

Proposal for The Davis Project for Peace: The Belizean Leadership Youth Summit (BLYS)

Shanice A. Sanchez & Dhvani T. Tombush - *Barnard College 2015*

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Empowering Belizean Youth through discourse, career training, and the practice of social entrepreneurship so that they may be vessels for transformational change in their community.

Problem and Root Causes: Gang Violence, Crime, and Government Inadequacy

Belize is bordered by Mexico and Guatemala and situated on the Caribbean Sea. This location has made the small Central American country of 324,000 an important stopping point for the transportation of narcotics¹. The unregulated nature of the drug trade and a high poverty rate of 40% have produced a violent climate in the country that allowed for several gangs to concentrate in the 60,000-person Belize City¹. These gangs have earned Belize the title of 6th most violent country in the world. Approximately 40 people per 100,000 are killed per year with a total of 145 in the year 2012 alone². This rate, a 15% increase from the previous year, is large in proportion to the population in Belize City.

Gang violence has captured the lives of many Belizean Youth, whose country holds the 6th highest rate of incarceration², a statistic that can be attributed to poverty. In a small country with a GDP per capita of \$8,900, high youth unemployment rate (19.5%), and 4 out of 10 people living in poverty, gangs provide an enticing alternative¹.

Low levels of confidence in government have also reproduced generations of Belizeans who are invested in crime and violence. In 2012, a ‘gang truce’² which paid prominent gang leaders for peace ended. When violent crime levels such as home invasions, grenade attacks, and shootouts began to rise, the government issued a “Declaration of Crime Infested Areas” which permitted law enforcement agents to conduct search and seizures in profiled communities without warrant. Here, we observe the power of gangs in Belize over the government, and a lack of trust between the government and vulnerable communities. Together these factors reinforce the prevalence of gangs, leaving a large population of Belizeans vulnerable, either as potential recruits or victims.

Theory of Change

Our program intends to inspire transformational leadership by providing a space for positive discourse among Belizean youth, equipping youth with career training and role models and finally, encouraging them to practice social entrepreneurship and activism. This new discourse will critically examine the issues of their society, while crafting solutions to them. Additionally, they will be better prepared to advocate for their own and the communities’ social and economic advancement. Moreover, by practicing social entrepreneurship and activism, these youth will be empowered to sculpt their own solutions to community problems. These measures will eliminate the government and low educational opportunities as the middlemen determining the success of these youth. This program has potential for extremely high impact because the 50 students participating will be equipped to reach across a wider population within Belize City.

Implementation

This project consists of a 3-month campaign and 3-week program for 50 male and female students between the ages of 16 and 21. Students will submit applications found in media and high schools.

¹ CIA World Factbook

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ho.html>>.

² United States Department of State

<<https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=13420>>

The three-month campaign will involve social media reach out and webinars that will start the conversation surrounding gang violence. Also, career development workshops will be conducted in the 10 high schools in Belize City, preparing for and advertising our program.

In the first week of the program, participants will learn techniques for positive discourse surrounding issues in their community. Students attend negotiation and debate workshops where they practice conflict resolution. After workshops, they are divided into groups and assigned an issue. Together, they devise a target policy for each issue. Each group will then present their problem alongside their policy and the other students will offer criticisms and suggestions. They will practice communication skills that will allow them to advocate for themselves and engage each other to solve community's problems.

The second week focuses on career training and entrepreneurship. The morning sessions will feature a guest speaker followed by practical career workshops. The guest speakers will become role models for participants to emulate and will provide insight into the job market. Afternoon sessions will include lessons on entrepreneurship teaching need identification, program and business development and impact which will culminate in a final pitch of a social venture.

Week three, "Activism as Empowerment" will provide transferrable skills that will contribute to economic empowerment. The week will begin with an excursion to a non-profit organization or service center to foster a spirit of service. Then, using the skills and framework learned in the weeks before, students will choose an issue and develop an original campaign to address it with a \$750 seed budget. On the final day, we will host a ceremony where students present the results of their campaign, reflect on areas for growth, and discuss next steps. Ultimately we hope this program will produce self-advocates that will break the cycles of poverty and violence that threaten peace in Belize. We, with the help of the local YMCA, will also require follow up evaluations from the students regarding the impact of their campaigns.

Personal Investment and Contributions

As a Belizean herself, Shanice Sanchez has witnessed many family members fall victim to both ends of the gang conflict in Belize. She currently serves as the Coordinator for Success and Enrichment programs at a school in Harlem. Among her initiatives is a student leadership council, which teaches social justice, Harlem history, and current events. As an ELLA Fellow she created an efficient social justice program entitled, *In Circular Motion* that geared at empowering female victims of abuse through creative expression. Shanice has also served as a Speaking Fellow at Barnard College where she works toward fostering a positive speaking culture at Barnard College by encouraging intellectual friction. Shanice has a passion for youth development in marginalized and at risk communities. Her strong network in Belize and her experiences in program development will ensure a successful project for peace.

Dhvani Tombush is a co founder of the educational initiative "We Care." *We Care* fund raises to provide educational materials for underserved secondary school students in Nigeria and runs summer programs that develop arts and career interests. She attended the African Leadership Academy, South Africa where she was trained in the theory and practice of leadership and entrepreneurship. During this time, she began a supplementary curriculum program for an underprivileged preschool and library-reading program for the elementary school. Finally, as a Global Symposium scholar for Brazil she created and executed leadership workshops for female high school students that used a simulation to understand gender inequality in the workplace and suggest solutions. Dhvani possesses an enthusiasm for education, entrepreneurship, and leadership.