

YOUTH & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN VALLE DE ANGELES, HONDURAS

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of ongoing poverty, political instability, and recent natural disasters, Honduras has experienced an increasing number of children left without family support and forced to find homes on the streets. Children engrossed in street culture are more vulnerable to violence, and quickly become ostracized from larger society.¹ Furthermore, when children experience poverty and violence from a young age, they are more likely to perpetuate these same cycles, making meaningful social change increasingly difficult.

Due to these circumstances, orphanages play a vital role in maintaining a stable environment for vulnerable youth. Consequently, effective programs that link orphanages to surrounding communities and emphasize peace, education, and self-empowerment are of the utmost importance. Grassroots initiatives focusing on youth can promote peace and stability in Honduras by providing new opportunities and building on the strengths of each local community.

PROJECT OUTLINE

In order to combat the growing disconnect between vulnerable youth and society at-large, we plan to open a community center as an expansion of a newly established orphanage in Valle de Angeles, Honduras that will engage youth in education, safety, self-empowerment, and community life. We will achieve this by partnering with Children's Villages of Honduras (CVoH), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization we have been in contact with since Ariel volunteered with them in 2006. Executive Director of the Valle de Angeles orphanage, Jeff Ernst, is working to establish the community center, which we will help open with funds from this grant (see Budget). Throughout the summer, we will engage the youth and local community in taking ownership of the project, as countless research has demonstrated improved project sustainability when local residents are involved.² During the first few weeks, this will include furnishing and equipping the center with desks, school supplies, and recreational materials, as well as advertising the opening of the center using flyers, meeting with community leaders, and speaking at local events. The new center will strengthen ties between the orphanage and the surrounding community by providing a space for both the orphans and local clubs and organizations to convene, thus encouraging interaction and learning for all. As such, the community center will promote peace, unity, and civic engagement in the area.

Once the community center is operating by mid June, we will use the facility to engage the orphans and community members of all ages in educational programming. Drawing from a variety of sources, including Support for International Change, Right to Play, and The AIDS Support Organization, we are finalizing a culturally appropriate curriculum to teach classes on general health, hygiene, nutrition, and sexual education. By using innovative, multi-faceted approaches to teach the youth, such as skits, dramas, sports, and formal lectures, we will educate the children in a manner that inspires creativity, self-empowerment, and teamwork. After several weeks of lessons, we will unite our students into a health club, selecting the best students as leaders to continue to educate themselves and others. In this way, the health education program will be sustainable even after our departure. In fact, our final assignment for the students will be

¹ Jeff Ernst, Executive Director of Children's Villages of Honduras, formerly Tierra Santa Support Inc.

² Israel, Barbara A. et al. *Health Education Quarterly*. 21:2, 1994; Fawcett, Stephen B. et al. *American Journal of Community Psychology*. 23: 5, 1995; Purdey, Alice F. et al. *Health Education & Behavior*. 21:3, 1994.

to creatively teach the rest of the community what they have learned, thus fostering full-fledged community participation. This health curriculum will be a template for future classes and civic engagement in other subjects as well. As such, we will not only be providing health education in Valle de Angeles, but also inspiring and setting up a model for positive social change in the area.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

By the end of the summer, we will have a fully functional community center that will provide a space for classes, workshops, and local events. The center will be an extension of the orphanage and will also be available to community members. According to Jeff Ernst, most orphanages are "very isolated from the community and do not focus any (or relatively little) efforts beyond their own gates... There is a perception that hogars [orphanages] are a drain on the communities in which they are located and the children are often ostracized as a result. We hope to change this perception and in effect promote peace amongst the inhabitants of the community and the children who reside in hogars. We intend to involve our children in the projects we undertake, providing them with opportunities to learn important skills like leadership and teamwork while building self-efficacy, social competence, a positive self-identity and a belief in the future." The new community center has the potential to accomplish these goals while integrating the new orphanage into its surrounding area, thereby promoting peaceful and sustainable development for the entire community.

In addition to opening the center, by the end of July we will have taught approximately 15 classes and 150 people, empowering our students to make their own positive behavioral changes to improve general health and wellness. As such, we will be enabling peaceful, upward mobility for the orphans and community members to break the too common cyclical pattern of violence and poverty. Our work will also help establish infrastructure for future education in this area. Our curriculum, which emphasizes sustainability via peer education and club formation, will be far-reaching and long-lasting because of the multiplier effect whereby our students will continually teach themselves and others.

It takes a village to raise a child. This project will help create that village through peaceful collaboration between the orphanage and the local community. Resolving the existing problems at their roots will leave fewer children vulnerable to violence without homes and families.

ABOUT THE APPLICANTS

Ariel Gandolfo studies International Relations and Latin American politics at Pomona College and has extensive experience with community development in Latin America. In 2006, Ariel volunteered at CVoH's orphanage in Comayagua, Honduras, and has since sought to work in humanitarian aid and international development. Beyond Honduras, Ariel has taught English in rural Peru and spent several months in Ecuador working with indigenous youth. He is thrilled at the prospect of returning to Honduras, and hopes to use his academic and work experience for the benefit of the community that taught him so much nearly five years ago.

Danny Low, a pre-medical, anthropology student at Pomona College, is committed to healthcare education and working with vulnerable youth. After teaching health classes for several months in East Africa, Danny developed a curriculum specific to Tanzanian youth last summer, which due to its effective sustainability, has now spread from the 7 schools at which he taught to over 20 today! Additionally, Danny has research experience with vulnerable children in Kenya and Tanzania, and has co-founded the community-based organization Tumaini La Mbele, which provides education for orphans and street children in Babati, Tanzania.