

**Stages of Development: Empowering Girls Through Theatre
Dominican Republic
Barnard College of Columbia University
Elizabeth Richardson, U.S.A., Barnard College**

The goal of my project was to establish a theatre program at the Doña María orphanage and school for abused girls as a way of preventing domestic violence through empowerment. By giving students a forum to create their own pieces of theatre, I sought to foster creativity, communication and problem solving and give the students a greater sense of the voice they have in their community.

This project has been funded entirely by the grant generously provided by the Davis Foundation. It would also not have been possible without the contributions of Becky Davis, a friend and fellow Barnard graduate who volunteered her time during the first two months to help develop the curriculum for the playwriting section of the program and teach and co-teach workshops on storytelling.

So far, we have run a month of theatre workshops at Doña María and worked with a core group of students who will continue to run a theatre club for their peers after the workshops end.

The greatest difficulty we've encountered so far has been with scheduling. Even though Doña María is an orphanage and the students live at the school, they have a recess from classes during the summer and some of them visit relatives, so the school administrators wanted us to wait until the fall semester to begin the theatre workshops. Because that pushed our schedule back a bit, I've arranged to continue work on the project through early December so I can support the program through an entire semester and production cycle before passing it off to the students and their mentors.

In the meantime, the month before the workshops began became an invaluable opportunity to learn more about the theatre, education and nonprofit work going on in Santo Domingo prior to beginning work of my own. Becky and I got involved with three groups whose members will contribute to the long-term trajectory of the Doña María program: El Centro de Orientación y Investigación Integral (COIN), Teatro Guloya, and Escuela La Altagracia. COIN is an NGO where I interned last spring that works to promote HIV/AIDS prevention for at-risk groups in the DR. We worked with COIN to launch a new training program for peer educators who will use arts-based education methods to promote HIV/AIDS awareness and are also interested in doing work to continue the theatre initiative at Doña María. Teatro Guloya is an independent theatre that often works with children from disadvantaged backgrounds and will provide a stage for our students' final productions. Volunteering at Teatro Guloya has given us important insight into techniques of teaching theatre and using theatre as a medium for social change. Escuela La Altagracia is the secondary school partnered with Doña María where I will be working with students ages 13-18 to help them start their own theatre company as well. Some of the students at La Altagracia will help me co-teach theatre workshops at Doña María, and it is my hope that the connection between the schools will encourage the older students to continue to teach the younger ones new theatre techniques after I am gone.

Working at Doña María, education style is one of the greatest cultural differences we have encountered. Teaching the workshops and talking to other educators, I realized quickly that emphases of American education such as critical thinking and creativity are not stressed as much in Dominican education as collaboration and rote learning. This isn't to say there aren't times when the girls have amazingly creative ideas or really struggle to collaborate, but in general these trends have held true, and we've had to adjust curriculum and teaching style frequently to try to find a method that works best for the students.

We came into the workshops with a fairly specific curriculum already written out that mirrored the process of putting on a play including units on playwriting, design, directing, acting, and production. However, the first workshops did not go at all as planned. Students were unfamiliar with the terminology and activities we used to try to introduce them to storytelling and we started to fear that many of the goals we had for them producing their own work were too advanced. However, when we tried introducing an improvisational scene-building exercise the girls completely took charge of creating the story, enthusiastically inventing characters and an entire plot, then collectively self-directing and staging the production. Through this experience our assumptions about the abilities of the students were

shattered, and we learned how much our role here is not that of instructor so much as that of listener, collaborator and facilitator.

It has worked well to focus on building positive skills rather than trying to directly address the abuse the girls have gone through. Administrators at Doña María were concerned that the theatre workshops might expose the girls to violent images or ask them to talk about traumatic events in their lives. While the ultimate goal of this project has been to prevent domestic violence, it has been a very understated goal. We have tried to create a space for the girls to create projects free from assumptions about what they have been through.

The core group we have worked with at Doña María is comprised of twelve students: Franchesca, Erica, Casandra, Aldriana, Marianela, Luz Maria, Katherin, Michelle, Yoselin, Theanny, Kindulisis, and Dianyeri. They are between the ages of nine and twelve and were self-selected for their interest in theatre. Working with this small group has allowed us to work in depth with each of the girls and helped them to form tight knit connections as performers and individuals. While we are beginning by working intensively with this small group, the girls will perform for the entire student body, impacting approximately 200 other students and hopefully inspiring them to pursue ambitious projects of their own. Depending on the interest these performances generate, I also plan to teach other sections of the theatre workshop for all students who would like to participate.

The future of the project will be the students of Doña María running their own theatre club and inspiring future generations of students to create theatre as well. The program is designed to leave the students of Doña María with all the tools they need to continue making theatre independently from the workshops and inspire them to tackle challenging projects. The resources I am leaving with them include costumes, set pieces and scripts as well as methods and techniques of theatre making. I have worked with the school administration to ensure that the girls will be allowed time and space to continue rehearsing and performing plays. I am also continuing to build connections between Doña María and potential mentors for the students including performers at Teatro Guloya, students at Altagracia, and members of the youth program at COIN.

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Peace is an absence of violence, an absence of waste. It requires symbiosis. A peaceful society is a just society, a society that enables all of its members to achieve their fullest potential.

Today, the girls at Doña María seem to find peace in the joy and excitement of play as they invent stories with their friends and experience an escape from whatever other issues they have to deal with in their lives. In the months and years ahead, I think our efforts have the potential to make healthier individuals and ultimately a healthier and more peaceful society. A girl who has healthy relationships, strong self-esteem, dreams, goals, abilities, and education is much less likely to be part of an unhealthy or abusive relationship in the future, and in turn is much less likely to be abusive toward anyone else.

So far the person who has been most effected by this project has almost certainly been me. Building a theatre program from scratch in a foreign county has been an incredibly empowering experience for me at least as much as for the students.

This project has changed the way I think about the world both by exposing me to very real differences between cultures and highlighting that there is no one right way. I have come to have a better understanding of how deeply ingrained culture is, how culture is what people understand to be the reality of the world around them yet that understanding is not the understanding most other people in the world have. And that is okay, as long as we are flexible and listening. All too often we are not, and even our ideas about how to help others can cause more harm than good if we get caught up in trying to disseminate our own culture.

I have been touched and humbled by school administrators' openness to letting us work with their students, particularly since we are from a foreign culture and country, and by the students' warmth and friendliness in sharing their talents with us and their classmates. I look forward to seeing where the next chapter of this work leads.

