

Planting the Tree of Peace
The Republic of Georgia
St. John's College, Santa Fe
Elene Gvilia (Republic of Georgia), Bilsana Bibic, UWC Costa Rica (Montenegro),
Terrance Manning (USA), Noam Freshman (USA)
Peaceforgeorgia.weebly.com

The aim of our project was to educate and inspire Georgian and Abkhazian high school students affected by the Georgian-Abkhazian civil war. Through liberal arts seminars, non-violent conflict resolution training, medical clinics for refugees, and grassroots political studies, we sought to foster new understanding and fresh dialogue by bringing together youth from both sides of this decades old conflict.

To raise additional funds, we hosted a Georgian cultural night which was open to the entire college and local community, and featured traditional Georgian food, drink, dance, and a silent auction.

After arriving in Zugdidi, a small town in northwest Georgia, with the help of the American Corner, an English learning center run by the U.S. State Department, we gathered and organized 20 high school students from both sides of the civil war. Many of the students spoke and wrote English proficiently, were among the highest achieving students in their classes, and were motivated to practice English and consider the serious matters we planned to discuss. After two weeks of organizing in Zugdidi, including finding space for seminars, meeting with doctors who would accompany us to the refugee camps, scoping out the refugee camps, and much more, we were ready to begin courses with the students. Our first week's focus was leading 90-minute seminar discussions using the Socratic method. An opening question from a project team member set the tone and highlighted a problem or section of the text for the class to examine closely. This kind of learning teaches students to think independently and encourages them to take an active role in the discussion and in their own learning, by inviting them to ask questions of themselves, and each other. The teacher helps guide the discussion, bringing up pertinent points and asking clarifying questions. During our first seminar we found that, although the students had been told how the seminar would work, they felt hesitant, even uncomfortable, with this style of learning. Many of the students had never had a class like this before and were nervous or shy about discussing their thoughts with the group. This first seminar was perhaps the most difficult classroom experience we encountered. All the team members tried to encourage discussion by asking questions to prompt student responses. This seminar, as we had imagined it, did not work out. Luckily, this situation was solved over time due to the excellent student dynamic that emerged the next few days and our constant encouragement of each student's participation. Our next seminar was the exact opposite of the first. With all the students comfortable with each other, and with us, our team had to act as referees to make sure each student was heard and had a chance to share their opinion! Not only were they excited by what they had read, they were jumping at the chance to talk about Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. This trilogy of tragic Greek plays chronicling Agamemnon's homecoming after the Trojan War and a house pitted against itself – caught in a seemingly unsolvable net of murder and division – worked out to be the perfect text to spark a fresh dialogue about civil war in Georgia; a conflict that has been static and unsolvable since a ceasefire was brokered between the Georgians and Abkhazians twenty years ago.

This first week we also led courses in mediation and conflict resolution, Georgian and Abkhazian history courses, and held play rehearsals for the students' presentation of the *Oresteia* they would present at the conclusion of our project. Our conflict resolution courses focused on teaching the students how to act as mediators to diffuse and help resolve problems. By teaching the students to resolve a dispute between peers at school, we hoped to foster skills aimed at personal and approachable situations, rather than focusing initially on the seemingly insurmountable resolution of conflicts between nations. Ms. Bibic, who has extensive training in these skills, introduced the students to new vocabulary for talking about and helping resolve conflicts, then led them in hands-on role playing activities, prompting the students to create conflict situations, then allowing a mediator to practice solving the issue in front of the class.

Some of the most powerful experiences came during the project's second week: the medical mission, where we brought these same 20 students to the Abkhazian refugee camps in Zugdidi. Mr. Manning spent a day introducing students to basic first aid techniques, biology, and anatomy, as well as teaching them about the medicines we had purchased for the students to assemble into kits and distribute in the camps. These medical kits allowed the students to approach the refugees with desperately needed resources and then to talk with these people – their neighbors – some of whom had been living in terrible conditions for over 16 years, and to hear incredible stories of fleeing from war and living in its aftermath. Many students had not been inside the refugee compounds, had not seen the shocking living conditions of their own countrymen, and had never known a time when these refugees had not been living in their own backyard.

The culmination of our project was a political conference, led by Mr. Freshman and facilitated by the USAID branch in Zugdidi. Inviting some 30 guests, including current and former political leaders, poets, writers, teachers, a priest, refugees, veterans, community organizers, and experts in the field of conflict resolution, we held a town hall style discussion with the students, about the future of Georgian-Abkhazian peace. We wanted to re-ignite a long static conversation by allowing the students to speak with knowledgeable people connected to the conflict 20 years ago, so the students might begin to think about steps they could take to resolve the conflict. With recent seminar experience, our students had become seasoned interlocutors and were hungry for answers. Moments into the two-hour discussion, the room erupted in noise and confusion, but our students sat quietly and respectfully listening to our guests shout, interrupt, and speak over each other. Then, at the conclusion of the discussion, one of our students, visibly distraught, said, "We are young but we are interested in answers, you are not answering them. You all have talked about the conflict and how Russia is to blame, but we are interested in the future, looking forward." After two weeks of seminars, conflict resolution and history courses, and humbling encounters in the refugee camps – all activities honing their skills in listening and learning – our students saw that the discussion that had just occurred, one in which no one listened and all involved seemed uninterested in or unable to move forward, was one of the reasons this intractable conflict remains unsolved. At the conclusion of the project they understood, indeed, experienced firsthand, that a simple discussion can be the seed of peace.

On the day of our departure, we met some of our students at the American Corner, where they had gathered to prepare a grant application to continue the work they started during the project. We have since heard the students have received the grant money, which they will use to start a program of mentorship and learning with the kids living in the refugee camps. Our dream was to inspire these 20 students to become agents of hope and peace in Georgia. With the receipt of their own grant we are inspired by the knowledge that our students will continue training and teaching their peers and countrymen.

Section 2.

We defined peace not as a lull between two wars, but as a harmonious and amicable relationship of understanding and mutual respect between people, cultures, and nations.

We knew our brief project could not achieve such a definition of peace, so we gave our students the tools and confidence to lead their own courses and become active and engaged students and citizens. By re-sparking an important national dialogue between young people on opposite sides of the civil war, we hoped they would respond by talking to their peers and parents, and then, as adults, encourage mutual understanding and help usher in much needed resolution to this conflict.

Seeing the conditions of the refugees, hearing the stories of the refugees and our guests at the political conference, impressed the students and team members that war is so often bred from misunderstanding, mistrust, and deception. By immersing ourselves in a conflict where most bloodshed has long since subsided, we were able to see how needless, pointless, and devastating war really is, even a generation afterward. We left Georgia with the very visceral feeling of the devastation of war, but that it *can*, and should at all costs be avoided. "We left the United States to teach Georgian students about peace; we returned having been taught an important lesson in generosity and love for friends and neighbors."

Noam Freshman



Bilsana Bibic Leading her Conflict Resolution Course



Team Member Elene Gvilia Recieves a Hug From a Refugee at one of the Camps Visited



Leading a Seminar Discussion on Aeschylus's Oresteia