

## Giving Voice to Repressed Children: Promoting the Higher Education Dreams of South Korea's Orphans South Korea

International House New York

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BDdUew1kMY>

This pilot project aimed to provide leadership training, mentoring opportunities, independence training, and English language classes for South Korean high school orphans who were close to aging out of the social welfare system, while simultaneously providing rare opportunities for these students to travel, tell their own story, and expand and strengthen their community. It sought to ameliorate these children's risk to lives of violence and conflict by helping them to develop the skills necessary to build their self confidence and by creating opportunities for them to establish a supportive community that would safeguard them against violence and protect them as they pursued their higher education dreams.

During the months of planning before the project commenced, the project evolved from an extensive English camp into a leadership camp with an Amazing Race theme that took place over five days. The 12 kids were divided into 3 groups and each group was assigned a Korean college student as their team mentor. Teams were given a go-pro camera, race clues, tasks, challenges, games, and budgets to solve and manage as they raced from their orphanage in a small town in an eastern province of the country to and around the different neighborhoods of Seoul, the big city. They received points for each clue and activity solved on their own, each photo/video taken, and each "independence" skill they showcased. Eight Korean and four American volunteers served as clue holders, activity leaders, and judges for different points in the race. Six Korean adults, approached specifically for their careers and training (in hospitality, culinary arts, nursing, graphic arts/web design, the airline industry, and the military) served as volunteer panelists for a breakout session that focused on careers of interests to the students and achievable with hard work. The kids were able to speak to them about their specific dreams, and the panelists were able to share their experiences in how they achieved their education and their careers. The camp ended with a dinner party for the students, volunteers, panelists, and organizers to converse, celebrate, and build rapport in this new community. This was followed by an awards breakfast the next morning where the kids were able to share what they learned from their camp experience.

While the camp was successful overall, unanticipated difficulties stemmed most from scheduling difficulties. The original two week camp format was scratched when the students' extended school year and the orphanages' yearly camp trip (planned many months before) only allowed for 5 free days to run this project. As a large component of the original proposal was contingent on the students traveling, visiting universities, and interacting with college students and young adults, it became apparent that the project would benefit from more of an out of classroom experience. As such, the classroom structure was restructured to an activity-based race instead. Interestingly enough, the out of classroom experience allowed for the kids to take more ownership of their experience in that they were allowed to make decisions that many of them had never even thought of previously. Growing up in group homes and orphanages, they were at the mercy of the house rules, restrictions, and decisions made by their housemothers and the orphanage directors. As the orphanages had asked me to consider ways to add independence skill building activities such as taking public transit, budgeting a certain amount of money for an activity, ordering and eating alone, and other such activities that these students had never done on their own to the larger curriculum; the race style ended up being the best way to run the project and address multiple interests and goals from KKOOM, the orphanages, and my own goals for the project.

Language and cultural barriers also proved to be difficult hurdles in planning. This project would not have been possible without the 20+ volunteers who helped run various aspects of the program with many of them volunteering for multiple days with no compensation other than food to eat and a bed to sleep in. However, there was some difficulties in that a few of the volunteers who promised to help months in advance (who had previously confirmed confidently and frequently) backed out during the last two weeks before the project's run. Luckily this same cultural inclination allowed for other students and adults to jump in and volunteer at the last minute. However, it was a definite shock and headache to be in that position a few days before the camp was to start and to have to organize volunteers who I

hadn't had as much time to work with before. The language barrier was the most difficult with the students. Their English level was lower than I anticipated and I had to rely more on the college student volunteers, body language, and Google translate in some of my interactions with them. This did not affect the actual program too much as the high school students were able to take direction from the Korean volunteers and the college students. However, I did walk away from the project feeling more accomplished about the program created, the logistics coordinated, and the relationships I formed and strengthened with the volunteers, rather than the relationships I was able to cultivate with the students.

Even considering all of the difficulties I ran into, the project ran smoothly overall and both the students and their respective orphanages remarked on how much it benefitted the students. The non-profit I worked with was happy with the results of the leadership camp and we spent much of the time during and immediately after the camp documenting the planning process with the goal of replicating all or parts of it again in the future. Since returning to the US, I have been in talks with them to discuss how they can take various aspects of the project's programming and implement them in other South Korean towns and with other orphanages around the country throughout the year. They are also interested in running the complete project again next summer which they would then fully fund and which I would either serve as an advisor to the program and/or volunteer to be a part of the volunteer team. While the project will not be its own entity or non-profit, I am happy that the work will be of good use to KKOOM and that they will include it in their yearly programming.

## Section II

Prior to running this project, I tended to define peace in terms of security, where peace was simply freedom from violence and conflict. I saw peace as security in terms of educational achievement, in monetary capability, and in securing supportive networks and relationships. While I still believe all of that to be true, after running this project, I would amend that definition to include that peace also entails developing an inner confidence and belief in oneself, and the freedom to believe that one is of value.

What struck me so powerfully about these students is how very aware they were of their precarious position in their society. I assumed that many of them would not have any goals or dreams of higher education or of achieving certain vocations after they were to leave their orphanages. However, the Korean volunteers told me how surprised they were to see that it was almost the exact opposite. These students knew exactly what they wanted to be or do for a career. However, these students also believed that those dreams were impossible because they only saw them in terms of money. It was shocking to see that the students knew exactly how much money their dreams required in terms of training or further education. These figures were large enough and enough of a hurdle that the students had simply stopped dreaming and had even stopped analyzing all possibilities for accomplishing their dreams since the figure was so large.

As these students spent more time with the volunteers throughout the camp and the volunteers broke down the students' arguments about the costs of their dreams, it was amazing to see the students realize that there might be other ways to pursue further education and training. Their excitement from hearing stories of how others had solved their money problems and pursued their goals was palpable. In the short-term, both the students and the volunteers have benefitted from their experience in terms of creating a larger supportive community that is committed to helping these students succeed. In the long-term, many of the volunteers have already approached KKOOM to volunteer with other programs they have. More importantly many of them have expressed to me how they have walked away with a changed sense of what it means to be an orphan in Korea. Their preconceived notions of that position in their society have been challenged and they are determined not to forget what they've learned. If they stay true to their word, and this experience continues to affect how they treat and interact with orphans, I would say that this project accomplished changing how both the volunteers and the students will approach life in the long run. I know that my own world-view on economic disparity in relation to pursuing peace has been challenged. In my own goals for pursuing work that pushes for higher education access for all, I will endeavor to always consider how personal worth is an integral component of all plans and solutions.

“Peace is not found solely in freedom from violence and in economic security. It’s also found in freedom from self-oppression, where an individual can believe that their dreams might be possible and worth pursuing, no matter how much society has told them otherwise.” – Christine Arlene N. Arrozal



The high school students, college student volunteers, and I in front of Sogang University, one of many stops on “The Amazing Race – Leadership Camp, Seoul”.



A few of the Korean volunteers after they shared their stories and career paths in their breakout sessions with the students

Two of the students race to win a Road Block challenge.

