

Section I

The objective of the project “Express Yourself!” was to build a community centre and provide four preliminary workshops in sports and the arts for the children in Pallivasalpiddy, a community of formerly displaced persons in Sri Lanka. This would prepare the children for a programme intended to build bridges between Pallivasalpiddy and Chiraddikulam, also a formerly displaced community but of a different ethnic group.¹

Thus far, there have been no other fund-raising efforts for this project, but since these workshops constitute the first part of an ongoing project to build bridges between communities, there will be other sponsors, which will include the Princeton Reachout 56-81-06 Fellowship and the Global Childrens Fund.

I worked in collaboration with Citizens Initiative (CI), a small group of professionals and non-professionals who engage in post-war assistive activities entirely on a volunteer basis. When I returned to Sri Lanka I learned that CI had been informed that the villagers of Pallivasalpiddy were no longer living in that community so could not be assisted as originally planned. Instead, CI was finalising the groundwork (including a preliminary inspection visit) in Kakkiyankulam, also a community of formerly displaced Muslims. For this reason, there was a significant delay. When we visited Chiraddikulam to check on its progress and to Kakkiyankulam to discuss means of assisting it, we organised a preliminary cricket workshop for each of the villages on the 23rd and 24th of July with the assistance of Mr Ravindra Pushpakumara, a former national player and current cricket trainer with the Sri Lanka Cricket Board (SLCB). This one workshop was unexpectedly successful in drawing out the children, and changed how I viewed the project. We felt that cricket – a familiar and popular sport – would be an extremely effective means of jumping right into the building bridges part of the programme, and I believed that the Davis money would actually be better spent in funding four ‘bridge-building’ workshops instead. An added bonus is that the SLCB is always on the lookout for fresh talent for regional and national teams, and if they find promising cricketers they will likely offer them sports scholarships to better schools.

Villages of formerly displaced communities such as these are monitored by a small army unit posted nearby. Thus far CI has received support from the unit attached to Kakkiyankulam and Chiraddikulam in implementing programmes assisting the villagers to resume former livelihoods. For this bridge-building programme too, the brigadier in charge displayed great initial enthusiasm, even offering to transport the children from both villages to the army grounds each week so that they could play there. Later, however, he told us he could not in fact provide transport, and that he was concerned about the villagers’ response to a programme like this. His vacillation concerned us, and after a meeting we arranged between him, a manager from the SLCB, and Mr Pushpakumara, I felt the issue was that he did not believe in the project as a means to effect peace but had agreed to assist us as this might mean members of the national cricket team would visit his division to assist in carrying out the workshops. While this was a disappointing realisation, I also learned that in order to move forward, we needed to learn the best way to work with people like him, and make the best of adverse situations.

I also completely underestimated how much time this project would take, basing it on a timeline that Citizens Initiative had created earlier in the year. Since I am in Sri Lanka for a year and not just the summer, I had the luxury of deciding not to spend the allotted money for workshops during the month of August simply to complete the first part of the project, while we were still unsure if the bridging programme would work. Instead, I will use that money when we begin the cricket workshops in October.

The programme is aimed at 25 children from each village, so fifty in all, and although there are not very much more than this number of youth per village, my fear is that it will ultimately focus mainly on the boys, given the SLCB’s involvement. Therefore, if the cricket programme is launched successfully, I will use contacts I have made with the national netball team to create a similar programme for the girls.

¹ The villagers of Pallivasalpiddy are Sri Lankan Moors (Muslims) while Chiraddikulam is a Tamil community.

Section II

I believe that peace is the ability to communicate freely amidst differences of creed, ethnicity and opinion while appreciating the richness of that diversity, not feeling threatened by it. This project aims to commence that communication. Post-war reconstruction has begun in the island, but I feel that there is a lack of focus on the process of reconciliation. For us to move forward as a nation, communication is vital, but programmes designed to foster it are few and far between. "Express Yourself!" is part of an initiative that recognises the need for this interaction, and will provide a space for these children to see others for themselves free from adult or their own preconceived bias.

Used to the youthful idealism of college, I learned to pitch the project to those who had misgivings about its intrinsic worth and encourage them to assist us, in the hopes that potential success might change their minds and dissipate their doubt. I am also learning humility – the role I played these past three months was very different from what I had imagined. While I had thought I would be leading arts-oriented workshops in August, I found that cricket was a much more powerful tool for our pilot programme. I saw how well it worked as an ice-breaker and learned that the Sri Lanka Cricket Board have already carried out a similar programme in conjunction with UNICEF. I unwillingly admitted that I was not the best person to lead these particular workshops, but I learned that my other skills could be very handy to further our goal. Citizens Initiative comprises working professionals who are volunteering their time, and their busy schedules often cause postponements in this volunteer work. I stepped in at a time when Citizens Initiative itself was experiencing a few internal setbacks and took charge of logistics for visits, handling accounts, arranging meetings, and liaising between Citizens Initiative and others. I rapidly drew up proposals for potential sponsors and revised these as necessary, designed floor-plans for the community centre and faxed them to the overseeing army unit when a cancelled visit meant that I could not give these to them in person. My contribution over the year will evolve, but over the summer it consisted of being able to mitigate and minimise delay.

I also learned a great deal about the power of sports – especially cricket – as a means of effecting peace in the island. What makes this project so potentially powerful, and sustainable over a long period of time, is precisely the fact that it is linked to the island's most popular sport. Karuna Amman, LTTE-militant-turned-politician, once allegedly confessed that while he was still a member of the LTTE,² he and other cadres would sometimes furtively listen to cricket commentaries on the radio and silently cheer on the 'boys' – possibly the only instance that the separatist group aligned themselves with the rest of the country. Our meeting with the brigadier was also enlightening. He invited Mr Pushpakumara to stay over at the officers' mess at any time he comes to run the cricket workshops, saying it was a small token of appreciation for the 'great service' that the national cricket team has rendered the country – which I found striking, coming from a member of the military who fought in a thirty-year civil war.

For these reasons, I am more convinced than before that cricket is the most legitimate and accepted tool to use for our purpose. At this moment, I am striving to ensure the cricket workshops commence in October as scheduled in our budget, and will introduce the arts workshops when the cricket workshops are running smoothly and authorities therefore become more familiar with the idea of interaction between these communities.

"As a Sri Lankan, I found this summer to be a taste of the future – frustrating postponements and delays offset by unexpected breakthroughs. Our limited initial interaction with the children was very rewarding, and I look forward to the ensuing cricket workshops. The road to peace is rocky, but not without moments of gold." – Nushelle de Silva

² LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Tamil separatist organisation defeated in 2009, intent on demanding a separate state for the Tamil people and responsible for the ethnic cleansing that displaced the Muslim communities of Kakkivankulam and Pallivasalpidy.

Express Yourself!
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Children of Kakkiyankulam engage in cricket matches and a session on batting and bowling techniques