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Title: Talk for Tomorrow (it was originally “University Students: Challenging the Status Quo, Doing Their Part for Peace)

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Project Summary

With the funds provided by the Kathryn Wasserman Davis Foundation I have organized and planned four major activities during June, July and August 2007. Most of the activities were focused around breaking prejudice and stereotypes between students of Serbia and Kosovo; meanwhile, peace building, dialogue and promotion of tolerance were emphasized through roundtable discussions, workshops, visits and social interaction.

The first activity of the initiative was the meeting of the core group of activists in Belgrade, Serbia between June 15 and 17. The group was comprised of students who have studied abroad and were looking forward to utilizing their experience in the project. During the three days in Belgrade the team discussed the future activities of the initiative.

During the second activity the students from Belgrade came to Prishtina, Kosovo on June 29 and stayed until July 2. The sessions were held at the premises of the regional NGO Youth Initiative for Human Rights and revolved around finding new ways to enhance cooperation between universities in Serbia and Kosovo.

The main activity of the project was held between July 14 and 19 in Prishtina and was named “Beyond Differences.” Five students from Serbia and five students from Kosovo, who were selected through an application process, lived together in a flat, where they interacted, socialized, cooked, and even organized parties together. During the day they attended various meetings with high ranking government officials, important personalities from the opposition and the NGO sector. Also, the group did community service in the Prishtina region during which it distributed packages to impoverished families with different ethnic backgrounds (Albanian, Serbian, Roma, etc). Meanwhile the last activity was a street action, which was held in the main city square where messages for peace were written down on white fabric. Random passers-by contributed with their thoughts and messages, and also had a chance to meet the Serbian and Kosovo students who participated in the project and learn about the project.

The videoconference was held on August 2 in the Telemedicine Center of Kosovo in Prishtina and at the premises of the British Council in Belgrade. The videoconference was broadcasted in the local media and sparked the interest in a number of organizations, such as the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network. There were around 25 active participants in the videoconference, while the topic of the videoconference was “Common Problems: Inherited Prejudice.”

All the activities of the project were recorded by one of the participants of “Beyond Differences” and will be turned into a documentary by mid September. (The documentary can be viewed online at www.talkfortomorrow.com starting September 20th). The funds for this documentary were received through a grant application from the Youth Initiative for Human Rights. The documentary will reflect on the events, socialization and the future prospect of the initiative.

Objectives

The main goals of the project were the following:

- Promote cross-regional dialogue in the Balkans
- Educate each other about our respective cultures through direct interaction
- Build strong friendships through living and working together
- Give an opportunity to young people to move away from their prejudices by getting to know each other
- Discuss general stereotypes and prejudices and find ways to help the society move away from them
- Familiarize young people with videoconference technology, so that they use it for personal development in the future
- Through the wonders of technology present a more amiable image of the region
- Present an alternative image of Kosovo and Serbia, not as it is portrayed in the media
- Provide first hand education to young people about society in Serbia and Kosovo respectively

- Engage students in taking an active role to influence their society, especially through the project ideas that will be generated during “Beyond Differences”
- Through documenting the changes in the lives and perspectives of the participants of “Beyond Differences” affect the attitudes of the viewers of the documentary as well
- Through the documentary, show to a wider audience that students from Kosovo and Serbia can live together; also that they are willing to learn more about Kosovo’s society and vice versa.
- Through concrete results of the students’ joint efforts, such as the documentary, community service and the organized street action, prove that the youth of Serbia and Kosovo can cooperate
- By having students from Serbia visit Kosovo and vice versa, prove that the safety situation in both countries has improved
- Promote the initiative by broadcasting the documentary on TV and organized public showings

Project Results and Implications

- Ten students from Serbia and Kosovo were brought together for five days in Prishtina. Students were able to learn from each other and move away from their inherited prejudices.
- As originally intended, the location, Montenegro, was replaced by Prishtina, Kosovo. Although the latter was not a neutral place, it had its significance because it allowed students from Serbia to learn first hand about the reality in Kosovo (different from the image given by history, media, politicians, etc). Meanwhile, Albanians of Kosovo understood that one could live and cooperate with Serbs in the post-conflict Kosovo despite the preconceived difficulties or ‘coexistence impossibility.’
- The emphasis in creating dialogue was through an active living approach (instead of constantly talking and exploring ways of communication inside the apartment). We visited sites, participated on a community action, organized a street action, met people from the civil society and political structures, attended workshops, socialized, and experienced the nightlife of Prishtina. These all provided the participants with different perspectives on the reality of Kosovo and its people.
- The community Service brought the students together (moved away from their differences) and strengthened their bonding. Their focus was in a third party (those in need) instead of themselves. Helping others allowed them to identify what they have in common.
- Street Action with “Messages for the Future” – Allowed the group to take its activism and reality out to the world, outside the apartment. We showed the community in Kosovo that we could cooperate and actually do things together. The importance was that ordinary people saw us, were curious of what we were doing, and were even inspired to write their own messages for the future.
- The problem with the video-conference was that some students started to take sides and move away from dialogue. There was though a contrast in the views and ways of communication between those who participated in Beyond Differences and those who did not.
- Recruitment was more difficult than originally imagined. It was hard to convince students before hand that it is secure to come live in Prishtina with one another for five days.
- The event achieved to establish a core group of students who in the future will cooperate to further the peacebuilding efforts between the two ethnic groups – more specifically to continue with and develop the idea of video-conferences between universities of the region and also from around the world.
- With these activities we managed to break some of the stereotypes that are predominant among youth in both Kosovo and Serbia today. Also, through living together these young people learned about each other and have moved away from their differences and have understood that all face similar problems
- A young Serbian journalist was inspired by the idea of the project that she decided to write a profile on the project in a bi-weekly regional national Magazine in Serbian which could be found on our website.
- www.talkfortomorrow.com is available online. A wider audience could read more about the project, events and also the documentary called “Beyond Differences.”
- We were in partnership with Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Fare Verde and another 100 Projects for Peace initiative called After Kosovo.

Future Prospects

- Upcoming video-conferences between Belgrade, Prishtina, universities around the region and the world
- Organize a street action in Belgrade, Serbia so we can raise awareness about the existing efforts of both Albanians and Serbs that are working toward reconciliation
- Turning Talk for Tomorrow [Do for Tomorrow] into an NGO that will have access to new funds
- Continue to organize events that have a community impact about local, regional, and global issues

