

The Musical Peace Summer Camp, USA
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The Musical Peace project took the form of a month-long summer day camp, free of charge, offered to 25 campers between the ages of 12 and 15, all from Wilkes County, NC. This project was designed to stimulate the creative energy of middle schoolers in rural North Carolina, to provide artistic instruction in a region largely devoid of accessible arts education, to foster a supportive and morally upright learning environment for kids at a crucial point in their personality development, and to expose underprivileged young people to the artistic environment and opportunities of their home state. In addition to the Davis Projects for Peace grant, the Musical Peace Summer Camp was the recipient of a Summer Feeding Grant, allowing us to provide daily breakfast and lunch to all our campers and staff free of charge. We also received the support of the local Communities in Schools office, giving us access to discounts on bus transportation for field trips, discounted use of an optimal venue, and use of the ConnectEd home communications system from the Central Office of Wilkes County Schools.

Despite months of preliminary planning, once June came around many things had to be changed. The original venue mentioned in my proposal fell through but I soon secured a Community Center with two floors, a stage, a dining room, a kitchen, and a beautiful backyard. It was the perfect home for our camp and a true stroke of luck. The guest presenters and musicians, who had all expressed their enthusiastic willingness to help in our communications while I was still at school, proved difficult to secure. I changed paths, going less for the local professional musicians and more for the members of the community who were either employed as arts educators or, like myself, had followed their artistic interests away from Wilkes County and were only back in NC for the summer. In this way I developed a staff of instructors to teach percussion, music theory, drama, visual arts, basic strings, group chanting, yoga, and zumba. I rounded out the schedule with music history lessons, voice classes, music form and genre lessons, and free private voice lessons for any interested camper taught before and after the regular camp day. The classes and lessons proved hugely successful and resulted in an astounding final performance during which even the shiest campers performed solo songs, raps, and monologues.

The field trips I had planned fell outside the regulations of the available student busing and the camp was refused a discount that would have made certain tickets possible. I changed course and scheduled field trips to educational programs instead, taking the students to hear a final dress rehearsal of an opera summer camp at the NC School of the Arts and a final concert of a string orchestra and percussion ensemble at the Appalachian University Canon Institute. These two trips proved hugely successful as they allowed for the opportunity to tour the campuses, witness varying musical ensembles, and participate in Q&As with student-age musicians. We also had the unanticipated opportunity to teach progressive lessons on concert educate, musical criticism, and performance analysis. Because of the campers' extraordinary good behavior and profound interest in the field trip experiences, I added a third trip half way through the camp. We went on a backstage tour of an amphitheater located just outside the county line, learned about cast meetings, saw a light and sound board, heard a presentation by backstage techies, and then had VIP seats for an outdoor musical theater performance of a traditional Appalachian murder tale, "Tom Dooley."

Those directly benefitted by the camp were the twenty-five middle and early high school students who were our campers for the month long learning experience.. The average camper was from a low-income household, usually left home alone unoccupied for the summer months, and had a strong interest in music and the arts with little or no access to musical instruction. However, the families of the campers have also greatly benefitted from the project, as reported by several parents, in that their children have become interested in their educations, curious about the possibility or pursuing music lessons, and far more engaging and positive in general. The camp not only fed and occupied these 25 students for the entire month of July, but also put the campers in direct contact with the individuals in their community who have the resources and energy to guide them towards an arts-filled future, no matter what their financial status may be. The camp's immediate legacy is in its impact on the characters of the participants; no participant left camp without being enrolled in either school chorus, school band, or community theater. But the impact extends deeper than their school enrollment, touching on important character factors. As one parent remarked upon picking her camper up on the last day, "I can't believe what's happened in this one month: usually when I get home from work she's on the couch with TV blasting and I'm too tired to do anything about it. But for the last few weeks I've come home to her plunking around on a fake piano she drew on the front step, singing along under her breath. Now she tells me she needs a job so she can save for a real keyboard. It's not just the new love music that makes me so thrilled, it's this new

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work ethic and the idea of earning the tools to achieve what you love.” – Debbie Lynn, parent of camper Hollie Lynn.

The most frequently asked question of camp was whether or not there would be a next year. Although I’m unable to provide a definite response based on my graduation date and Fulbright application, the support of the community, the success of the project, and the general reception and transformation of the campers leans strongly towards a repeat performance. Several of the older campers naturally took on leadership roles in the later weeks and expressed interest in working as “counselors” or volunteers for a future camp. I am in conversation with local individuals and community arts groups about the creation of a permanent annual camp based on this summer’s version that would keep me out of a central administrative role, involved rather as a template reference and possible guest instructor. In this way, the camp could begin to blend with the community more fully and the atmosphere of support, positivity, and creativity would not seem isolated to “Camp” but could weave into all of the campers’ experiences.

For me, peace is not a neutral state. It is not the absence of conflict or the lack of stimuli. Peace vibrates with positive energy, both the kinetic energy of being involved in uplifting actions and the potential energy of change, renewal, creation, and support. Peace is both achievement and belief. It is anticipation, voyage, and celebration. My project aimed to involve children in the entire process of peace by taking them on a four-week artistic journey in which they were required to discover and conquer their fears, discover and nurture their talents, and discover and celebrate each other. In the short term, these students have new skills that put them ahead in school and open new doors for their futures, new friends that share a constructive and expressive outlet and interest away from the local drug and crime scene, and a new confidence in themselves and their educations that will help them succeed from within an oppressive socio-economic bracket. Music and arts, strange as it may sound, are not peaceful by nature. They are rebellious and provocative. In addition, access to music and arts education is in no way equal and universally available. Yet the language of music is an equalizer and knowledge of music history is a perfect way to understand cultural change and union. This project put a heavy focus on teaching the campers the language of music and continuously highlighting the importance of respecting the evolution of music and other arts as a mirror of our evolution as a species.

This being said, the long-term effects of the camp are many. First off, heavy creativity stimulation in early adolescence (such as provided during this camp) has been proven as the number one way to improve cognitive development and kick-start a lifelong cycle of creative thinking. Second, self-confidence traditionally plummets amongst poor and poverty-stricken adolescents upon entering high school. This camp worked continuously to boost confidence, teach self-respect and universal respect, and combat irrational feelings of failure by providing numerous opportunities for low-stakes testing and solo and group performance. Because of the extreme malleability of the personality during early adolescence, the effects of this camp will be seen for years and years to come.

I began this project with a strong desire to share positivity and fun using my favorite language: music. On a personal level, I was feeling disoriented, a twenty-two year old opera singer unsure of whether she should continue to pursue a career as a classical musician or if her time was up and academia was her future. I felt selfish and egotistic in my conservatory lifestyle. I thought being around children, teaching them how fun music is, how important the arts are, might bring me some clarity and show me whether or not work as an educator was in my future. I come away completely ecstatic. I have never been prouder or more forgiving of myself in my entire life. The lessons I hoped to teach to my campers (self-love, appreciation of gifts, hard work, support of colleagues) have worked ten-fold on me. I realize that my campers loved me not because of my voice or my degrees or my organization skills, but because I spoke kindly and gave them snacks. Because I always let them try again and always clapped the loudest. This project showed me the reality of youth, wiped clean of trope complaints of technology and laziness: every generation is a fresh start, waiting for positive attention, high expectations, and a good example to follow. In my attempt to teach art, I realized the importance and power of self-expression within a supportive environment and have vowed to dedicate my life to both expression and the creation of such environments.

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