

Participating University: Furman University

Project Title: Restorative Justice and Conflict Resolution in Greenville, SC

Student Project Leaders: Austin Geer and Gabie Giers

Dates of Project Execution: Spring 2020 – Early Fall 2020

Location: Greenville, SC, USA

Overview: We are proposing a project that centers on restorative justice and conflict-resolution for the Happy Hearts Community Center located in the New Washington Heights (NWH) community in Greenville, SC. The community center is located 10 minutes from Furman's campus. According to a study done by the United Way of Greenville County and Furman University, the NWH community is located in one of the poorest census tracts in the county. Recent statistics indicate this tract also has the highest violent crime rate in the county. NWH is primarily comprised of Black and Hispanic populations, 84.4% and 16.6%, respectively. Throughout our time with the Stay-and-Play afterschool and summer program at the community center, we have watched some of the kids fall in and out of homelessness and we have heard about their troubled home lives. These stresses often manifest themselves in student-student or student-volunteer conflict.

Restorative justice focuses on truly taking responsibility for wrongful actions, and mending relationships in a healthy way. Dr. Fania Davis, a keynote speaker at this year's MLK Day event on campus, shared how this practice has blossomed in educational and criminal justice settings. We want to establish a curriculum for the kids to give them a creative outlet centered on restorative justice, team-building, and peace-keeping. These principles will be woven into the use of art and drama. We would also work to relieve the tension between the Black and Hispanic populations by creating a greater sense of community. As a next step for the program, we plan to coordinate with another non-profit named Soteria CDC, a re-entry program that helps formerly-incarcerated men reenter society. The program includes a woodworking shop where the men create art and furniture from reclaimed wood. We plan to have them build a stage for the kids where they can act out plays and skits that they put together. Most importantly, we want to create an interactive space centered on the process of restorative justice, perhaps such as a "peace circle" that could be designed collaboratively by the kids and men from Soteria. This would be an area where we can go with the kids and discuss why they are upset about a situation and resolve any conflicts that arise, peacefully. We also plan for the Soteria members to share their journeys and experiences with the children and discuss how they overcame certain obstacles in their lives. We plan to begin curriculum development in late spring and throughout the summer of 2020. Gabie will be working at the community center during the summer, so there will be ample opportunity to implement lessons during that time, as well as the early fall. We will hold peace circle design sessions in the spring. Build and installation will take place during the summer of 2020.

Project Goals: We strive to give the kids of the Stay-and-Play program a creative outlet to work through any resentment or anger they may have and to build a sense of community and kindness around them. Our interactions with the students suggest that they are not necessarily approaching conflict from a productive, non-violent, restorative justice lens. With the peace circle, we aim to teach the kids how to effectively communicate and approach situations with a more peaceful and understanding mindset. We

want to create a safe and comfortable environment that will demonstrate how they can better resolve conflict in their lives by using their words instead of resorting to violence. We plan to establish a creative arts program centered on peace, but one that is also rooted in experiences related to their lives. We want to open them to a broader view of the world while acknowledging the hardships that they may be going through. In addition to creating community with the kids, we hope to bridge the gap between the Hispanic and Black communities, and the new renters and long-tenured residents. Through an assessment of the Happy Hearts Center by Furman Sustainability majors, it is evident that there is a lack of community engagement with the neighborhood association, so we feel that by making the center a place for discussion and interaction, we can revitalize this shared space. We would do this by hosting co-sponsored events with the neighborhood association such as barbecues, fish fries, etc. We would encourage the community to be active in the planning process and we would facilitate discussions. Finally, by having Soteria come in to build a creative and interactive space for the kids and share their journey, we can bring together two often marginalized communities to teach and learn together. To date, there have been assessments of how Happy Hearts could be transformed; however, lack of resources has been a barrier to action. With this funding, we could finally implement the plans Furman has developed in collaboration with the community. Because Happy Hearts is essentially the "heart" of this community, rebuilding this center would connect Furman students to a more diverse part of Greenville, motivate the youth population of NWH, and develop young leaders focused on peace.

Determining Project Impact: Success would mean seeing more cohesiveness in the community between the children, parents, families, and volunteers. One way to measure a favorable outcome is maintaining contact with the founder of the Stay-and-Play who lives in NWH in order to receive direct feedback on the effectiveness of our efforts. In addition, we can document the improvement in the behavior of the children by implementing a series of questions geared towards asking the kids how they would respond in certain situations. We would give them the questions before the beginning of the program, then a year later to see if the way they approach conflict has changed. We will know if the program is working for the kids if we start to notice a change in how they respond to actions that would normally anger them; a change to their responses to positively mend relationships. They are very vocal about how they are feeling and often give us feedback on our activities. We would also survey student and community volunteers. Through these program implementations, we know that there will be an adjustment period. Therefore, we may not see results immediately, but we hope that we will be able to impact their lives in the long-term.

Ensuring Project Sustainability: The Shucker Leadership Organization at Furman is already working to provide structure for the Happy Hearts Stay-and-Play program during the school year and the summer program. However, we currently lack the funds to make that structure and the activities more impactful for the kids. By hiring a conflict-resolution specialist to train the current leaders of Shucker (and neighborhood volunteers), we can, in-turn, develop an annual training program for new students and volunteers. This will ensure that future classes of Shucker Fellows will be educated on how to best resolve child conflicts and work with children of diverse backgrounds.