

Lexojme, Enderrojme, Arrijme
Albania
Amherst College

Iris Aliaj, Albania, Amherst College, UWC-Atlantic College
Kathryn Libby, USA, Amherst College

Project Description

Our project rebuilt and renovated a library for Zyber Hallulli Children's Home and engaged 36 children in reading and literacy activities. Davis funding was sufficient to meet our goals. However, the project was supported by international literacy organizations Reader to Reader and LitWorld, both of which provided resources, training and support throughout the process.

Project Review

We worked with the children from 5-7pm each evening, reading aloud *Harry Potter 7* and playing games to encourage reading, critical thinking and problem solving. The beginning of our program coincided with Children's Day, and we gave each child their own gift-wrapped book to celebrate the holiday. Each child received a second book at the inauguration of the library. Several times we took small groups to book stores or publishing houses to choose new books for the library or themselves. Weekends were spent gathering materials and resources to rebuild the library. We visited publishing houses to negotiate bulk discounts on new, popular and classic titles. With the help of several eager children, we organized the library shelves by genre and age, recycling older, decrepit books. We contracted and supervised workers during the day hours to renovate and fix up the room that houses the library.

At the completion of our project, we had:

- Installed lighting;
- Furnished the room with curtains and carpet;
- Added shelving and storage space;
- Painted the room and repaired damaged walls;
- Provided beanbag chairs;
- And donated over 500 brand-new Albanian books, both fiction and nonfiction.

Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries were 36 orphaned children residing at Zyber Hallulli. 11 children strongly connected with the program.

M., a 12-year-old boy, finished his Children's Day book (*Frankenstein*) within a day and was eager to tell us the story. His enthusiasm was not only sustained but grew throughout the program. Every time Kat mentioned a book he would ask, "It that your *favorite* book?" By the end of the program, he was reading popular novels such as *Harry Potter*, *Artemis Fowl* and *The Golden Compass* with great passion.

S. was rescued from under a bridge at the age of 13. We met her after she had spent a year at Zyber Hallulli. She showed such interest and enjoyment during our sessions, and we felt that she was already on board with reading. It wasn't until we were sorting books that we found out she couldn't read. She carefully examined each book before asking if it was in Albanian or English. Her steadfast dedication to the library and her curiosity for the books she could not read showed strength beyond her years.

Difficulties

Our greatest difficulty lay in cultural and language barriers, but also in the amount of time we had with the children. We had less time with the boys, our least interested group, because they were involved in filming a movie. Yet at the inauguration, several of the boys wanted to know where certain books were and what was available to them.

How We Developed Peace

Our definition of peace is defined by Johan Galtung's philosophy of two kinds of peace: negative and positive. Negative peace is the common understanding of peace-building: the absence of violence and conflict in society. Increasing literacy reduces violence, crime and recidivism in communities; our project worked to keep the children invested in their

education, and therefore off the streets. Yet peace is much more than the absence of violence. Positive peace is built upon the respectful attention to the needs of all groups and a commitment to justice in all levels of society. This is where our project thrived. Our care and attention to the individual needs of each young person is what had them coming back, day after day, to read aloud and engage in educational play even when there were games to be played outside and TV to be watched. Lexojme, Enderrojme, Arrijme fostered a sense of equality, opportunity and personal value for each child involved in the program; there is no one group that needs this more than orphaned and abandoned children.

By creating a warm, welcoming space filled with books, we have given these 36 kids the space and opportunity to discover the healing power of books. This library will remain long after these children have grown up, and will enrich the lives of hundreds more. Having engaged 36 children and provided them with long lasting resources, we firmly believe that they will continue the project goals in each new child to arrive at Zyber Hallulli: we read, we dream, we achieve.

Change in Worldview

For Kat, the world is a much larger place and the diversity within it is more than she had ever imagined. The project showed her just how much a country can differ from another, yet how similar each person is in their dreams and aspirations. She is even more dedicated to international literacy work, and is currently employed at one of the literacy organizations that supported this project, Reader to Reader.

At the beginning of the project Iris was going back to her home country expecting a lot to be familiar and straightforward. However the experience enlarged her view of the challenges and the opportunities to make a difference that are present in Albania. She now has a wider perspective on the situation of orphan children in Albania and is eager to put this knowledge to future use. As a psychology major Iris had been interested in the concept of resilience but it was meeting the children in the orphanage that truly shaped her understanding of it. Witnessing persistence, courage and laughter in the face of significant adversity enriched her view of resilience beyond what any textbook could.

Personal Statements

Kat Libby: "Every child deserves the chance to love a book. Working with these Albanian orphans solidified my desire to bring literacy and a love of reading to every person, no matter how disadvantaged or disempowered."

Iris Aliaj: "Building relationships with the children in the orphanage convinced me of the power of feelings of connectedness to foster engagement."





Lexojme, Enderrojme, Arrijme

Iris Aliaj, Albania, Amherst College, UWC-Atlantic College