

Mentes Brillantes
Colombia
Williams College
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Section I

Project Goals: To renovate an abandoned house and transform it into an after-school arts center in Cartago, Colombia that will target severely at-risk children and adolescents from the Carlos Holmes barrio. In the after-school arts center, the students will receive help with their homework from volunteering high school and college students, and will also learn artistic skills such as dance, vocal lessons, drawing, theater, arts and crafts, and others. The project was previously named *Esperanza De Todos*, but I decided to change the name to *Mentes Brillantes*, which means "Brilliant Minds" in Spanish.

Details: This project was a culmination of ideas and passion for arts between a very good friend of mine, Mateo, in Cartago, Colombia and myself. When I traveled to Cartago in January, he and I realized that we had a similar vision for the abandoned house that his family owns and were ecstatic when we learned that the Davis Projects for Peace program would help us transform these ideas into reality. The house is still owned by them and now runs as the after school arts center. Overall, the project ran smoothly. Because Spanish is my native language, I did not have much trouble communicating. However, there were some cultural barriers. The way business works in Colombia is very different from the way business is run in the United States.

First of all, there are significantly more locally owned businesses than corporate owned businesses, meaning that almost every store observes the afternoon *siesta*. In order for me to travel to these different stores and buy what was needed for the arts center, I needed to catch a ride with either my friend or his family because they knew where all of the stores were located and how to get there. I would not have been able to travel on my own on the bus or in taxi because I am not familiar with Cartago at all. Scheduling did not always match up, and because from twelve to two or three in the afternoon were usually off limits, getting errands done became difficult and frustrating sometimes. Another difficulty was the fact that businesses do not usually take debit cards, only cash. Therefore, almost every day about two times a day, I withdrew cash from my bank account. This was frustrating because my bank does not exist in Colombia and so I was charged about \$3.00 every time I withdrew money. Thankfully, there were not any budget constraints. Lastly, the manual labor on the house took much longer than expected. This was very frustrating because we opened the arts center two weeks later than planned and I was not able to spend as much time getting to know the students.

Because Colombia is much different from the United States, I did not have to obtain a permit for construction work. Mateo's family recommended most of the workers we hired. One worker, Andres, who did most of the painting and basic handy work, was very kind and would sometimes bring his wife to work with him. He would charge us very low prices, and so I began giving his daughter English lessons to show my gratitude. The house currently includes a lobby, two classrooms, a patio that was turned into a classroom, a bathroom, a small kitchen area, and a dance studio. The dance studio used to be a large space behind the patio, so I had to purchase tools such as cement, tiles, and bricks in order for the workers to construct two walls and tile the floor. I also wanted the space to look as much like a dance studio as possible, therefore I purchased a large mirror that covers almost an entire wall. When the students as well as the volunteers saw this room, they were in awe because they had never seen anything like it. The list of construction equipment purchased includes paint, wood for new doors, a toilet, a sink, and plastic roofing to put over the patio, a new lock, and others. I was constantly in and out of the same stores. When business owners found out what the tools were being used for, many gave us discounts or sometimes would give us items for free. This was a huge blessing. The students will also enjoy two new computers, a printer, a refrigerator, a fan, two guitars, a piano, six recorders, congos, and other more basic school materials.

The week before the inauguration, the volunteers who are now helping out at *Mentes Brillantes*, came in and helped paint and clean the house in preparation for its opening. I had been a little stressed

that week because I did not know if would be able to open in time, and the volunteers surprised me the next morning by decorating the entire house. That's when I knew everything would turn out just fine.

Despite obstacles and stress, *Mentes Brillantes* had its inauguration ceremony on August 16, 2014 and officially opened on August 19, 2014. During the inauguration ceremony, members of the community entered the arts center for the first time, and the parents signed up their children and received more information while their kids played games and placed their handprints on the wall in the lobby.

The plan is for the arts center to be sustainable and have a very long and successful future. So, although we target the children from the Carlos Holmes barrio, *Mentes Brillantes* also invites students from other barrios. Students who reside outside of Carlos Holmes barrio are asked to pay a higher fee (residents of Carlos Holmes barrio pay 500 pesos: the equivalent of \$0.25 a day, whereas others pay the equivalent of \$1.50 a day or \$25.00 a month.) We decided to require a fee because when they came for free, the children came and left when they wanted and did not always bring their homework with them. Therefore, we did not feel it was wise to allow the children to enter for free because if they do not have to work to receive the services of *Mentes Brillantes*, then they would not appreciate what the center has to offer.

Currently, *Mentes Brillantes* operates between the hours of 9-11 AM for children who go to school in the afternoon and between 3-5 PM for children who go to school in the morning. Around ten children attend each session. The first hour is spent doing homework and the second hour is spent learning a new artistic skill. There is definitely a future for this project. I am in contact once a week with the two women who are in charge of *Mentes Brillantes* and they both express excitement and encouragement about creating a governing board, finding sponsors, and continuing to figure out more ways to provide more children from Carlos Holmes barrio the services we offer.

Section II

Peace is when you feel physically, psychologically, and mentally safe enough to be exactly who you are, to grow, to learn, and to thrive. The *Mentes Brillantes* project will contribute to peace because it will provide children with a safe space in the midst of an unsafe environment. In the short term, the children of the Carlos Holmes barrio will learn new skills and improve in school. They may also discover talents in arts or academic subjects that they may not have realized they had because they did not have the tools to discover them. Through academic achievement as well as a newfound artistic appreciation, new doors will open for these children. These new opportunities offered by *Mentes Brillantes*, which hopefully more students will take advantage of, can help lead these students away from dangerous habits and living conditions. In the long term, the more children who walk into *Mentes Brillantes*, the more children who will be able to develop alternatives to prostitution and selling drugs as a way to get by in the world. By providing peaceful options to risky habits, the whole neighborhood can change for the better.

My experience with *Mentes Brillantes* showed me that life never goes as planned and that there are people outside of the United States waiting to learn from you as well as teach you. After this summer, I am seriously contemplating moving to Colombia and working further on *Mentes Brillantes* (a thought that had never crossed my mind previous to my Davis Project for Peace). I am currently in the process of applying for jobs and internships in Colombia, as well as organizing a Spring Break 2015 trip at Williams College so that a few students and I can return to Cartago for ten days to volunteer at *Mentes Brillantes* as well as to learn more about the country's culture and history.

"I know there are conditions, out of my control, that determine who will receive a fruitful education and who will discover a passion in arts. However, there are ways that I, and others, can subtly but powerfully defy this lack of peace--by loving our fellow global citizens enough to disseminate the power of art and education. At the end of it all, a Davis Project for Peace is a huge exchange of love and ideas between two bodies that know there are greater opportunities than what the world at first seems to offer us."

- Marcela Osorio

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