

Letters for Peace: Bridging Closed Borders
Armenia
International House New York
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www.lettersforpeace.org

Davis Projects for Peace: Final Report

Project Goals & Support

"Letters for Peace: Bridging Closed Borders" (LFP) aspires to utilize workshops at the intersection of creative writing and conflict resolution to spark dialogue between youth in countries whose governments experience protracted conflict. The summer 2018 pilot phase involved youth in Armenia and Azerbaijan who gathered for workshops comprised of guest lectures; seminar-style discussions of history, identity, and political transformation; and writing exercises resulting in the students' final letters articulating the hope towards and possibilities for a peaceful future between the people of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

One other fundraising effort contributed to LFP. This was the 'Travel Funds Opportunity' presented by Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Armenia, Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Azerbaijan through Caucasus Research Resource Centre in Georgia, and International Alert within the framework of 'Peacebuilding through Capacity Enhancement and Civic Engagement' programme funded by the European Union under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace. In addition, institutional support was provided in the form of consultation, brainstorming, student and guest lecturer recruitment, and securing of venue. The three core institutional partners were Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, Impact Hub Yerevan, and AGBU Armenia.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

As a first-generation American with Armenian parents displaced by Lebanon's Civil War and grandparents who survived the Armenian Genocide, I grew up with the stories and emotional aftermath of how state-sanctioned violence can dismantle communities, cultures, and cooperation. I first went to Armenia as a volunteer in 2007 where, for the first time, I encountered how the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan impacted the individuals, communities, and economy of Armenia. Most striking was the fact that the borders were closed, rendering null the possibility of substantive interaction between the two populations. I returned to Armenia in the 2012-2013 academic year as a Fulbright Research Fellow where I taught a six-month screenwriting class and monitored elections among other activities. This experience helped me better understand the power of creative writing in helping youth make meaning of their world, as well as encounter the significant internal and external hindrances to Armenia's capacity to grow a middle class and cultivate a viable economy.

In the 2017-2018 academic year, I returned to Columbia University to pursue my second masters in creative writing (the first was in international and public affairs). On Saturdays, I volunteered to teach creative writing workshops at Rikers Island Jail Complex. This experience reinforced lessons learned while teaching in Armenia, but this time, the context -- America's mass incarceration crisis -- was distinct. After serendipitously encountering an information session about Davis Projects for Peace (DPP) at International House New York, I looked ahead to the summer and imagined how I could apply my background in writing and teaching with my understanding of the stalemate between Armenia and Azerbaijan. I thus began to develop, articulate, and write down what would become LFP. Little did I know that a momentous shift awaited Armenia months after submitting my proposal.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

Reams have been written on this subject. My summary offers light traces better grasped with a deeper examination of the literature. The primary reason for the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabagh (NK) which, today, is an independent nation called the Republic of Artsakh (RA) governed predominantly by Armenians. RA wishes for its independence to be recognized, a goal supported by Armenia, but Azerbaijan disputes that NK belongs to its homeland and must be returned. With support from Armenia, RA refuses to relinquish its control over the land. After

generations of peaceful coexistence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the South Caucasus regionally and in NK specifically, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union caused tremendous displacement and forced migrations sparked by edicts from Moscow as well as local conflicts. In 1987, Armenians in NK voted to join Armenia SSR, and upon the collapse of the Soviet Union soon after, the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan waged war over NK. The conflict lasted from 1988 to 1994 and dealt to tens of thousands of people on both sides death, injury, and psychological trauma. Since, a shaky ceasefire between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan, now independent nations, has continued over the unresolved status of NK. Intermittent fighting between the armies of Armenia and Azerbaijan continues across the line of contact in NK, and in villages near the closed borders of both countries. Relations between the two countries have come to a tense standstill as hate speech regularly appears in the mass media on both sides to demonize the "other." A lack of communication between the two populations has, for generations, become a norm.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

I chose to work in Armenia because of my personal background as an Armenian American, and because of my professional background as a workshop leader and researcher active in Armenia's civil society development as well as my background in the US working in prison reform, refugee resettlement, education, and other civic activities. I was fortunate to identify a partner in Azerbaijan who would organize a response workshop in Baku once our letters in Armenia were prepared. This was a critical development since Armenians are rarely permitted to visit Azerbaijan.

What was it like to work in your host site?

Working in Armenia's capital of Yerevan is comfortable and pleasant. The capital is small, the people are friendly and collaborative, and following the Velvet Revolution, I found that many working in civil society development expressed enthusiasm around LFP. The revolution gave people hope that peace, persistence, and accountability could help achieve unthinkable transformations.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

The only point when I felt the project might not work was during the phase of student recruitment. Our initial application deadline and age range did not yield enough applicants. We adjusted the application form to be a more interactive and easier-to-submit Google Form, and we increased the maximum age limit to include university students and recent graduates. With these adjustments, and with regular follow up with institutional partners, we were able to recruit enough students in Armenia.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

The main challenges I encountered in communicating with people included facing a deep-rooted skepticism around the concept of LFP. Many in Armenia do not believe that peaceful transformation of the conflict is possible by engaging the youth on both sides of the border because the military, financial, and ideological resources of the ruling classes invested in the perpetuation of conflict would never allow for it. This belief is understandable, but it is a path to paralysis, not change. Another challenge involved language. Though I speak Armenian, it is not at the same level as my English. This was resolved by having a translator present in the workshop. Last, communicating with partners in Azerbaijan proved challenging because we could only rely on electronic modes of communication which, while generative and helpful, have inherent obstacles.

How do you define peace?

I define peace as the ability of individuals, communities, and nations to use nonviolent means to resolve conflicts, promote justice, and support one another in pursuing common goals and interests.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

In the short-term, LFP contributes to peace by facilitating peaceful dialogue across closed borders. The youth in Armenia and Azerbaijan have few opportunities to engage with one another in substantive conversations that do not reinforce widespread threads of hate, division, and war. Through LFP, they were encouraged to imagine and articulate the possibilities for a peaceful future between their

two populations. In the long-term, LFP contributes to peace by amplifying a growing movement in the region to promote nonviolent social transformation by investing time and energy with the youth who represent future leaders possessing potential to pivot the situation towards compromise, resolution, and mutual respect.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

The project revealed to me how individuals and institutions -- even those professing belief in peace -- can become attached to the existence and perpetuation of conflict to the point that when presented with the possibility of pursuing peace, they prefer instead to reinforce the troubling stability of an inherited conflict. What's more, I learned that peaceful social transformation is indeed possible, and that while we all have the capacity to create dramatic change, populations are more willing to believe in change when they can witness others within their own communities serve as role models.

Please provide a 1-2 personal statement sentence, suitable for use as a quotation.

"Launching Letters for Peace gave students in Armenia and Azerbaijan an opportunity to engage in constructive, peaceful dialogue despite widespread, antagonistic rhetoric on both sides of the border. With my own family impacted by genocide and civil war, I, as an Armenian American, wanted to humbly contribute something that could build bridges and restore belief in the beauty and genuine goodness of the human spirit." -Raffi Joe Wartanian

