

Computers for Orphans: Bringing the World to the Heart of Jamaica

Jamaica

International Student House - Washington, DC

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Section I

The goals of this project were to cultivate computer literacy and information technology skills, bridge the digital divide, and expand the worldview of the residents of the Hanbury Home for Children, a facility for orphaned, abandoned and abused children in central Jamaica. To that end, we set up a computer lab and media library with five new desktop computers, a printer and a whiteboard, installed 33 educational software programs, connected hi-speed Internet, and conducted four formal training sessions and two workshops with the children and staff.

The five new computers, the printer, and accessories were purchased from a local supplier in Mandeville, Jamaica. They were set up and networked the day after our arrival. The firm's technician was on hand during the two weeks of our project to assist and troubleshoot as we adjusted the system. Since the computers constituted a large percentage of the budget, purchasing the computers locally represented an important investment in the community's economy as well as its underprivileged youth.

The 33 educational software programs were chosen carefully for coverage of all age groups and subject areas. Programs ranged from phonics games to a high school homework help program, from basic reference software to programs which would share our American cultural heritage or build awareness of the African heritage of many of the children. Installing the software occupied three days.

Connecting the lab with hi-speed Internet took a week. Upon arrival, the Home's office was using an unreliable dial-up service. We discovered that hi-speed Internet was available from a competitor at a cheaper price, set it up in the computer lab, and paid for the first month. After several days of enjoying the greatly improved Internet access, the Home's administration decided to switch Internet providers.

Formal and informal computer training occurred throughout the project. As we handled technical arrangements, the children would crowd into the lab to watch and play. In small numbers this was a learning opportunity, but as more children inevitably rushed in, it became difficult to maintain order. In the second week, we conducted training sessions on the computers and software with the older children. The Home's office assistant and in-house kindergarten teacher were also trained. With the four most computer-savvy children, we did a special session on word processing and data spreadsheets. Finally, we held two workshops: one on growing up, and the second on social media such as email and blogs.

The project went surprisingly smoothly, with no significant communication problems and good support from the Home. The two biggest surprises were the prior existence of a computer network for the children and the security situation. Prior to arrival, we understood that the Home had no computers for use by the children. In fact, there was already one CPU connected with seven monitors, which we integrated into the new network. Unfortunately, the rapid expansion of the lab posed an unforeseen security risk. We learned from the Home's very concerned director that nearby schools had suffered major thefts from their labs. The director has since ordered a metal grill for the lab's door and windows.

The long-term sustainability of the project was of foremost concern. First, a two-year warranty on parts and labor with on-site service was purchased from the supplier. The firm's technician has been a frequent presence at the Home, ensuring that both he and the Home's staff are now familiar with one another. Second, a fund with the local Rotary club was established with 10% of the project grant for upkeep and improvements to the lab. Great efforts were made to invest the club in the oversight of the project and club members made substantial time contributions to the project. Other sustainability measures included furnishing two sets of back-up copies of the software, incorporating the Home's staff as often as possible in our activities, and preparing a special report for the Home with a summary of what we did, where everything is, all contact information, and an inventory.

The project is designed to benefit the 73 children of Hanbury Home. The greatly increased computing power will allow more children to work on the computers. The software will encourage the children to play on the computers and build their familiarity and comfort with information technology even as it reinforces their in-school learning. The Home's kindergarten teacher is excited to work with the

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youngest children on the new toddler games. The older children will be able to do Internet research and print their school assignments. The Home's director also plans to request a civil service technology volunteer to tutor the children, and the youth branch of the Rotary club is assembling an IT volunteer program at the Home. After the social media workshop, many of the children set up their first email addresses and learned to use a search engine. We hope this new arena will expand their perceptions of the world, while the skills they will build will improve their opportunities for college and better jobs.

Section II

While our project had concise and narrow objectives to achieve at the implementation level, it did have broader goals: a goal to cultivate peace, a goal to share our experiences, a goal to help understand each other better, and a goal to create hope for a better, more peaceful future together. It is with these goals in mind that on August 17 of this year, we had embarked on our journey to Mandeville, Jamaica, carrying with us high tech computers, educational software, fast Internet connection, and most importantly, a message of peace and equality for the poor, disadvantaged, and unprivileged kids of the Hanbury Home for Children.

To us, peace is justice. Every human being has a yearning for justice and, we believe, when there will be justice, there will be peace. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." While there are injustices at virtually every level in our societies, at home and abroad, our project tried to address the injustice or inequalities at a much deeper level: at the level of the abandoned, the abused, and the orphans in our global society. We feel that we all have a special responsibility towards these children, because they are deprived of the most beautiful gift of our human life, that is, the unconditional love of our parents.

Our project strove to bring these disadvantaged children to the same level as their peers, not only in their own country, but also in countries around the world. In our new globalized world, which is linked up by communication devices and organized around information resources, technology has become one of the most effective and rapid equalizers of opportunity. We hope that these children also become productive and responsible members of our global village and eventually become agents of peace and justice themselves.

This project was a learning experience for us as well. At the individual level, we both learned the value of working together, despite differences at times, to achieve greater good for others. At a broader level, we both feel assured that global peace is achievable. Working with the children, we saw the spark in their eyes, their inquiring minds, and their desire to better themselves. We felt our presence there was a ray of hope for them. The children wanted to spend all their time around us. They wanted to know as much about us as we wanted to know about them. As days went by, we felt a bond with each other. And this bond is the nomenclature of the global citizenship we seek to achieve.

"While we know that peace cannot be achieved instantaneously, with the persistence of individual hard work, the collective courage to make sacrifices for higher ideals, and strong commitment from organizations like the Davis Projects for Peace, we have learned that achieving peace and justice is within our abilities." - Adnan Kummer

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