Children's Playground: Fostering Peace between Native and Refugee Communities
Jordan
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http://childrensplaygroundforpeace.com/

Section I:

Our project aimed to bring together Syrian refugee and Jordanian youth together through an exploration of the peaceful mechanisms of education, art, and dialogue. The implementation of these mechanisms through a summer program offered the refugee and native youth of the Jordanian city of Zarqa to understand each other's experience and work together towards community development.

In addition to the generous funds from the Davis Peace prize, an additional 500 dollars were raised through a crowd-sourcing fundraising website, called "Crowdrise." These 500 dollars helped us meet additional projects needs, specifically for our program's supplies with a higher than expected turnout of students in the project. Here is the link to our Crowdrise page: https://www.crowdrise.com/childrensplayground.

For our project, we partnered up with a Jordanian aid organization, ARDD-Legal Aid, which provides legal services to refugees throughout Jordan. Initially, we wanted to hold our program in Mafraq, the city next to the largest Syrian refugee camp. Though, from an Education survey conducted in the cities of Mafraq, Zarqa, and Amman, we realized that the immediate need for a program was in Zarqa, a poor, developing city, twenty-minutes from the capital Amman. With the influx of Syrian refugees, existing problems such as poverty, drugs, unemployment, and a deteriorating education system have worsened. While there are many active aid international organizations in Mafraq, little to no services are being provided to the refugees and residents of Zarqa. ARDD is one of the few organizations that hold an office in Zarqa. The ARDD office in Zarqa is located in Gueria, an underserved neighborhood full of refugee and native families. Most of Gueria's youth do not or rarely attend school, vulnerable to issues such as drugs, violence, harassment and more. During the summer, the girls spend most of their time at home while the boys are on the streets. After touring the neighborhoods and meeting community members, we decided to hold our program in Zarqa. As we visited communities members with our broachers and applications to recruit students, we realized that our program title, "Children's Playground, "was not capturing the essence of our educational, artistic, and dialogue components. To make our program title more representative of our program's goals, we changed the title to "Voices of the Future" whose Arabic translation was more accessible to our community members. This title embodies our goal to empower the youth of our program to become leaders as voices of their respective communities' future. From our community recruitment efforts, we registered about 33 students but at the start of the program, an additional 50 students showed up. Our original program and resources were designed for 20-25 students, though with the unprecedented attendance, we had to expand our capacity and services, which was challenging. To overcome this, we expanded our program team with staff and volunteers provided by ARDD. The additional staff and volunteers also helped us with our challenges with the Arabic language, which was the communication mode of the students. Our program was held three days of the week. To respect the cultural separation of boys and girls, we held separate sessions for boys and girls. Among the girls, there was an equal division of Syrian and Jordanians, which allowed for an effective execution of the program activities. Among the boys, there were more Jordanians than Syrian and a vast difference between the ages. Hence, we divided the boys into three different groups based on their age and maturity. All program activities were conducted as part of the education, art or dialogue curriculum. As part of the Education component, we taught the students English based on their prior knowledge of the language as indicated by the score they received on a placement test. The students were divided into two English groups, Elementary and Intermediate. It was incredible how students who could not recall ABC's at the start of the program could form basic English sentences and greetings by the end of the program. In art, the students explored and produced work in different forms of art, such as collage, painting, and pastels. Because most of the student had not explored art on this level before, we invited a professional artist to hold a "fundamentals of the art"

workshop with the students. In addition to the visual arts, the students also worked on creative writing, from poetry to prose, in which different themes of identity and home were explored. This allowed a lot of our Syrian students to contemplate on their understanding of their experiences during the war and their complex meaning of home as refugees. As part of our dialogue component, we divided the students into small focus groups in which they discussed a variety of subjects, most notably the complexities of what a *community* is. In these focus groups, the students shared their concerns about the community they lived in. The girls shared their experiences with issues such as harassment and not being allowed to attend school because of safety fears. The boys talked about their problems with the worsening public schools and not having outlets for recreation leading many to the streets. In addition to these problems, the students were struggling with self-esteem as many had been reminded by their community that their dreams were limited to the existing struggles in their life. To motivate the students to move beyond the dialogue to leadership, we invited a motivational speaker Dr. Sana Abdo. Dr. Abdo reminded the kids that nothing is impossible and with that we transitioned into our service project. In partnership with a local environmental organization, HU-Green, the students transformed their neighborhood by building a Green Wall, a sustainable arrangement of plants placed into recycled bottles. The building of the Green Wall confirmed our goals for the program as both refugee and native students worked together to give back to a community and space they shared. A testament to our program's success has been the remarkable feedback we have received from our students, their parents, and the fact that the community has continuously asked for more programs and services for them. Their support and demand for more services has also inspired us to take action to work after the end of this summer project to implement program activities through our partner organization, and for us to seriously consider ways to raise funds to hopefully continue annual summer programs, such as Voices of the Future, for refugee communities that are in need around Jordan and the world.

Section II:

Peace can be defined as a state of being. This state does not exist if two groups, living and sharing a same space and set of problems, do not unite to understand their experiences and exiting problems. Before our program, this was the state in which most Gueria community members were living in. The Syrian refugees, and the native Jordanians, both lived in frustration with the neighborhood's issues, yet never interacted to understand one another's perspective. Through our program, the youth of this divided community came together—refugees and natives—in a shared space learning, exploring ideas, art, and then together giving back to their community with service. In this bringing together of the youth, the seeds of peace that have been planted are growing into their short-term and long-term phases. On a short-term basis, refugee and native youth in the community have developed friendships and understanding, which has attracted the attention of the entire community. The youth's peace with each other will lead to the growth of peace among their adults, leading to community peace. On a long-term basis, this peace will transform the community to a place where they can resolve the neighborhood's problems. Our project has changed us in the way that we approach service and giving. Through our program, we realized that service is really a kind of an exchange. As much as we gave to the students with our time and resources, they also taught us incredible lessons about perseverance and life.

"What this summer reaffirmed to me was the great potential that exists in the youth, no matter which community they belong to. I was amazed by our students' sustained passion for learning, exploring, and contributing, regardless of their existing circumstances and challenges. I want to channel their spirit into my own life." – Farah Amjad

"Every morning, I would wake up and think what a wonderful opportunity I had been given to be brought together to spend time with such incredible students from all around the Middle East—whose stories had the power to help everyone overcome their differences and create meaningful friendships in a struggling community. The students had an amazing spark of enthusiasm and passion to learn and to lead, and with the resources we had been given, they were truly empowered to make a difference in their lives and communities. "-Wardah Bari