

“Centro Cultural RealizArte”
Mexico
College of the Atlantic
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www.facebook.com/CentroCulturalRealizArte

Section I: Project Overview

Centro Cultural RealizArte is an arts and cultural center in the rural Mayan community of Yaxkukul, Yucatan, Mexico. Our mission is to promote and value indigenous culture via arts and literacy education in a community where creative and educational opportunities are limited and globalization threatens local traditions.

The award from Projects for Peace is the only source of funds we have received.

Overall, the project went impressively well without a hitch. When I arrived in Yucatan on July 1st, my partners had already been working for months to prepare for the summer. With only donations and volunteers, they were able to secure the building that would be our cultural center and have it looking clean and beautiful for our summer workshops. They also hired teachers, planned the schedule of events, and promoted the workshops within the community. This was done with huge help from students in the community itself. The students cleaned and painted the space with their own hands, which gave them a sense of ownership. This was really essential to our mission and the project would not have been so successful without such community involvement. Upon arrival, I was happy to finally be there and able to have real conversations rather than organizing everything over WhatsApp, as we had been doing for months before.

In our first week we had 35 students sign up for summer courses. We opened the workshops to the entire community and had a diverse range of ages from eight-year-old children to adults of 40 years. It was exciting to see that interest in the cultural center was not limited to one particular age group. The most popular workshops were photography and music, which had two different groups of students, while theater and Mayan culture had one group. Each group met twice a week for two hours over the course of five weeks. Participation was strong through the end of the workshops though we occasionally lost attendance due to weather (summer is rainy season). It was really incredible to see students show up day after today with the desire to work and learn together.

In addition to our summer courses, we started a library project in the cultural center. We discovered that the town officials had a garage full of books from the old library that had been closed down five years ago. Even though Yaxkukul receives benefits from a federal literacy program that establishes libraries in rural communities, when we arrived there was no library to speak of and the books had been left abandoned. We decided to rescue the forgotten books and establish a small library. We also hosted activities to promote literacy and actively engage community members with literature in addition to lending out books.

Those who benefitted from our workshops represent diverse ages within the community, and we even had some students travel from nearby towns. Besides the students who received these programs absolutely free, our teachers greatly benefitted from the project. We hired professionals in music and the arts who work in Merida, a city rich in the arts but where many artists struggle to make ends meet. With the support from Projects for Peace, we were able to provide them a good wage while bringing a high-quality service free of charge to the community. Truthfully, the classes taught at our cultural center were of university quality, and bringing that resource to a town where most people don't study beyond high school had a huge impact.

The difficulties we faced were, in my mind, minor and part of the experience. One challenge was simply receiving the funds from my college, as I had a lot of trouble using my home bank while abroad. After many emails and phone calls, I eventually opened a local bank account, which worked perfectly but the process leading up to that was certainly stressful. Another small challenge was that I

purchased a Macbook computer for the cultural center, thinking in my mind that it was of the best quality. Upon arrival I found that no one knew how to use it because they only had experience with Windows. It was an interesting lesson in cultural appropriateness, albeit a small one. Thankfully, I did not have any major cultural or language barriers because I had previously lived in Yucatan for six months and returned to live with my host family who were also my partners in the project. At times, living and working together everyday was simply exhausting but in the end we saw that our hard work and cooperation paid off.

The biggest challenge is certainly securing the future of the cultural center. It worked to our benefit that the dollar had an exceptionally high exchange rate to the Mexican peso during this summer. The funds from Projects for Peace had a huge impact and went much farther than we expected. We were able to plan additional activities and go beyond our original proposal. My partners are working to solicit additional support from the local government and public institutions in Yaxkukul and Merida so that activities and events will continue and I will remain involved whether from near or afar. Although I know it will be a huge challenge, after seeing everything we accomplished I don't doubt that we will secure a long happy life for the cultural center. The award from Projects for Peace sparked interest and gave impetus to fundraising.

Section II: Impact

Peace, in many ways, comes from within and it is that sense of inner peace that we worked on this summer. In order to be fully realized citizens in the world, we first must be content with ourselves. Many factors contribute to violence, but I do believe that problems with self-esteem and self-value play a role.

This project contributes to peace in Yaxkukul by providing a space for people to thrive. As an artist, I believe that participating in a creative process has immense benefits for individuals and communities. Having a space for arts and culture in Yaxkukul provides all members of the community with an outlet for their frustrations, joys, tragedies, boredom, and the general ups and downs of the human experience. Instead of going to the bar on the corner, they can explore new worlds in a book, express themselves through a song, find beauty in a photograph, or simply play a board game with their neighbors.

Also crucial to the promotion of peace is the element of indigenous Mayan culture. Yucatan is home to a wealth of knowledge and traditions thanks to its Mayan heritage, yet many people hesitate to claim this as their own due to centuries of discrimination and modern pressures from a globalized world. Our biggest goal is that through revaluing Mayan traditions, language, and knowledge, community members will revalue themselves and their community. When one sees beauty, strength, and intelligence in themselves through their ability to create, they begin to see these things in their surroundings and their community as well.

On a more tangible level, this project was a personal lesson in the world of non-profits and how people struggle or succeed to make a living doing what they believe is important rather than what pays the most. It gave me insight into where I would like to go beyond college and showed me what form my ideals and beliefs can take when manifested into action. It also solidified my desire to pursue the arts and taught me perhaps what I had hoped to teach my students: that art can change your life and maybe even the world, too.

Personal Statement

To me, this project is valuable because the community members themselves have shown they treasure and appreciate its presence and have taken full advantage of what the center offers. My summer in Yaxkukul with Centro Cultural RealizArte taught me that arts and culture have a place in promoting world peace, and that a group of like-minded hard-working individuals can accomplish great things by working together.

Photography



A day in the Mayan culture workshop: building a miniature Mayan house



Some of the crowd at our final performance enjoying the work of the music workshop



Some of the students in the photography workshop that I co-taught and myself (third from right)