

*Sonhos São Caminhos: Ways Are Dreams*

Brazil

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## **Section I**

Summary: *Sonhos São Caminhos* is a project which assists at-risk Afro-Brazilian girls to foster empowerment through identity strengthening, building solidarity, connecting with community resources, learning cottage industry skills, and creating a safe and stable space for continued growth and success.

*Sonhos São Caminhos* is a partnership among three organizations, The Davis Project for Peace, Youth Art Haven and Bahia Street. Youth Art Haven (YAH) is an organization that provides shelter and programming for minors who are victims of sex trafficking. Bahia Street is an after school program which operates as a second school for girls. The project was based in Salvador, Brazil. This city is a culturally vibrant part of the country but also suffers from underdevelopment: poverty, high rates of violence, and a lack of access to healthcare and education. Young women are disproportionately affected by poverty as they are often at-risk of increased rates of physical and sexual violence, prostitution and trafficking.

The project was housed in the Bahia Street facility along with two educators also from Bahia Street. YAH provided two volunteer educators and administrators. There were originally sixteen girls, two of whom did not complete the project. All of these young ladies were selected for the project by the educators who either knew them from their previous participation in the Bahia Street after school program or from the local community. All participants come from a low income and high-risk background.

The project employed five educators and two cooks. The project was held from Monday to Saturday for three weeks. There were various presenters, from historians, to theater performers, photographers to IT experts. We went on field trips to a ropes course, to museums, dance courses and other cultural events. We were visited by local NGO's which provided resources for health, safety and education. We discussed history, identity, our goals, practiced positive thinking, and self-awareness and also learned cottage industries. Finally, there was a graduation where participants were awarded with a monetary scholarship and certificates of completion.

The project will continue throughout the year with two educators meeting with the participants one weekend per month with a continued focus on self-esteem and identity as well as IT skills through the creation of personal blogs. If further funding is available, the project may continue into a second year.

The difficulties in this project arose from scheduling conflicts with a school strike. The original plan was to conduct the project during the public school's winter vacation. However, when I arrived, the teachers had already been on strike for an entire month over a wage dispute. The strike was resolved and since the students had been out of school for so long, the scheduled break was shortened. This occurred during our second week of the project. We therefore had to change our schedule. In the end, it was not a huge stumbling block since public school students only go to school three hours per day. We split the group into two sessions, morning and afternoon and continued the project for the last week in half-day intervals for the last and third week of the project.

The second difficulty was that my partners and I had to borrow and juggle around funding since my ATM card was cloned and \$3,000 was stolen from the account. The money was reinstated but took a long time.

The budget was sufficient for the project, with enough left over to sustain the project into the year. This is due in great part to the generosity of my colleagues who allowed me to stay in their home and cut down on my own living expenses. The budget and planning of the project were meticulous and there were few unexpected expenses.

For myself, there was obviously a language barrier as I do not speak Portuguese fluently but it sure did improve over the course of this project! The cultural and language barrier aspects were minimized due to two of my partners from YAH being ex-patriots, Americans who have lived in Brazil

for many years who were able to mitigate those issues with me. The project was successful because of all the local support. The project did not solely depend on me, so any difficulties that I encountered were not detrimental to the project thanks to my wonderful colleagues.

There were fourteen young women who completed the project, continue to be in the project, and many of whom enrolled in the Bahia Street after school program because of the project. I wish I could tell you about each one, her story, her hopes and her situation but suffice it to say that these women are in very difficult circumstances, some illiterate, some with no parents, some caretaking for elderly grandparents or young children, abusive households, etc. All these young women are of Afro-Brazilian decent, descended from Africans enslaved to work in the sugar cane fields, a practice that was abolished only about 100 years ago. Much of the social disparity arises from this very recent and inhumane history.

I believe this project has had long lasting effects on the participants. For example, the girls who were not already enrolled in Bahia Street's year round after school program almost all joined after being introduced to the facility and educators by this project. I believe this project provided a once in a lifetime opportunity for these young women and the change in them and the sisterhood that was fostered by the end of the project was palpable. As mentioned, the project will continue to run one weekend a month throughout the year with an educator from both Bahia Street and YAH. One of the main focuses of the continuation of the project is on photography and blogging with cameras purchased with grant funds. With availability of funding, the project may continue into a second year.

## Section II

### A

In the context of this project, I define peace as the opportunity for an equal chance at a fruitful life, a life of choice rather than imposition. I believe that inequality works against peace as much strife is caused by the injustice of unequal access to material goods. These goods are not merely things, but dictate the most important aspects that constitute quality of life such as education, access to employment and health care. Peace is when all children have an equal chance of choosing the direction of their own life.

This project contributes to peace in the short term by assisting youth discover choices within the imposition of poverty that was forced upon them. The young women felt that they were being invested in, that they are important to society and are the caretakers of the future. It is this emboldening feeling that gives these girls a more positive outlook on life, that helps them to bolster their own potential and to multiply their empowerment to those they encounter. This spreading of tangible and positive change by these young women brings peace to them in their own lives, to their families, and to the community. In the long run, I believe the participants of this project will be equipped to find and create better opportunities for themselves and avoid the common pitfalls of poverty.

As for myself, I saw a side of Brazil I never ever would have seen had it not been for this project. I learned a great deal about the region, about the conditions much of the population is living under and about the wonderful, dedicated people who are working everyday to improve lives. I learned a great deal about the culture and language and made amazing friendships. I am changed in the closeness I feel toward the region and renewed in my dedication to development after being reminded, first hand, why this work is so important. This experience was most definitely life changing and I will never forget the people I met, the good work that we did, and the young women who are the future.

### B

"This project afforded fourteen bright, hopeful, vibrant young women in extremely difficult situations a chance; a chance to laugh, live and learn. I know this project meant the world to these girls, but it meant even more to me. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to create change for so many people so directly. Mrs. Davis, Thank you and Obrigada" -Alexandra Sisk

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