The concept of peace does not always need to be as serious as the absence of political or economic conflicts; it is validated by the amity among people and by the shared equality in the society. Peace is the condition in which people feel secure about their beings and have the same privileges toward their future. Still, its entire meaning could be acquired only if it is additionally perceived as the state of mental comfort and self-achievement. Thereby, I propose the summer camp “Harmonization” in order to help people to capture their best abilities and to achieve peace in its original form.

For two years, I have participated as an executive officer of Best Buddies Chapter at Connecticut College, an organization that helps “enhance the lives of people with mental disabilities.” Interacting with disabled people here has been a singularly invaluable experience – their uninhibited self-expressions, their natural easiness, and most of all, their ability to live life at their best indeed have never ceased to inspire me to keep up my work and dedicate more of myself to the betterment of their conditions. However, Vietnamese mentally disabled people, particularly the children (MDCs), have received very little attention from society. Of 1,200,000 disabled children, approximately 6.52% (or 78,300) are mentally impaired (Ministry of Labor – Invalids and Social Affairs, 2008). Although there is not yet an official report on the number of institutions that offer special education to MDCs, according to Special Olympics Vietnam, it is fewer than 900. Most of these are located in big cities, due to the lack of financial endowment and ill-equipped infrastructure in rural areas. Besides, the figure includes both accredited institutions with professional teachers and unaccredited ones with untrained care-givers. Indeed, the country has only four academic institutions that offer special education as a major (Ministry of Education – Training, 2007). Compared to the 78,300 MDCs nation-wide, the 1,000 to 1,500 students currently majoring in special education hardly meets the demand. The exceedingly high student-teacher ratio of 52:1, as a result, affects negatively the quality of teaching and teachers’ attention to the MDCs.

On a society-wide basis, MDCs are deprived of attention and care from the public, given that Vietnam is listed by WHO one of the few countries where social services and special legislation that protect people with mental disabilities are absent (WHO/Atlas: Global Resources for Person with Intellectual Disabilities, 2007). In fact, most MDCs receive little guidance and are hardly given any chance to pursue enough education to develop and be prepared for their adult life physically, mentally, professionally and socially. Lacking adequate cognitive abilities, behavioral skills and being neglected from the public attention, MDCs are one of the most vulnerable groups to physical and mental assaults in the country.

Binh Minh Elementary School is the only institution in the country that offers education for both elementary school-children and MDCs. Of 600 students in total, there are approximately 40 MDCs, ranging from ages 8 to 17 with cognitive level below average. Although they are studying in the same environment and sharing the school facility, segregation between the two groups still exist. The MDCs are secluded in their area and restrained from interacting with the school-children. As a result, MDCs are locked within a closed, isolated curriculum and have no exposure to ordinary social relations, and consequently, fail to develop the necessary social and behavioral skills to survive in the society.

Keeping the urgent needs of MDCs in mind, I propose the project “Harmonization”: a summer camp that aims to promote socialization of the MDCs at Binh Minh Elementary School. Not only available to the MDCs at Binh Minh, the camp will also be open to students from high schools in Hanoi who can volunteer to act as mentors as they lead the MDCs into a more socially integrated environment. During the summer period, when schools are closed, the MDCs stay inside the house and are excluded from day-to-day relations. At the same time, most high school students spend their time on extra academic classes and entertainment activities. Given the high cost and little availability of summer camps in Vietnam, “Harmonization” will be a unique opportunity for all participants to enjoy and enrich themselves in a meaningful and positive way.

The summer camp will be directed to MDCs who are at least 13 years old, with a total of 30 participants. 30 high school volunteers will be selected through an application process, based on their past commitment to community service in general and to people with mental disabilities in particular.

The summer camp will be held in two sessions, each enrolling 15 MDCs and 15 volunteers. Each camp will last for five days and will take place in Tam Dao, a rural district 70 miles from Hanoi. I have made arrangements for accommodation with The Recreational Resort for Athletes. A large facility with significant outdoor space, it will host all of the planned activities.
During the program, each volunteer will pair with one MDC of the same sex, sharing a room and doing most of group activities with that child. The activities include:

- **Arts and hand-crafts:** As the MDCs have below average cognitive and communication skills, art offers an alternate means of communication and expression. It is often used by special education teachers to foster their creativity and openness to concepts, feelings, and most significantly, self-expression.

- **Physical activities:** These activities help to reinforce MDCs’ concepts of effort, achievement and success and enhance their self-esteem. I will consult a senior worker from Special Olympics Vietnam, whom I am acquainted with, for the implementation of the sports activities.

- **Recreational/outdoor activities:** These activities will give the participants opportunities to experience life from a different and fresh angle, and try to place themselves in the natural environment. The activities will also allow them to socialize with friends while enjoying the countryside air.

- **Other entertainment activities,** such as overnight camping, talent shows.

Before the camp starts, volunteers will receive special training from Binh Minh’s staff to acquire essential knowledge and skills to engage the MDCs. The curriculum has been consulted with my professor, Dr. Kathryn O’Connor. All activities will be supervised by leading coordinators, including three volunteer parents of the MDCs and three teachers from Binh Minh. Interactions between the MDCs and adult coordinators will be minimal in order to promote communication, mutual support and teamwork among MDCs and volunteers, which is the main purpose of the project. After the camp ends, MDCs and their high school partners will be encouraged to keep in touch through email and biweekly meetings at Binh Minh.

Not another ordinary camp for children, “Harmonization” also aims to achieve other significant long-term goals:

- **First,** it will help prepare the MDCs with essential life skills, particularly behavior control and communication. When living with somebody other than parents and teachers, the children will also learn to be more self-sufficient and independent, gradually approaching a larger environment than the familiar but closed setting of their home and classroom.

- **Second,** Binh Minh will be able to develop an effective curriculum that encourages integration between its MDCs and its school-children.

- **Third,** the camp will help the high school students to transform their life experience and to develop a positive and healthy lifestyle by engaging in community-oriented activities.

- **Forth,** it will raise social awareness within people with mental disabilities and calls for the society’s attention upon their situation.

Before the summer begins, I will design a Web site to introduce the project, promote its mission and recruit high school volunteers. The Web site will be maintained after the summer camp both as the project’s archive storage and as a comprehensive source of information on mental disabilities, given that there is absence of the service in Vietnam. Information will be available in both English and Vietnamese and focus on, but not limited to:

- Health advice for pregnant women and their new-born
- Upbringing and care-giving advice for parents
- Materials for special education teachers on methodology and activities
- Lists of institutions that offer special education curricular

After the camp finishes, the Web site will play a long-term important marketing role to the project, promoting its mission to enhance the lives of MDCs.

Success of the program will be evaluated by:

- The quality of the relationship between the MDCs and their high school partners
- Careful observations by teachers on the developmental progress of the MDCs during the camp
- Testimonials from parents, their before and after thoughts on the camp’s impacts on their children
- Evaluations of high school volunteers of the camp and those of their own experience
- Media coverage and publicity of the project
- Usage patterns of the Web site, determined by its traffic and the amount of information posted.

Survey is the main method of gathering testimonials and evaluations, and will consist of both open-ended and close-ended questions.