

Restorative Justice and Conflict Resolution in Greenville, SC  
United States of America  
Furman University  
Project Leader: Gabie Giers

The main goal of this project has been to enhance the arts program at the Poe Mill Achievement Center in order to provide the children with a creative outlet that teaches peacekeeping and team building, and to provide them with a greater sense of community and kindness. Additionally, mine and the organization's goal has been to expose the children to new perspectives and ideas by bringing in speakers from various backgrounds, but also training the staff and volunteers in what restorative justice means, and how they can best provide an environment that fosters understanding and peace.

Other fund-raising efforts did not contribute to the project. Only the funds provided by the Projects for Peace grant were used. I came up with the idea for the project when I was volunteering at another afterschool program in Greenville, named New Washington Heights. While working with this program, I discovered the need for a better support system and access to resources for children in Greenville. During my time at the program, I realized that children coming from these at-risk backgrounds typically approached confrontations or disagreements from a very defensive and aggressive stance, and the children would benefit greatly from giving them a creative outlet in which they can discover healthy ways to work through any anger that may stem from their situations at home. I chose the organization because the Poe Mill Achievement Center (PMAC), works with at-risk, and mainly minority, children in Greenville, so I thought that their program aligned best with the goals of the plan I had come up with. I also observed that the structure of their program would best implement and sustain the lessons we were trying to teach through the grant.

From my personal experience, I believe this issue of anger driving conflict in these children is due to the stress they experience in their family and home lives. Multiple children in the PMAC program have fallen in and out of homelessness and others have opened up about their troubled home lives. Unfortunately, these stressors often manifest themselves in student to student, or student to volunteer/staff member conflict.

Working with and at PMAC was very rewarding and pleasant. Hannah Dixon, the co-founder of the program, and her staff provided me with a great support system and offered honest and constructive feedback throughout the implementation of the grant. I developed friendships with the kids and staff, and I felt very welcomed. It was very rewarding to personally hear how the training had positively impacted the staff and to watch the children implement concepts from lessons related to restorative justice in their interactions.

Because of the support I received and the existing stability of the PMAC program, I personally did not feel as though the project was not going to work. Additionally, due to the pandemic pushing back the

dates for funds, I had an additional year to plan and to collaborate with PMAC and the Shi Institute at Furman, so we had ample time to discuss a plan and talk through expectations.

I wouldn't necessarily say that there were *challenges* in communicating with people, but more so that there were learning curves, specifically when interacting with the children. I come from a middle-class background where I wasn't exposed to many of these particular hardships, so I had to learn how to view situations from these children's perspective and come from a more understanding viewpoint as to why they approach conflict the way that they do. I also had to learn how to effectively break up the more aggressive and sometimes physical arguments between the children and how to diffuse the conflict through communication.

I define peace as the concept of achieving harmony and diffusing conflict through practicing understanding, acceptance, and kindness for others.

The project at PMAC has helped to foster an environment of listening, learning, and sharing. PMAC staff and volunteers are working hard to approach children and the trauma that they carry with them in way that supports them and make them feel safe. The priority at PMAC is to ensure an environment where every child feels safe and knows their worth and value. Incorporating methods and strategies learned through the Restorative Justice Practices trainings and book discussion have enabled PMAC teachers to lead with many tools to support not only the children, but their families as well. PMAC has implemented several new specific strategies over the summer since receiving the Restorative Practices training. For example, during their circle times, they are exercising different sharing methods, questions during circle time, and using a talking piece. They have learned how to better approach conversations with children especially around abuse and trauma. They have expanded their tools for discussions with parents and facilitating Family Nights. According to Hannah Dixon, the PMAC Staff, Volunteers, and children have learned to have more empathy and respect and love each other better through the project. The changes described above will continue through the years of PMAC operating and even expand into their individual lives and interactions with others outside of PMAC, promoting peace and justice in many arenas of their lives.

This project has opened my eyes to the realities of the world and the hardships that unfortunately many people face. I have also gained a new understanding of how systems, processes, and paradigms in our society have historically marginalized minority communities, and my passion for changing these in order to contribute to a truly just and equitable future has been ignited.

The grant implementation ultimately was impacted by the pandemic. Initially, my plan was to implement the grant in the New Washington Heights program, but with the pandemic and the founder leaving Greenville, they unfortunately shut down. However, this caused me to conduct research about similar programs in Greenville, and it led me to PMAC. Despite the pandemic, PMAC was able to run their summer program and have speakers come on site, all while safely and effectively following CDC precautions. Additionally, no staff or children contracted COVID. Given the pandemic-related challenges that I experienced, my advice to future PFP grantees would be to plan for changes to happen. The plan

you create will most likely be altered or changed in some way, so exercising problem solving, and adaptability will be very important. Additionally, my biggest piece of advice is to ensure that you have a solid network or a supportive team to collaborate and problem solve with.

**Personal statement:**

My experience in leading this project has taught me how to approach situations and interactions with a more inclusive and holistic approach, and it has provided me with a greater understanding of new perspectives that have challenged some of my previously held beliefs. Additionally, this experience showed me that I am capable of enacting change within my own community, and it has provided me with the skills necessary to enact change on a broader scale in the future.

Team leader: Gabriella (Gabie) Giers

