that regularly helps support the Happy Kids Foundation. The house currently needs furniture, a paint job, and some minor bathroom reparations. The only major renovation needed is work on the ceiling. The house will serve as an after-school youth center for children from the Carlos Holmes neighborhood. I will arrive in Colombia mid-July and stay until the end of August in order to complete this project. As soon as we are notified about our funding from Davis Peace Projects, we will take three initial steps. The first step will be to recruit volunteers. Since I will not be in Colombia when Davis Peace Project winners are announced, my friends at Happy Kids will speak to the officials at the Universidad del Valle and the local high schools and offer the after school program as a means to complete their students' required volunteer hours. Our goal is to recruit 10 students from the high school and 10 from the university. These young men and women will help with pre- and post-construction cleanup of the house, as well as mentoring of the children once the after-school program opens. The second will be to publicize the center and community involvement. In July, when the house is being renovated, Happy Kids volunteers and I will go around the Carlos Holmes barrio and distribute fliers and information about the after-school program. The third step will be to hire a contractor to conduct the two renovations that require the work of professionals: ceiling and bathroom. As soon as the ceiling and bathroom jobs are finished, the Happy Kids volunteers and I will clean, paint, and decorate the center, based on suggestions from the community members from the Carlos Holmes barrio, including, and especially, the children. In order to inspire a sense of belonging and ownership from the beginning of the project, we will invite the kids to come in and help us clean and decorate their school schedules permitting. We will purchase paint, couches, tables, desks, decorations, two computers and a printer. Because we want to inspire the children through the arts, I will dedicate a room in the house for the learning of music, with primarily Colombian instruments, a piano, a guitar, and a television (which will function as a monitor to show songs and videos for the children to learn). After the renovations and until my departure at the end of August, I will be teaching music, theatre, and dance, and helping the children with their homework, with the help of Happy Kids volunteers, as well as young volunteers from the local high school and Universidad del Valle. After creating stronger ties with student volunteers, the volunteers will have a work schedule at the after school program and with time, the center will be managed and operated fully by the Happy Kids Foundation with the help of the student volunteers.

Sustaining the Project

We will also buy and receive donations of school supplies from the community. To raise funds for operational costs in Colombia, we will hold periodic flea markets (which are very common in Cartago) and charge a small fee for particular music classes. I will also continue fundraising on my own once I return to Williams College by asking for school supply donations or possibly selling art projects that the children themselves will make at the after-school program. I will also seek funding through the FundMe website. Before volunteering at Colombia Vision, I created a FundMe website page and was also able to raise funds to buy some school supplies for the girls and adolescents I was working with. With the different fundraising projects I will run here at Williams, I estimate I can raise around \$250-\$500 USD a year.

Conclusion:

The children of Carlos Holmes barrio are not taught to thrive, but instead to survive. From a very young age, they are forced to navigate their neighborhood's violent and troubled atmosphere, and therefore have a difficult time focusing on academic success or on the ways they can improve their living situations. However, I believe these kids have a story to tell and have the potential to do more than just survive their neighborhood – they have the power to promote peace and transform the Carlos Holmes barrio. The after-school program will create a space to exercise reflective and critical thinking and provide an opportunity for the children and adolescents to express what they think about their environment and how they want to change. It will guide them to ask questions about their social and economic reality while seeking solutions together through educational and artistic learning. This after-school program, with love and compassion, will inspire the underprivileged children of the barrio to succeed academically, and therefore economically, so that they can live peaceful and productive lives and one day give back to their community and beloved country.