

Title of the Project: *The Hope Project*
Country of project implementation: Nigeria
City: Ibadan, Oyo State
Sponsoring College: University of California, Berkeley
Designated Project Leader:: Oluwagbemisola Deborah Akinsipe
Home Country: Nigeria
College/University: University of California, Berkeley
Contact email address: akinsipegbemi@gmail.com

(Only student associated with the project)

The idea for The Hope Project was birthed in 2018 when as part of the mandatory Nigerian National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), I had the opportunity of teaching mathematics to a group of Grade 11 students from low-income families in Port-Harcourt, Nigeria for about a year. Prior to this time, like most Nigerians, I was aware of the abysmal state of our State schools and other government-run institutions. However, I had not deeply considered the far-reaching consequences of such conditions for the children in these systems. I remember sadly realizing that many of the teachers in the school I was assigned to were hardly motivated or motivating. The students had limited access to textbooks and computers and were often dealing with family situations that were difficult to navigate. Having been taught poorly in earlier years, many had problems understanding even basic concepts and were therefore likely to fail the competitive exams to get higher education slots. It quickly became clear that for many of these children whose lives consist of precarity, despondency was never far away and hopelessness, in many cases, became the perfect precursor to violence. When one comes from a such a place, violence can look very attractive. When it feels like you have nothing to lose, you can risk it all.

Therefore, the goal of The Hope Project was to intercept the flow from hopelessness to violence, even if just for a few students. The project stemmed from the belief that if students in such situations are empowered to think that they are valuable, that they have a lot to contribute, that there are opportunities beyond their immediate circumstances and that people care about their progress and are willing to come alongside them to give them the help they need, they can be saved from turning to violence which has somewhat become the most lucrative business opportunity in these areas.

Initially I had hoped to carry out the project in the school in Port-Harcourt I taught in during my NYSC but following the Covid-19 pandemic and recent separatist tensions and violence in Nigeria, I was advised by family to carry out the project in the city where I grew up; I am very familiar with the region and also speak the local language. However, changing the location of the project presented a couple of challenges. I had to start afresh with establishing relationships with the administrators of a different State school, pitching the project, and working around their schedules. During the starting deliberations, it seemed the timeframe and project would not work for the interested parties but at the last minute, we were able to reach a consensus and eventually added two more schools to the project. The pandemic also resulted in higher prices for the souvenirs I wanted to give the students. Thankfully, I was able to connect with local vendors who offered quality products that fit into the budget. Finally, post-pandemic, a lot of the friends I had hoped would help with the project had moved to different regions. Fortunately, I could bring on board some staff members for the project and my family also helped. I learnt a lot about contingencies, the importance of really understanding the terrain/host site and am grateful everything came together.

The Hope Project ran for 5 days across 2 weeks, and we held sessions with the students about purpose, core values, peace, mental health, interpersonal relationships, and communication. We created a manual for the program, gave out journals, school supplies, water bottles and gift prizes. The students spoke extensively about their aspirations, many of which were previously buried, and wrote thoughtful essays at the end of the program. Several students shared their art with us and with each passing day, they were more excited to be part of the program. They asked many crucial questions and we had rich conversations. It is hard to capture in words, but we saw the students transform into more confident and hopeful people in such few days.

It is my hope that in the long term the students would remain hopeful and committed to impactful futures. During the project, I believe we unlocked a sense of purpose and direction for them, and I am looking forward to what this translates to in coming years. Even the school administrators that had initially been hesitant gave us glowing reviews and were grateful for the program. It is an imperfect metric, but I intend to keep in touch with the school administrators to track the students' commitment to their academics in the new session. I wrote in my proposal for the project that I chose a class-based two-week-long project versus just one big event because I felt that in matters like this, closer, repeated contact is more important. This was proven true by our project; I got to know many of the students by name and interacted personally with them. By staying in touch with the students, I hope to remain informed about their progress.

The project was also transformational for me. I grew in my organizational and leadership skills but more importantly, my convictions about development in my country were strengthened, my scopes of reference were broadened, and my awareness of the pressing challenges was deepened. Going forward, I intend to seek funding to expand the project and also bring in resources around computer/software training, remedial education, career counseling, mental health and maybe even art and entertainment. Years ago, I came across the quote, "Talent is universal, opportunity is not". I saw this firsthand with the students during my project and it is my goal to bridge the gap and draw in those opportunities for them.

Quotes:

"It is difficult to imagine a world full of fulfilled and whole people lacking peace. Peace within, I believe, leads to peace without (outside)." – Oluwagbemisola Akinsipe ('Gbemi')

The Hope Project sought to intercept the flow from hopelessness to violence for students in particularly precarious situations. By awakening their dreams, the project made the students aware of their power and their ability to resist being consumed by the tides of violence. Now, the work continues to bridge the gap between the talents and dreams that were awakened and available opportunities because as we know, talent is universal, but opportunity is not." - Oluwagbemisola Akinsipe ('Gbemi').

Section II: Photographs

