Dance for Peace- A dance step towards peace in the island of Cyprus
Cyprus • International House, New York
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Section I

Goals

The overarching goal of this project was to bring on stage together two folkloric dance groups from both communities of Cyprus. The participants of this peace project were the Dance Club of University of Cyprus representing the Greek-Cypriot community and the Lefkosa Folklore Association representing the Turkish-Cypriot community. The specific goals of this peace project were to create through the art of dance a safe space for discussion, opportunities to break down stereotypes and to eliminate ignorance. The project also aimed to establish a long-term relationship between the two dance groups, which will lead to future bicommunal collaborations in the island.

Challenges and Sustainability

Overall, the project was very successful but I had lots of challenges to face along the way. One of the unanticipated difficulties that occurred while I was in the island was the hesitation of the Greek-Cypriot dance group to perform in the occupied area of the island. The original plan as described in the proposal of the peace project was to have performances only at the Greek-Cypriot community. However, during February the Turkish-Cypriot group proposed that we dance for both communities, thus sending a message for peace on both sides of the island. Eventually, both groups agreed that this was a great idea and that we should do this.

Nevertheless, in July the Greek-Cypriot group had some concerns, which were mostly political, and they did not want to risk sending any political messages on behalf of the University of Cyprus through this project. The group has asked me to negotiate with the Turskish-Cypriot dance group for only one performance at the south part of the island. I already knew what the answer would be, and as anticipated the Turkish-Cypriot group expressed the opinion that the message for peace should come from both sides, therefore we should perform on both sides of the island.

What was suggested was that the Greek-Cypriot group dancers would perform at the occupied area of the island as individuals, without representing any institution. Both sides liked the suggestion and everything continued as scheduled. I realized the minute I stepped back home that my project was already political, no matter how hard I tried not to make it one. I wanted it to be about dance and I think I have accomplished that in the end.

What is more, most of the participants were young students with ages from 16-24. Thus, their proficiency in English varied. Every instruction had to be accurately translated in both languages. As one dancer mentioned in the end we were all able to speak through the language of dance. Communication is general was one of the biggest challenges of this project as I had to negotiate with both sides numerous times for every little detail of the project. In several meetings with both groups I was cautious about the way I was expressing myself since I did not want to offend anyone. Some people are still very sensitive about specific terms and names being used and accidental use of those might be offensive. I felt constantly that I was making a diplomatic effort to finalize everything and move on with the project.

On the other hand, the workshops, rehearsals and performances went really well. Dancers enjoyed "ice-breakers" and post-performance reflective conversations. Their contributions to the activities was both entertaining and inspiring. They felt safe to share their opinions about the political situation in the island since dance was able to bring them together and limit differences and "borders". After the first performance dancers were much anticipating the second one. At that time, I felt my project was really working.

As far as the performances are concerned, they were successful and the audience was able to receive the message sent. Dancers were able to see the similarities in dance steps and traditional music and resulted that we share more similarities than differences. With regards to any logistical and organizational issues of the project everything went smoothly. There were no budget related problems either.

By the end of the project the dancers became friends and discussed the possibility of repeating this next summer. Since the "ice has broken" a new collaboration will be far more successful and the message sent would be stronger. This is where the sustainability of this project lies. I have also been thinking of starting a dance company in Cyprus called " Dance for Peace" which can truly represent Cyprus in international dance festival, thus globally sending the message that youth and art want peace in this island and they are acting towards it.

Section II

There have been negotiations to bring peace to the island of Cyprus for 37 years now. Since the "borders" opened in 2003 there has been an effort for reaproach from the two populations through a plethora of media. The medium selected for this project in order to contribute to peace was the art of dance. Peace in this project is defined as the opportunity of providing a safe space through the art of dance for open discussion, breaking down stereotypes, eliminating ignorance and providing sound and unbiased educational grounding.

Furthermore, contribution to peace through this project is both short-term and long-term. Within the timeframe of the peace project the two populations had the opportunity to get together and send a message for peace during the rehearsals and performances. The hope though was to create friendly relationships between the participants, which would contribute to further collaborations in the future. Participants expressed the wish to work together again next summer. These young dancers have changed even just a bit their opinion in reference to reapproach between the two populations. This project has been an education for them and the hope is that they will transmit this education to other young minds as well by sharing their experience through this project.

It is beyond any doubt that this project has completely changed my views with regards to the possibility of peace in Cyprus and the way I perceive reapproach. You see reapproach, has been unfairly related to a political party in Cyprus—just like anything else. I do not believe that anymore. It has nothing to do with political aspirations rather than with open-mindedness and will for peace. I aspire the power of the youth, as they hold the key and they are the future of this island. I am definitely more open-minded than ever and ready to act more towards peace. As mentioned in my journals, this is by far my biggest accomplishment in life.

I am proud of myself for bringing the two populations together and for believing that the project can successfully happen. Peace is not easy to happen and changing minds is hard but not impossible. Dance and the youth sent a strong message to all the politicians in Cyprus. We can coexist.