

Reconciliation through Rural School Development

Sri Lanka

Luther College

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Section 1

Our project consisted of three main goals: (1) to build a pavilion at Sivabhoomi Arakkatalai, a school for disabled children; (2) to build two toilets and paint buildings at Muthuthamby Maha Vidyalayam, a school for orphans; and (3) to interact with the children and have peer counseling sessions at both schools.

We had several fund raisers in the town of Decorah at multiple churches and private organizations. We subsequently collected \$3,086.61 from all fund raisers including individual contributions from well-wishers. We used these funds primary for transportation to and within Sri Lanka, to purchase food, and for unanticipated expenses of the project.

We first contacted officials in the north who were in charge of the respective schools by telephone to arrange a meeting to discuss the proceedings. Kavindra's mother travelled with us to help facilitate the meeting and to discuss the terms and conditions of the project. The architectural plan of the pavilion and the toilets were finalized through the help of Kavindra's brother who is an engineer. Building the pavilion with proper supervision and expertise was of great concern due to safety reasons, thus a contractor was hired to supervise and build the pavilion. The plan was handed over to the contractor for the cost estimate of the pavilion and the toilets to be reprocessed. Due to the involvement of a contractor and the ongoing financial crisis the estimate was a little higher than anticipated. As we had predicted the increased cost beforehand the fundraised money was helpful to continue the project as planned to a greater extent.

Although the project went generally as planned, due to budget constraints, we had to compromise with the officials of Muthuthamby Vidyalayam on building one unisex toilet instead of two separate toilets. The officials agreed on building one unisex toilet in the second meeting. The officials at Sivabhoomi also agreed on accommodating us at their school during the course of building the pavilion.

We headed back to Colombo after the meetings. We then returned to Jaffna after a week to begin the construction work. As we were housed in the school itself, during the course of building the pavilion we interacted with the children and got to know them. We established a friendly relationship with the children and they soon became very comfortable being around us. After interacting with them and trying out different sports, we managed to find out that many were able to play soccer. We trained all the children who were interested in playing soccer. Although Noorullah was not familiar with the native language the children responded to him very well. They developed a very good connection with us in and out of the training sessions. We had lunch together with the children at most occasions. We also played carom and spent a lot of time having conversations with them which boosted our energy levels and inspired us to spend more time with them.

The building process went smoothly as there were no rain showers during the two-month period. There were approximately 30 professional workers and some volunteers involved in building the pavilion with two supervisors present at the building site at all times. The pavilion was completed earlier than the expected date. An opening ceremony was held to hand over the pavilion to the school. Parents and caretakers of the children at Sivabhoomi were invited to the opening ceremony and the ceremony started with a party and ended with a soccer match between two teams we had coached. The parents, officials and the children all watched the game from the pavilion we had built. The winners were given trophies

in order to encourage them to be more involved in sports. The newspaper and T.V reporters had also come to the opening ceremony and we were interviewed and our interviews were telecasted on air.

The same contractor was in charge of building the toilet in Muthuthamby Maha Vidyalayam. But the building of the toilet and painting of buildings took more time than expected. The contractor was away for two weeks, so the work was stopped during that period which delayed the construction of the toilet. The school already had toilets which were not in good standards. The toilet pit that was already available was too small and it was very hard to connect it with the new toilet. For this reason a new eight-foot pit had to be dug and connected to the new toilet. As some buildings were still in destroyed state at Muthuthambi, we painted only the buildings which were used regularly.

All of the children in both schools were definitely assisted through the project. It gave them hope that people were willing to help them out. Also we feel that the whole community in the north benefited from this project, as many parents who were not willing to send their disabled children to school might have heard from other people or seen on television that children in such schools are well taken care of and supported by community members and teachers. We also believe that we made the way for an entire generation to seek out for things they do not have yet. By building them a ground with a pavilion, we showed our belief in them. Further, as education is the key for success, the new toilet and the painted buildings will encourage them to study harder and it will allow other parents to be reminded of how important education can be to their children.

Section 2

We defined peace as the right to acquire proper education at the beginning of the project. And we believed that using education as a force to unite people, nations, and cultures would foster a more peaceful and sustainable future. We still believe that these ideas are a very important aspect of living a peaceful life after the project. We also learned that every child has the secret potential to change the world for the greater good, no matter what abilities they may or may not possess.

Our project contributes to peace in the way we had expected. The newly built pavilion will unite not only the community in the north but it will also unite the northern Tamil community with the Sinhala community in Sri Lanka. Sport is the only reason which brings all Sri Lankans under one flag and we believe that every Sri Lankan will cheer for the children from the north if they represent the nation at the world arena. Thus, contributing through sports as a united nation would bring peace and prosperity to the long lasting conflict. Also we believe that the newly built toilet will reduce the risk of diseases and the painted buildings will give them the feeling of a new start which will help the war victims to recover fast and concentrate on their education, which will ultimately bring peace and prosperity.

The project has definitely changed the way we think about world. It made us understand that achieving peace is not a giant task which takes endless effort and countless minutes. We understood that peace could blossom from a simple gesture or a gentle smile. After interacting with the children at both schools we realized that the world consists of many human beings who are looking for love and care. People are not so different after all; they are just sensational and emotional beings. With people who are willing to contribute to build a better world on one side and with people who are thanking the ones who contributed for putting the effort on the other side, it seems like we are all one and the world is so small. It also reminded us of the phrase, "United we stand, divided we fall."

"I have learned that every disabled human being consists of potential skill and talent. It just needs to be paid a little more attention to be observed. Three months of continued effort on the project has provided means for the disabled kids to overcome their disability to some extent. " - Noorullah Zafari.

