

Project Title: Healing the Souls through Arts

Proposed Date: June-August 2007

Project Location and involved party: The Healing Family Foundation (HFF), Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Background: We observe that people with disabilities in many countries are often perceived to be unable to accomplish anything, and rather a burden of a society. It is unfortunate that this inaccurate perception has become an invisible barrier that prevents communication between people with disabilities and the non-disabled. It is even more unfortunate that our society has accepted this non-communication to be something normal and as a result, has made the first become invisible to the latter. As a group that believes in equal opportunity and human rights, we advocate that people with disabilities receive attention and recognition they deserve, because only when rights and values of a person are elevated, there can be true peace. Therefore, to empower people with disabilities and to make a society see that they are people of values and with abilities became our interest, and fortunately we share this belief with the Healing Family Foundation (HFF) in Chiang Mai, Thailand: a local organization that has tackled this barrier and stereotype of people with disabilities through arts since its official founding in 2005. A group of orphans and children with disabilities have been trained to weave clothes in a ‘free style’, known as SAORI in Japanese. Their woven clothes are subsequently made into marketable products, e.g., decorations on T-shirts, scarves, table clothes, ties, buttons, hangs---all of which have intrinsic value in their own right. Not only does this activity render a deserving income to the people with disabilities, and in certain cases, their families; more importantly it brings them joy, sense of accomplishment, self-dependence, and self-worth. Additionally the foundation has become a place for them to socialize, forming social bond of friendship, and develop their potentialities.

In addition to assisting the HFF in fostering a positive attitude about people with disabilities, the project is meant to serve a further social function: promote the value of service. Since service has become a virtue of importance in an international world, and an instrument to peace, we see that the first step and the most sustainable solution to this problem of non-communication between the two groups would be to make young people adopt this service attitude. By directly involving high school and college students, the project will attempt to provide opportunities for interaction and to implement the belief that an integral part of being a responsible citizen is active involvement in community service. In a society where people have become more violent and less thoughtful of others, it is essential that there exists a project or program that will transform the thoughts and mold the hearts of the young to be concerned of people who are different than they are. To get pass the physical appearance and differences is the first step to peace in general.

Project Description and Objectives: The “Healing the Soul through Arts” Project believes that social interaction and contact to the outside world is as important for the people with disabilities as it is for the young to step out of the comfort zone and learn about other people. Therefore, this project will work closely with the HFF at the same time as incorporate young people in Chiang Mai into the project. We aspire to achieve the following goals:

- 1) To provide a space for people with disabilities and students to interact and enrich one another;
- 2) To foster a positive thinking about people with disabilities;
- 3) To promote a spirit of volunteerism that lacks in Thailand, especially among young people;
- 4) To assist the HFF in the area of administration and publicity;

- 5) To give Westminster College students an opportunity to observe a self-sufficient organization in order to cooperate with a local community and create a project upon their return;
- 6) To allow an opportunity for the students and people with disabilities to learn more about the cultures of the participant from Westminster College and to practice English

Strategies: 1) Collaborate with schools and universities in Chiang Mai to encourage interested students to commit a certain amount of hours to this project. All participants will become a regular visitor to the Center. They will then be divided into the following different committees according to their personal interests and talents, and work together:

A) The Social Committee: Responsible for coming up with a weekly activity for the group to bond.

B) The Publicity Committee---responsible for working closely with the local media and spreading the word about the Foundation through brochures, handouts and posters. Currently the Foundation has an online blog (diary) in Japanese. This committee could create one in Thai and English in order to update events and upload pictures to make it interesting to read for the youth, which is our target audience

C) the marketing committee---responsible for expanding the market for the artistic work of the Foundation. Chiang Mai's tourist and cultural attractions makes it rather easy to get in touch with local shops and hotels who could become a retailer and distributor. This committee may consider selling the products at the Sunday market, where people can freely sell and buy products in downtown.

2) Organize a weaving pattern design competition for students and a general public

3) Write a report on the change in outlook of the disabled and students after participating in this activity. This report of healing through arts and social bonding will possibly serve as a result of successful outcome of the Foundation.

Expected outcomes and future impact: 1) Through weekly activities together, a floor of communication between the disabled and non-disabled will be opened. As a result, non-disabled participants will gain a more accurate and positive thinking about people with disabilities. Likewise, the latter will gain self-confidence and self-esteem and feel encouraged to integrate rather than isolate. Understanding and peace should be a reflection and an outcome of this provided space for interaction between the two groups;

2) The seed of volunteerism spirits, which lacks in the Thai society, will be successfully planted in the young minds. This spirit will live on even after the project ended;

3) Understanding and appreciation of cultures different that one's own will be achieved. By cultures, it is meant not only the Thai culture and the cultures of Westminster participants but also that of people with physical disabilities, and that of non-disabled. Horizons of all participants will be broadened and respect will be earned.

4) All local participants will be inspired to continue with the project, while the Westminster students are bounded to bring back what they learned to the Westminster and Fulton community in various forms. In addition to a presentation and a written report, we hope to construct a small club and work with a local organization to empower a selected target group such as people with disabilities or young people with drugs and family problems. We aim to invite existing organizations on campus such as fraternities, sororities, independents and international club to join this effort and possibly make it a "college project" that everyone shares a goal and aspires to achieve it as a community.