

Derron JR Wallace '07  
Wheaton College, MA  
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### **Fighting for Our Lives: Creating Schools for Peace**

“We are the younger generation. We are fighting for our lives, As AIDS and hate kill many people, we are fighting for our lives. We have no education. [Still] we are fighting for our lives, As AIDS and hate kill many people, we are fighting for our lives.”

**--Tanzanian youth song**

They sang sweetly. With tambourines shaking and hands clapping, thirty-five courageous Chagga and Maasai children chanted the Tanzanian youth song at a slow and steady pace. I listened to their compelling and troubling cry while helping to prepare a meal for them at a local orphanage. Indeed, the message the Tanzanian children conveyed through this song is one to which many troubled youth in my homeland, Jamaica, can relate. I thought of my childhood friend, nineteen year old Jamaican ‘rude boy’, Shane, who defends his life and block everyday with a gun in one of Jamaica’s increasingly violent communities. Or, ten-year old Jamaican street-boy, Wilson, who maintains his life and well-being with each additional dollar he begs and receives. I am sure they would somberly join the chorus with the Tanzanian youngsters. Though the struggles or fighting tactics of Shane, Wilson and the Chagga/Maasai children are seemingly different, I’ve come to learn that the social epidemics (poverty, gangsterism, homelessness) that shatter families and lives, leave youth unmentored and sometimes uncared for. The domestic, gang, communal, criminal and political violence Shane, Wilson and many young Tanzanians and Jamaicans face can only be addressed effectively through as many concerted, collaborative social programs as possible. I propose one such program: a non-traditional peace project centered on enhancing education for youth in two inner-city public schools, one in Jamaica and the other in Tanzania.

In association with the Jamaica’s National Youth Service, National Social Development Commission and Chichibud Limited, along with Tanzania’s local business McMoody’s and LOHADA, I endeavor to tackle some of the poverty-related influences that lead to crime and violence in volatile school communities in Tivoli, Jamaica and Unga Limited, Tanzania. I aspire to establish ‘reading corners’ or miniature libraries in the public schools (namely Tivoli Primary School and LOHADA Day School) and provide school uniforms to the most needy children in these areas, for I wholeheartedly believe that education is the most precious, valuable and non-perishable social asset and effective anti-violence resource available to us today. By implementing this project in conjunction with the aforementioned parties, I hope to encourage youngsters to pursue and value education; create alternative spaces to express creativity; revitalize the ethos of the inner-city communities; combat the stigma attached to these impoverished areas; challenge business and government officials to offer consistent material support to maintain the ‘reading corners’ or mini-libraries in schools; and, most importantly for me, reduce the number of future “criminals”. This project will indeed “bring new [and dare I say, unusual] prospects of peace in the world”, particularly to Jamaica and Tanzania. It is about **Providing Education And Clothing Essentials (PEACE)**.

Through the establishment of reading corners in Tivoli and Unga Limited, youngsters will be exposed to multi-level/age-appropriate, culturally responsive, inspiring and engaging literature. These books will be so captivating that youth will be compelled to read consistently, and as a result, improve their literacy rate considerably. Summer activities will include, reading lessons led by local teachers, book reading competitions, and write-your-own-book week. The books these students create will be copied and catalogued so that future participants in ‘Schools for Peace’ can have access to the work of their peers. In the absence of prominent community leaders, youngsters will become accessible and influential role models for each other. As part of the ‘Schools for Peace’ project, a uniform donation/exchange program will also be established. Though it seems all too basic, uniforms are key elements of social and cultural socialization, and can be considered just

as important as books in these countries<sup>1</sup>. Each child will be given one additional uniform courtesy of the program. If they are able to keep these clothing essentials in good condition, they will be awarded two sets of uniforms in the following summer. The clothes that have been outgrown will be given to other needy youngsters. Essentially, this follows the Grameen bank model, but instead of money, we will use clothes as the means of exchange<sup>2</sup>.

Tivoli and Unga Limited are ideal sites for this peace project, not just because of their low socio-economic status and history of violence, but because the schools in these communities are of a very low quality and are welcoming of this initiative. The low performance and literacy rates of the students in these areas are but a few of the inevitable outcomes for youth schooled in such education systems threatened by economic challenges. With no libraries and a very limited supply of books, the students at Tivoli Primary and LOHADA Day School lack the basic resources needed to be successful in their educational pursuits. I am thoroughly convinced that alternative measures can be applied to redress the trends of failure. With the help of volunteers from the National Youth Service and advice from the National Social Development Commission, the 'Schools for Peace's' reading intervention, I hope, will enhance persistence and school success rates and provide support to failing school systems. I will travel to Jamaica first, from late May until early July to work with available volunteers on this project. This is the right time because schools are still in session at this point. I will then head off the Tanzania from early July until the end of August, the period during which school restarts.<sup>3</sup> My visit to these countries over the summer to pilot and field-test this plan is but a short-term investment to place the project in local hands (particularly principals and teachers) and thereby ensure its sustainability<sup>4</sup>.

I began to consider unorthodox approaches to peace while working in one of South Africa's leading grassroots peace-making initiatives, the Community Peace Programme, as a Davis International Fellow. My work took me to police stations, crime scenes and to the homes of victims and the accused in hopes of building peace and reconciliation. I would soon learn that this was not the only way to engage in the peace-building process or stem the tide of violence. While volunteering at Silverstream High school in Manenberg, Cape Town, I was reawakened to the fact that without accessible, sound, affordable education, youth can be frustrated, lose commitment to their continued learning, and often resort for consolation and income to drugs, theft, gangsterism and even prostitution. I now subscribe to the view that the one of the chief causes of violent crime is a lack of education. It is no coincidence that the some of the most violent parts of Jamaica and Tanzania (and even the rest of the world, for that matter) are filled with poor, uneducated, undereducated people. The most pertinent, urgent, resolute and strategic measure needed to limit violence in the future is education, delivered through an innovated approach.

The 100 Projects for Peace grant will take me back to familiar communities to engage in unusual work. It will allow me to enhance the schooling systems and educational opportunities in Tivoli and Unga Limited, regions that are feared and rejected. It will allow me to make education and learning more accessible to youth than it is at this point. The social, cultural and literacy skills they will acquire as a result of this initiative, will serve them well as they become competent, committed and loyal citizens of their respective countries. This is indeed a feasible peace effort. By piloting two very specific components of intervention and outreach, I will bring service in areas it is needed most. Through 'Schools for Peace', youngsters will learn to fight for their lives not with a gun or knife. Instead they will be armed with a sound education.

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<sup>1</sup> While it is possible to attend school without books in Jamaica and Tanzania, one will not be permitted entrance to school without appropriate uniforms.

<sup>2</sup> This dimension of the program will be monitored by the respective school principals.

<sup>3</sup> I will use my skills as a social science student to track, compare and contrast the persistence, progression and promise of the inner-city youngsters to avoid criminal or gang involvements in my pilot cohorts in the two countries.

<sup>4</sup> Principals and teachers will be trained on how to make contacts, forge connections, build partnerships and solicit funding for private sector organizations. In addition, I hope to link them to US-based organization such at gotbooks.com. Linkages to local and international organizations will aid in the development and maintenance of a stream of resources.