

Planting Peace with Police
United States
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“Projects for Peace: \$10,000 Student Grant Opportunity.” Immediately intrigued, I paused scrolling through my university’s campus announcements to read more. Throughout my life, in friendships, relationships and with strangers, I have identified as a peacemaker. As I’ve gotten older, my passion for peace has matured and developed into an interest in community building and conflict resolution on a larger scale.

My project, “Planting Peace with Police”, aimed to do just that. At the time I was brainstorming projects, it was impossible to look past the nationwide need for peace between police officers and minority communities. This conflict is so incredibly complex and deep-rooted, it is difficult to pinpoint why it exists. At home in Greenville, South Carolina, I noticed that the Greenville Police Department was lacking visibility and interaction with our community. Drawing from my own hobbies, I knew I wanted our peacemaking to take place through gardening. While looking through my community resources, I found Mill Village Farms, a local organization focused on community development through the employment of low-income, often minority, high school students to work on one of their farms located in food deserts, all the while developing critical skills that will help them as they prepare to enter the work force or further education. “Planting Peace with Police” aimed to mediate conflict and deescalate tension existing between law enforcement and minority youth in the Greenville, South Carolina community through farming and facilitating crucial conversations about race, identity, and conflict resolution. As part of my project, I brought in Mr. William Deck, C.E.O. of Mind Business LLC, through three Zoom workshops focused on peace-making and conflict resolution. At the center of this project were the goals of increased police visibility, police interaction within the community, and productive communication between police and Greenville’s minority youth with the ultimate end goal of decreased tensions and increased cooperation, trust and understanding.

Within 10 minutes on my first day on site, I feared that my project would fall through. At their own discretion, Mill Village Farms decided not to inform the teens that officers would be working with them on the farm. So, when cop cars pulled up to the farm on that first day, there inevitably were some strong

reactions. One student in particular had a very distressing reaction since she lost a family member to a cop shoot out just the day before. I felt awful but realized that this negative association is the heart of my project and should have been anticipated. It was tough for me to try to comfort her, since I have no concept of the pain she was going through and never will.

Peace to me is a mutual understanding among opposing groups with the decision to cooperate for the greater good. This definition of peace was at the core of my project and goals. This summer, peace in the short term was achieved between the teens and officers as they developed friendships based on a shared sense of humanity. The most profound measure of this peace-making that I noticed was that by the end of the summer, the student who had such an adverse reaction to the officers in the beginning was laughing and harvesting alongside the officers by the end of it. Looking into the future, Mill Village Farms will continue their partnership with the Greenville Police Department, to ensure long term efforts towards peace building.

Thankfully, my project was able to operate under normal conditions up until the end of the summer. However, days before our last session and end of summer celebration, one of our team members announced that he tested positive for COVID, despite his vaccination. Because of this, our summer was cut short, and we were unable to host our end of summer celebration. Not only was this incredibly disappointing since we weren't able to formally recognize and celebrate our achievements this summer, but it was also an unexpected shift to my budget. Despite this, I never received any additional funding besides what I received from Projects for Peace.

Projects for Peace provided me with the means to plant peace within my community. I can confidently say that this summer was one of the most impactful experiences of my life. I learned so much about life, friendships, kindness, and community from people I seemingly could not be more different from. On a broader note, planning and executing my own project gave me sense of independence and responsibility that I have not experienced before.

"Planting Peace with Police sowed seeds of understanding, kindness, and respect in the hearts of the teens and officers involved. In time, these seeds will burgeon into community members who lead with love first and approach conflict from a place of peace."

