Objective

Storytelling for Peace and Empowerment was designed to promote peace and reconciliation by providing an outlet for discussion of the inequality and discrimination faced by many young girls in Rwanda through a 10-day summer camp focused on storytelling. Our project aimed to provide a platform for the girls to share their personal stories of struggle and endurance and address the hostility they face in their daily lives. We also highlighted many socio-economic inequalities that exist within their communities and engaged in a conversation about creating initiatives to address and eradicate those inequalities, to ultimately lead to a more peaceful society.

In addition to the support provided by the Davis United World College, the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village (ASYV), located in the Rwamagana district of Rwanda, provided generous support for our project. The village donated the housing and board for all of our summer camp participants, and donated the meeting space needed to conduct our program. The village also used their influential connections to invite well-known and successful Rwandan personalities to speak at our conferences.

Young women around the world continue to face prejudice against their identities; yet, they are not provided with opportunities to talk about their personal experiences where they faced instances of discrimination. We recognized the need for an initiative that could provide young women with a platform to share their stories and engage in conversations about the inequalities and discrimination they faced. Growing up in Rwanda after the genocide, Peace Grace understood the importance of talking about individual experiences in order for the society to heal and move forward. At the same time, Sara learned about the significance of storytelling through her senior capstone project that focused on reconciliation within post-conflict societies. Therefore, we combined our personal experiences and education to create a program that focused on these topics: storytelling, girl’s empowerment and peace building. Since our project began with a conversation about previous initiatives undertaken by us in our respective countries that focused on girls empowerment, we decided to work with young women in Rwanda, especially those in high school, to better serve a community that truly needed such an initiative.

In the summer of 2017, Peace Grace had successfully designed a women’s leadership program called *Lift Her Up* through a student organization she founded in ASYV. Therefore, as a continuation of her efforts, we decided to go back to this particular high school to implement our project. We also chose ASYV as our project site because they specifically admit young vulnerable women who tend to be exposed to issues of gender discrimination, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. ASYV’s residential program work with their students with goals of educating and healing. Because of their dedication to women’s issues, ASYV welcomed our program that promoted empowerment and emancipation of women. Since, we were fortunate to partner with an organization that believed in our project’s goals and supported our initiatives, we did not have difficulty receiving the resources that were necessary to continue our program. They were eager to partner with us by providing resources that were necessary to continue our program.
In the initial stages, our main challenge in completing this program was caused by remote communication with the high school. As we were not on site, it was not always easy to make plans as a result of other responsibilities or time differences. However, once we arrived in Kigali, ASYV supported us by providing us a team of staff members who dedicated time to meet with us personally and communicated with us in a timely manner.

We believe that a society is peaceful when all of its members, including young vulnerable women, can openly express themselves so that any issues of discrimination can be acknowledged and addressed. We define peace as a situation where the voices of each and every portion of the population are encouraged and heard, and situations of conflicts are resolved constructively. Through our project, the girls learn that the art of storytelling can serve as an important tool which helps us understand the perspectives, joys and struggles of other members of the community. It provides individuals and communities the skills to resolve their conflicts through mutual understanding. By sharing their individual stories, the participants empowered themselves while receiving emotional support and acknowledgement from others who encountered similar problems. This started an important conversation, as the girls learned that by sharing their stories of struggle, they were able to highlight the problems that existed within their communities. In the long-term, this conversation can contribute to the movement that encourages the youth of Rwanda to use their voices and stories to build a peaceful society rather than allow fear and hatred to create disharmony.

Our project was an eye-opening experience for us. We saw the growth in the level of confidence and comfort as the girls participated in the various parts of the program. At the beginning of the camp, the girls had difficulty interacting with the facilitators and their peers. However, towards the end of the camp, the girls willingly worked in teams with participants from different schools and presented their creative projects in front of a large audience. This improvement gave us a strong realization that the girls were not lacking in creativity or knowledge, but rather they rarely had a platform or an opportunity that pushed them to channel their strengths and individuality. We always believed that a key to individual growth and development is education, but as a result of this experience, now, we value education that not only focuses on imparting knowledge but also allows the students to contribute and participate directly in the learning process. This entire experience has strengthened our individual resolve to dedicate our personal and professional lives towards the betterment of our respective communities.

“If we can empower even a single individual by encouraging them to tell their stories of endurance, we are able to contribute to a generation of young leaders who are capable of making their community a better and peaceful place.” -Peace Grace Muhizi

“It is especially important for the younger generation of women to believe that their voices, perspectives and experiences matter so they can strive to be effective agents of change. The most effective way of achieving this is by exposing them to prominent, relatable and fierce female role models within their own communities.” -Sara Belbase