

An Innovative Response to a Financial Crisis:
Aiding Rural Village Farmers and Underprivileged Youth
Greece
Wheaton College
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Section 1

The project goal was to help residents of the Greek island of Syros by redistributing unharvested agricultural produce. I designed and created a welcoming, open-air trade center to reduce wasted produce, enabling me to work with underprivileged youth, who would benefit from the redistributed resources. I also aimed to capture the experience in a film to inspire others to create change in their communities. No other fundraising efforts contributed to this project, besides the generosity of the 100 Projects for Peace award and the materials, space, and time that the people of Syros gave me.

My idea came from my knowledge of the financial crisis in Greece. Being half Greek, the crisis hit close to home. I had been following Greece's financial problems in the news over the past couple of years, so my research started from that foundational knowledge. On a prior visit to the island, I saw foodstuffs, such as fresh figs and peaches, fallen to the ground, unpicked and undistributed. After speaking with my contact on the island, Katarina Stefanou, the logistics that were part of my proposal became more tangible.

Reflecting on my experiences, I believe the problem I aimed at aiding most likely exists in many communities; lack of resources or barriers to access is common. With my personal connection to the community, I felt my Project for Peace could make a big difference. I realized that levels of poverty exist in Syros from talking to the women and men who help the kids in the partner organization I worked with, "Στέγη Ανηλικών Συρού" (the Shelter for Underaged People in Syros). I listened to their stories of helping at the organization, and they emphasized that the numbers of children in need have escalated since the financial crisis. Also, many donors, who had helped the organization in the past, no longer were giving.

Why Syros? I would have not changed the community I was able to assist, especially now having finished my project. Syros has become a second home. Part of my heart is there and will always be there. The people of Syros and I achieved our project together. I had a feeling from prior, shorter-term visits that this island had deep love and that my desire to help would be welcomed. Even though I came into the project with only an intermediate level of speaking Greek—and though Syros holds no familial relations—it feels more like home than anywhere else in Greece. Additionally, I had observed in previous visits that it was an island of locals, an island that was authentic Greece, with a very low level of tourism.

Once the project really started picking up speed, and I started building, I quickly realized I had taken for granted Home Depot and other big box stores and the ease of communication in the United States. Building the stand was what made me interact with the community more than anything else in the project. It was my constant persistence in gathering the materials needed for construction that made it a community project. For example, I knew I needed wood. I had seen unused wood lying around the island, so I took my bike around and started asking if I could use wood scraps. The answer was usually no, but I kept asking. I eventually ended up at the boatyard where they said I not only could use their extra wood, but also I could use their tool space. (Prior to this experience, three carpenters had told me I could not use their tools for a variety of reasons—not enough time, they were broken, and one even said, "because I was a woman.") The small boatyard was perfect. I could use the workspace, and I found old wood that I glued together to make full pieces, which eventually turned into walls. Eventually, I ran out of scrap wood and needed some real pieces. Through a number of phone calls, I unexpectedly reached the mayor of Finikas. His brother was a carpenter and was able to get me real wood! Still, the difficulty was the shape of the wood still had the bark left on it. I also needed poles. I figured out that removing the end of a rake made an excellent pole. What I learned from working in Syros and on this project is that creativity and persistence are your friends and never to take "no" for an answer. I learned to approach the situation with the determination to solve the problem at hand in order to reach the end goal. Once I overcame the

challenges in locating resources, the people on the island were delightful to work with. I was as grateful for them as they were grateful for me.

Every day, it was like putting a puzzle together. I have never approached anything in my life that had so much uncertainty in its ability to work. Toward the end of the project, I had built a certain amount of trust in the project, in my skills and abilities, and in the community of volunteers who helped. As I saw the project grow and success began to happen, I developed this omniscient feeling that it was all going to come together. I learned how to develop and trust in a process that originally had no shape or form to it.

Communication was like walking through an overgrown jungle that just needed the right hiking shoes. I will admit, prior to my arrival, I thought my language skills were better than they were. I struggled with vocabulary and details. I was working in realms in which my language skills never had been tested: building, teaching, and using slang. My language skills were necessary for two reasons: in some areas and subjects, my Greek was usable and it gained trust that I was a Greek helping Greeks. It was amazing how far that took me many times. Phone calls are popular there because text messages cost money. Phone-tag was a daily occurrence. The size of the island showed to be a benefit in my communications with people. It was much like my small college campus, running into people and knowing if you can't reach them by phone, you will probably see them in person very soon.

Short-term, the creation of the food stand facilitated connections on the island for the youth-shelter organization. Long-term, the connections I made will stay with me, and the stand will continue to redistribute food, as well as advertise the shelter in hopes of gaining donations and educating locals and tourists about this organization. In addition, the stand was on wheels so that it can be moved from place to place, which is particularly important given the limited resources that these people have. This mobility will also attract more attention, thereby raising more interest and, hopefully, funds.

I knew the world was a place that I wanted to discover, but discovering the world doesn't mean checking off destinations and seeing structural wonders of the world. Truly discovering the world is something deeper. We take for granted how the community we surround ourselves with shapes our culture and our identity. I now see the importance of discovering the communities and identities throughout the world and how they, too, can shape me and help me develop who I am. The world is small and full of people who see the positivity of what the world can give to whomever embraces it! I see peace as the creation, preservation or beginnings of laughter, security and love. I reached this conclusion and perhaps a renewed definition of peace after this project from realizing that I stepped onto an island determined to help a community of strangers. Those strangers became my friends and my community. They showed me this with great compassion and left me with a better sense of passion and belief in myself that I can make a difference in the world.

Pull Quote:

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