

Youth and Community Development in Valle de Angeles, Honduras
Honduras
Pomona College
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Section 1

Our primary goal for this project was to connect the orphanage, Children's Villages of Honduras, to the broader community of Valle de Angeles, Honduras via a community center and an accompanying community health fair so that the orphanage would be seen as an asset to the surrounding community instead of a drain. Additionally, our goal was to improve preventative health in the community of Valle de Angeles by teaching classes focused on healthy decision making, culminating in a community health fair in which our students would play an integral, self-empowering role.

In order to accomplish these goals, we focused the first part of our stay on establishing relationships with the orphanage and several institutions within Valle de Angeles. We soon began teaching approximately ten health classes per week at the orphanage and a local high school using a curriculum we wrote in Spanish, and also gave lectures at the health center on several occasions. Meanwhile, we taught English classes at a nearby technical school and provided English tutoring sessions at the Casa de La Cultura, which functioned as a community center in town. We also worked with local artists to create a permanent mural located on a central wall in town to spread awareness and signify the importance of holistic health. With the participation of the health center, Casa de La Cultura, orphanage, high school, and other local organizations, we began planning a Community Health Fair as a culmination of our grant period. Finally, on Sunday, July 17th, we hosted the fair, which consisted of posters, educational games, lectures, theatrical performances, music, physical activities, food, and free health consultations.

We believe the health classes were valuable for both the orphanage and the community. The health fair was also a great success, with contributions from many of our students at the high school, children from the orphanage, and participation from local organizations including the health center. As it turned out, the Casa de La Cultura had some of the capacities we were hoping to build in a community center, and we were able to partner with them for our health day and expand their capacity for future programs. As such, the overall goals for this project were accomplished, and the local infrastructure allowed for English classes and additional side-projects as well.

However, not everything went according to plan. First of all, the education system in Valle de Angeles was in much worse shape than we were anticipating. For instance, classes were frequently cancelled and students were unaccustomed to listening to lectures, making it difficult for our message to reach all of the students. Additionally, the children at the orphanage were very timid and much further behind both educationally and socially than we were expecting. As a result, it was challenging to get them to take as much of a leadership role as we would have liked at the beginning. Finally, time was a large constraint, as it took a few weeks to establish great relations with a variety of people, making it difficult to find and involve as many local leaders for our project as we were hoping.

Nevertheless, we feel that our project and our time volunteering in Valle de Angeles benefited a large and diverse group of people. The approximately 30 children at the orphanage benefited from our health classes, English classes, homework help, role modeling and work to foster stronger bonds with the community. The approximately 270 students at Hector Medina High School also learned from our health classes, both by increasing their knowledge and confidence in making positive decisions about their health, but also in seeing good role models taking the initiative to host events and make a difference in the community. We also spoke to about 125 adults at the health center about nutrition, diabetes, obesity and related issues, and the 500+ people who attended our Health Fair also had the opportunity to benefit from learning about positive decision-making in regards to health. Finally, another 50 students whom we taught English and for whom we hosted English tutoring sessions also benefited from this project and our time in Valle de Angeles as volunteers.

Section 2

We see peace as encompassing both individual experiences and community relations. For the former, we define individual peace as the ability to take control of one's life by making healthy and intelligent decisions. We believe that this individual agency or self-empowerment is critical if individuals are to live life to the fullest. Simultaneously, we recognize that individuals fit into a larger society, and peace within these community relations is therefore essential for economic, social, and political development. Peaceful community relations entail infrastructure and stability that create public goods and positive feedback loops which continue to allow for positive changes in the society. A functional and supportive community also assists each of its individual members to achieve his or her goals. In this manner, individual and communal peace is mutually reinforcing.

Our project intended to further this dual definition of peace by focusing on health on individual and societal levels. First, we intended to guide people in making healthy and intelligent decisions to enable them to accomplish their own personal goals. Next, by linking different parts of the community together – the orphanage, the high schools, the health center and the Casa de La Cultura – we sought to build a stronger foundation for peace within the community. In the short term, our project provided the information and resources to make healthy decisions. By equipping our students with the tools to engage in their community, while simultaneously building capacity within the institutions of the town, we also worked to build longer-term peace in the form of a stronger and more supportive society.

We feel that our project was useful for the individuals with and for whom we worked and the larger community of Valle de Angeles, but this experience was also very educational for the two of us. In particular, we realized how intricately linked education is to virtually all aspects of life, and how difficult it is to mend some broken pieces when the entire education system is struggling. We feel blessed to have had such a wonderful educational background in the United States, and from this experience think that improvements in education are essential for widespread development. Critical thinking ability was especially weak in Valle de Angeles, where students were accustomed to rote memorization, not encouraged to develop creativity and imagination, and shied away from forming or expressing their own opinions. Additionally, we realized that each individual is strongly embedded in the community environment in which they live. As such, for individuals to grow and develop, the community institutions on which they depend must also be supported and strengthened. Schools, health centers, community centers, police and government institutions all play important roles in the larger fabric of society, and each one must be nurtured to better provide the community with specific resources and assets.

In the process, we also learned a great deal that we hope to apply to community development projects in the future. For instance: the value of having a specific skill to contribute to maximize one's efforts in the community, the importance of establishing friendly relations with community leaders, the usefulness of identifying a quantifiable way to mark success, and the need for a time frame that suits the project goals. Besides the cultural and experiential knowledge we gained from this project, we also learned to be more grateful for our own opportunities and for the communities that have nurtured, sustained, inspired, and challenged us, like our families, high school, hometown, college, and friends.

We are infinitely grateful to the Kathryn Davis Foundation for the opportunity to create and implement a project that we feel used the available resources and infrastructure in Valle de Angeles to build a positive model around healthy decision making, which can be replicated in the future to continue building local institutional capacity and promoting peace in the community. This project demonstrated that people can truly learn and benefit from a project when they take personal ownership of it, and when the entire community can come together and use its own strengths to create positive change.

