

Express Yourself!: Encouraging creativity and communication in a post-war community
Location: Pallivasalpiddy, Mannar District, Sri Lanka
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“Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding.” – Albert Einstein

The armed conflict that ravaged Sri Lanka for thirty years ended in May 2009, and the island is teeming with economic and infrastructural reconstruction projects. Yet members of Sri Lanka's four ethnic groups continue to eye each other with mistrust. Memories of past wrongs and a lack of communication between groups have created and reinforced negative stereotypes. Attempts to reconcile these communities, however, are scarce.

Last summer, I volunteered for Citizens Initiative (CI), a small Trust Fund comprising ten individuals who work on a volunteer basis in addition to their various careers. They believe, as I do, that material reconstruction must go hand in hand with building bridges between communities. They have been in operation for almost a year and a half now, during which time they have undertaken several projects to aid those who were displaced during the war. At the close of the war, they provided sanitation, temporary bathing areas and top-up supplies of medicine and nutrition to the hundreds who were desperately seeking medical attention at the Infectious Diseases Hospital in the Vavuniya district. They then initiated a recreational therapy programme for affected children and youth in the camps that were set up for the displaced.

Possibly owing to the success of these projects, CI was invited by the Ministry of Health to begin work with communities who had been recently rehabilitated to their villages. Using funds raised by contacting friends and acquaintances, they aided these communities to regain former livelihoods. I assisted CI in their efforts in the village of Chiraddikulam, whose inhabitants are ethnically Tamil. Using funds that included a grant I received from the Princeton University Class of 1978 Foundation, we provided materials for the villagers to rebuild the damaged village community centre with architectural plans I had drawn. We also spent two days building a children's playground, again with drawings I compiled, and with the assistance of the villagers themselves.

CI is now working with Pallivasalpiddy, a village largely comprising Muslims, in a similar manner. Tamil-Muslim relations are strained at present¹, and we are currently exploring ways to effect positive interaction between these groups. As a person with a deep love for the arts, particularly theatre and creative writing, I strongly believe in their power to nurture self-expression and communication. Sports have a similar power – cricket has proved on many occasions capable of bringing the nation together. Past experience with proposed projects of this kind has taught me that programmes of this nature are best undertaken in conjunction with an organisation, not as an individual. Therefore, Sunela Jayewardene (CI's founding trustee) and I developed a programme that I would be able to lead, and that CI as a group would be able to implement, given sufficient funding. I will return to Sri Lanka for a year to volunteer with CI and implement this project.

Our greater objective, over the course of the next year, is to sponsor youth from these two communities to engage and interact through arts and sports workshops, and through sustained dialogue with each other begin to re-evaluate preconceived notions about other ethnic groups. Before embarking on this venture, we wish to first work with each community on the village level and build a solid foundation for the arts and sports programme. We would like to commence by constructing a village community centre and children's playground in Pallivasalpiddy similar to those built in Chiraddikulam. These basic infrastructures will be invaluable additions to the community, serving three purposes: a gathering space for the community (as well as a place to conduct a pre-school as in the case of Chiraddikulam), a place to conduct the arts and sports programmes, and a recognisable, familiar structure for youth from one village interacting with the other. Based on the length of time taken to complete construction in Chiraddikulam, I am putting aside a month to six weeks (from June to mid-July) for completion in Pallivasalpiddy.

We then hope to create an empathetic environment for self-expression and cultivate confidence through participation in preliminary arts and sports workshops for each individual village. Having been displaced for several years, the children's lives have been far from normal, so before we attempt to create conversation, it is important to give the children a voice with which to do so. I will spend the months of June and July recruiting

¹ On January 26th, 1994, Muslims in the north of the island were expelled from their villages by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They were given 24 hours to leave, taking only what they could carry and the equivalent to \$10 in cash. The Muslim villagers with whom CI is working have this date seared in their memories.

students from universities and high schools in Colombo (the capital, where I live and CI is based), to assist in coordinating and running these programmes with me. Some of CI's contacts who run programmes of this kind professionally have kindly offered to train students who are interested, and some of my peers have already expressed great interest in volunteering. We will also create curricula for each workshop during this time.

During the month of August, which coincides with school holidays, we hope to carry out three or four weekend arts workshops in Pallivasalpiddy in painting, writing, drama and dance, as well as activities such as a cricket match and other outdoor games. Each workshop will aim to be unique, allowing the children to acquire a range of tools to express themselves comfortably and easily. By inspiring them to be creative and confident enough to speak for themselves, and through sustained contact with the student volunteers, I believe they (and their parents) will be more open to interacting with the children of Chiraddikulam later in the year.

For the recruitment and training stage, I will be working in Colombo with CI, also joining them on visits to Pallivasalpiddy for their other programmes (distribution of agricultural supplies, holding medical camps, etc) during this time. In August, I will visit Pallivasalpiddy with the other student volunteers each weekend for the workshops, joined by a senior member of CI each time. On site, we will be working with Assistant Divisional Secretaries from the Ministry of Health and members of the Sri Lankan Army who have been posted to oversee communities who have been recently rehabilitated. The Army unit at Chiraddikulam showed great enthusiasm and hospitality, assisting CI to conduct medical camps and to complete the community centre and playground. CI has assured me that the same is true of the unit at Pallivasalpiddy.

This proposal is innovative in that there are no organisations in Sri Lanka working at this level of individual interaction with recently rehabilitated communities, nor any projects that plan to use recreation as a means of nurturing articulacy and confidence in service of easing ethnic tensions. As such, we have few parallels to compare its outcome, but will gather feedback from the youth before and after the programme to evaluate its efficacy. The sustainability of this project also depends entirely on individual interest and commitment to creating and continuing conversation between groups in a tolerant manner. However, we have seen through our own interactions with these communities how much more cordial our relations have become, and hope that the trust we have created through our assistance in each village will encourage them to participate.

The most significant challenges, on a material level, are funding and transportation. For this reason, I have divided my larger, year-long, initiative into smaller segments that can be effective both as individual projects and as part of my greater vision. We are also hampered by the necessity of hiring a van nearly every time we make a trip to these communities, as they are often located in jungle areas, inaccessible by public transport. CI also takes supplies that are not readily available nearby (agricultural supplies, paint and hardware, food supplies, etc). We visit for about two days at a time, staying overnight at the Officers' Mess. The trip costs about \$500 per visit, and while expensive, is much cheaper than purchasing a van, as vehicles are significantly more expensive to obtain in Sri Lanka than in the US. This issue is one reason why villages like these are consistently being overlooked, and while it takes a large portion out of our budget, we feel this is a necessary expense. This project will also eventually prove challenging in terms of the willingness of villagers to interact with other ethnic groups.

Citizens Initiative does not have steady funding or income, so funding through the Davis Projects for Peace would be incredibly helpful to us to implement this programme. As I apply for funding for this preliminary stage of our larger project, I am concurrently applying for future funding to ensure that not only are individual community infrastructures reconstructed – a necessary component of peace-building – but that they will be used to build bridges between different ethnic groups, a factor that I believe is equally vital for establishing peace.

This project will continue to challenge me as a student of architecture, as I will again create working drawings for the reconstruction of structures (e.g. village community centre and school). It will also require me to make use of my other skills – my writing abilities came in useful last summer, as I created a draft of the CI Profile, and assisted in writing funding applications. My hope is to complete graduate school in Architecture and Urban Planning, before returning to the island to focus my energies on reconstruction projects. As such, I believe that this interaction with those most severely affected by the war will have an equally transformative effect on me, helping me to better understand the issues at stake and the specific needs of these people. Most importantly, however, it will challenge me to work with my people with empathy and love, regardless of our different ideologies and background, and foster in me a more broad-minded attitude to peace.