

## **Davis 100 Projects for Peace Final Report - Summer 2007**

**Title:** Building Peace through Connections between Salvadoran and US Youth

**School:** Oberlin College

**Student(s) Information:** Denise Jennings, United States: UWC of the American West  
Sarah Bishop, United States

### **Project Summary:**

In August 2007, a delegation of seven Oberlin College students, all members of the student group Oberlin in Solidarity with El Salvador (OSES), traveled to El Salvador to build programmatic infrastructure and train future group leaders. The project was funded through 100 Projects for peace and through the Office of the President at Oberlin College. OSES has been working to create a sustainable international volunteer program and build connections with youth in the communities of Santa Marta and Suchitoto, both of which suffered tremendously from El Salvador's civil war. Although youth in these communities are extremely different from Oberlin students socio-economically, culturally and in many other ways, all share a similar focus on social change and education.

We arrived in San Salvador on August 6 and spent two days there orienting the participants to the country and its capital city. The delegation then traveled into the country to spend two weeks in the rural community of Santa Marta. In Santa Marta, the OSES leaders met with students from the National University, managers of the local radio station, representatives of a local AIDS awareness group, and the director of an organic greenhouse called *Invernadero* to develop the protocols for bringing future delegations of student volunteers to serve with these organizations. During our time in Santa Marta, we made a day trip to Hacienda Vieja, to visit two Salvadoran friends who run a childhood center. After being welcomed at the bus stop by Noel, Alba and 40 enthusiastic kids, we spent the day playing, swimming and laughing.

The final week of the trip was spent in the town of Suchitoto where we stayed at Centro Arte Para la Paz, an NGO working to rehabilitate men, women and children through art. Our purpose for going to Suchitoto was to see how we could eventually expand the program to other communities in El Salvador. We believe that it is important to hear other stories and see other communities that have also suffered from the war, to have a better understanding of the situation in the country. Therefore, we took a two-day trip to the rural community of El Sitio Cenicero, one of 70 rural communities located approximately 10 miles from the town of Suchitoto. Here, we heard testimonies of massacre victims and spent time with host families in the reconstructed community that greets you with a sign that says (in Spanish), "Welcome to El Sitio Cenicero, we always want new friends!" All in all, the OSES August delegation participants consisted of seven Oberlin Students, six host families and many friends in Santa Marta, six families in El Sitio, our friends Alba and Noel in Hacienda Vieja, the 40-some children with whom we spent the day and all of the members of the organizations with which we met.

### **Project Results:**

The goals of the delegation went hand-in-hand with the goals of OSES and our role in the communities. The main goal of this project was to provide leadership training for the future leaders of OSES as a means to create a sustainable program for years to come. The ideals of OSES became the scope for the August delegation. OSES works to expose US students to the

realities of war and poverty, in most cases a new and different reality from their own. Students experience daily Salvadoran life by living with host families, working with local community organizations and participating in activities with University students such as soccer, softball or going to the plaza for a \$ .12 cup of *leche de soya*, soy milk.

OSES emphasizes learning through lived experience. We believe that volunteering is a means of making connections because it provides a way of forming friendship through shared work. OSES's philosophy is not that we are helping, but learning with community leaders. OSES bases its pedagogy on that of Paulo Freire, that reflections and action go hand-in-hand. The learning and reflection happens in El Salvador, and the action part happens in Oberlin. Students return to campus to work with the College in order to continue the work in El Salvador. Our hope was to have two Oberlin faculty members with us in August to see the work that OSES does, both with the students and the communities.

While we were unable to successfully include an Oberlin faculty member on the delegation itself, we have been able to create a name for ourselves at Oberlin, and we are confident that OSES will have institutional support.

Overall, our two main goals for the delegation were accomplished successfully. Our goal to create a sustainable program at Oberlin College was obtained through the mission to train new leaders. The training went as followed: two Oberlin students took turns leading the rest of the group for a couple of days. They would do all the accounting, organizing, dealing with situations that came up (for example, one of the students became sick and that day's leaders had to figure out who they should call). The objective was to give the team leaders an idea of what their role would be when they lead a trip. We also met with various organizations to discuss our future within the community, allowing each future leader to express their feelings and vision for future trips. The training also included time for reflection. OSES leaders discussed the importance of leading, what it means to be a leader and ways to communicate with one another.

### **Implications:**

Through 100 Projects for Peace OSES's mission will continue to connect US college students to the reality and consequences of war and poverty. Students live with motivated youth who are working to make a difference in their community and country. The words of a Jesuit priest have become a mantra: "El Salvador, fall in love, get your heart broken and be ruined for life." By exposing students to the people of El Salvador, our hope is that they will fall in love. Through the terrible stories and testimonies, witnessing the reality of war and what it does to a people, to a country, they will be heart broken. And the "ruined for life" part—that is where they come back to the States and act on what they have learned. Our role in creating peace is our willingness to change the current situations. We all interconnected in the process of peace building. Yet if we do not know what the reality of the situation is, we cannot say *basta*\* enough! It is through our friendships and our sharing of stories that we learn. It is through our friendships that we can create peace.

---

\* Spanish word meaning enough



Rural Community Homestay, El Sitio Cenicero "We always want new friends"



Working with a group of clowns, a Spanish clown embraces an elderly audience member.



Sarah Bishop (back) and Molly Wheeler (front) playing the "Human Knot" with children from Hacienda Vieja.