

100 Projects for Peace - Ashraya Initiative for Children Computer Center Project Proposal

My proposed project concerns street children in the city of Pune, India. The number of street children in India is estimated at 18 million, most of which live in railway stations or on the streets. I was first exposed to street children and their living situation five years ago, when I moved to India to complete my secondary education at the Mahindra United World College. My initiation into the so-called “rootless and roofless” community was often emotionally painful. I watched five-year olds inhale chemicals to get high, seven-year olds bartering for “brown sugar” (heroin), preadolescent girls approach foreign men to sell their services, children of all ages hauled off to the children’s prison, children with festering wounds, fractured bones, and missing limbs, and the lifeless bodies of several kids I had grown to know, being dragged across the floor of the railway station by an arm or a leg, to be discarded by station officials after they had died of drug overdoses. Through their jaded devil-may-care attitudes yet desperate desires for affection and recognition, this barefoot brigade taught me a great deal about survival on the fringes of the social system and gave my growing commitment to changing the status quo a whole new dimension of ethical imperative. Most appalling to me, however, was the widespread apathy, ignorance, and complacency that I observed everywhere I went. Mumbai commuters walked right by children being beaten by police officers in the railway stations and people I talked to during my sojourns back to Austria and the US were blissfully unaware that five-year olds could be driven to drug use and nine-year olds coerced into prostitution. While I know that my above portrayal of the reality these children face is very harsh, it is by no means an exaggeration. The brutal circumstances on the streets are what motivated my commitment to street children.

The organization that I co-founded in April 2004, the Ashraya Initiative for Children (www.ashrayainitiative.org), was the manifestation of my desire to change the issues I saw around me. The Ashraya Initiative for Children, or AIC, is an NGO that was founded entirely by students and now runs a home for street children in Pune. At the home, we run both a residential program (currently nine (former) street children, ages 7 to 15, of whom I am the proud co-guardian) and a community outreach program that focuses on education for street girls (currently eleven girls, as well as counseling, material support, and medical services to their families, for a total of about sixty people). The Ashraya Initiative is, without a doubt, a lifetime commitment for me.

It has always been our goal to provide our children with more than just the chance to obtain a basic education; indeed, there are many people in India who live on the streets despite being literate and having attended primary school. A basic education hence does not guarantee an untroubled life, and we, as an organization have always realized that we need to raise our standards in order to effect meaningful, lasting change.

My proposal for the “100 Projects for Peace” grant therefore concerns the initiation of a computer literacy program along with an exchange program that will foster cross-cultural connections between children from a number of countries. My project consists of two parts – the empowerment of street children through computer education, and the promotion of peace and international understanding through communication at a young age.

In order to work towards helping the children who are now enrolled in our programs break the cycle of poverty, we intend to teach them computer skills and empower them to succeed in life. In India, computer skills, along with mastery of the English language, go a long way toward obtaining a job that pays enough to support a family. Computer literacy is an ability they will never lose, and that no one can ever take away from them, unlike material possessions or money, of which children are constantly in danger of being robbed when they live on the streets.

The second component of our proposed computer project is the interaction between our children and children from all over the world. We intend to initiate cross-cultural exchange in order to turn a large number of children into agents of change. Our board members come from six different countries (USA, Canada, UK, Austria, Japan, India) and we will be able to combine forces in order to start live web meetings projects with children from all across the globe as a fun, engaging way that kids from around the world could learn about differences and similarities, global issues, and community building. This will foster international understanding and counter the negative stereotypes that poor children from third world countries often face, which will not only help cross-cultural understanding at a very young age, but also have the potential to stir children’s interest in social service

and global change. With the help of partner schools from different countries (some of which we have already established as such), we will be able to create an on-going exchange between young people from immensely different social and cultural backgrounds, or, in some cases, opposing political ideologies (for instance, Pakistan).

We have established programs that provide me with the groundwork necessary to most successfully realize this computer center project. I would buy six computers and initiate basic computer literacy training sessions for all of the children. We intend to involve our volunteers and hire a social worker as well as computer teachers. I will work to coordinate the program, organize the purchase of all necessary items, and be the driving force behind the project. The computer teachers will teach the children basic skills during the summer, so that preliminary results (in terms of literacy and cross-cultural projects with children from all across the globe) will be seen after just three months. We would be able to present the outcome of our summer computer program in September 2007. I expect to be able to track the children's progress in learning computer skills and participating in the web meetings, and to engage them in creating and publishing a written report of the project.

Our proposed project has the potential to foster peace in multiple ways – it will bring the children into a positive, supportive, educational environment, in which they will be safe from abuse and violence against them on the streets, strengthen their self-esteem by providing them with a level playing field as the process of cross-cultural exchange transforms the children on both sides into simultaneous givers and receivers, and access to technology, the mastery of which could potentially radically alter their life prospects. Similarly, it will promote international understanding by challenging the stereotypes and preconceived ideas about street children locally and abroad, abolishing prejudices (especially between children from India and Pakistan), spreading awareness and garnering interest in important issues, providing the children on both sides with an engaging, rewarding experience that will inspire them to think about their ability to realize dreams and effect change, and teaching them, through example, what it means to be a citizen of the world, caring about and working for others. The combination of aspects that support peace in different ways is what I believe makes our proposed project unique, creative and innovative.

Our project would be initiated during the summer; however, it is sustainable in the very long run. Since we are a pre-existing organization that is well established, we are sure to be able to maintain the computer literacy project for as long as the life of the computers will allow. As we expand in the coming years, we will be able to incorporate many more street children as well as additional partner schools into our teleconference activities. Most importantly for sustainability, the children we teach will never lose their skills, will be able to pass their skills on to others, and will be more likely to acquire decent jobs that will permit them to sustain their families.

Listening to the children, who came to our home as victims of brutality and violence, with precarious senses of self-worth, pent-up anger, and sadness, now talk about becoming dentists, doctors, judges, policewomen and most of all social workers, so that they make a change and work for their communities, I am struck by the tenacity of their spirits, and the forgiveness with which they approach the very structures and people that marginalized them before they joined the home. There is not a doubt in my mind - these children *will* go on to redefine their own relationships to society. Our children have gone from being invisible citizens to developing a sense of internationalism, social responsibility, and justice. Even though they are still in the process of rehabilitation, our children are already ambassadors, and they are keenly aware of that fact. They are agents of peace through their achievements, and positive attitudes, since they force people to confront their prejudices and close the perceived chasm of difference between “street children” and “normal people.” I am convinced that we can be successful in gathering the necessary resources to create a framework within which these processes of growth, learning and inspiration can be mediated on a global scale to foster peace, tolerance and cross-cultural understanding.

The goal of my proposed project is to foster a new attitude towards street children, the recognition of their potential, the termination of violence against them and the subsequent advancement of peace within and outside their community. I have faith that one day, street children will not be denounced as "hopeless" cases and that their relationships with society will not be solely defined by the stigma associated with drug use, delinquency and violence. I hope that street children will see that they too have potential, and, with the vital assistance of projects like this, will be empowered to fight for equality, recognition, dignity and the right to dream their dreams.