

Peace Authors (Previously called Peace Books / Книги Миру)

Montenegro

Georgetown University

Elena Sapelyuk (USA, Georgetown University)

Summary

The *Peace Authors* project provides psychosocial support to refugee Ukrainian youth through a structured program focused on developing creative writing and peacebuilding skills. The program ran in Budva, Montenegro with a cohort of 20 refugee students in the summer of 2022.

Project Description

In 2014, the occupation of my father's hometown of Donetsk and the resulting displacement of 1.5 million Ukrainians from the Donbas, among them our family and friends, personally tied me to the reality of forced displacement. As my family came to the U.S. as refugees in 2006, I've also personally known the difficulties of the refugee experience. Originally, my project was created to serve youth internally displaced by the war in Kyiv. I never thought I would be working to respond to a full-scale war against Ukraine, especially one that has resulted in such widescale humanitarian need. As of April 2022, 6.6 Ukrainians have crossed borders and become refugees, while 7.7 million are internally displaced. 90% of Ukrainian refugees are women and children under 18. My project was developed in tandem with Dignity Space: the Ukrainian Centre for Non-Violent Communication and Reconciliation with the aim to support the next generation of Ukrainians in becoming ambassadors of peace and understanding while meeting the need for trauma-informed programming for refugee youth. Thousands of Ukrainians have fled to Montenegro, but the country - despite providing temporary protective status and accommodating newcomers - has not been able to provide social services at a large scale and has few NGOs operating in the region to meet needs. The Ukrainian association "Dobro Djelo" ("Good Deed"), the only official NGO working with the support of the Embassy of Ukraine in Montenegro, welcomed our efforts as many families were left without summer activities for their children since schools close in June. As Montenegro does not provide financial assistance to refugees, it was difficult for families to afford private summer camps and classes. Therefore, Peace Authors filled a critical gap in accessible, stable, and high-quality summer programming for youth. We also partnered with a parent-led volunteer organization, United Hearts, to connect with families who could benefit from our program. To ensure that participating families faced no financial burden participating in our program, I raised additional funds from the Georgetown University Social Innovation and Public Service (SIPS) Fund and through a GoFundMe campaign. Our program ran successfully but also highlighted the continued need for such programs as the war goes on and the displacement crisis has yet to be resolved. Dignity Space and I hope to turn our curriculum into a redeployable toolkit that can be used for future cohorts of Peace Authors.

Reflection

This summer was filled with many unknowns and was a great lesson in adaptability for me. Among them: the location of the project (decided one month out), the staff (new facilitator joined mid-program), the backgrounds of the participating kids (language, interests, experienced traumas), and, most importantly, the impact we were to have. Many showed up on the first day expecting a typical summer camp filled with sports, games, and time at the beach. Within the first week, me and my co-facilitators knew it would be a steep hill to climb. As I taught creative writing, I was shocked to find out on the first day that many of the students were completely unfamiliar with the concept and had never written outside of an academic setting. The Peace Engineers curriculum hit similar roadblocks - our kids were closed off and nowhere near ready to discuss the deep emotional and social concepts being presented to them. We had to go back to the drawing board and simplify our materials and approaches. From that point on, the days blurred into weeks. Some days were great with engaged kids, great work, and lots of progress. Others

were slow and aggravating as I felt little hope of getting a certain idea or concept across. Over time, the kids became closer with each other and more comfortable sharing their written works. Teenagers, refugees or not, tend to be black boxes. We cannot ever be sure what they took away with themselves from the program. Yet, there is some concrete evidence I can point to. Many completed written works for our “showcase” on our last day, to my genuine surprise. They proved my worries wrong in their ability to pull together amazing reflective pieces in a short amount of time. I hope they are as proud of their work themselves as I am of them. We also collected survey responses from the kids which were overwhelmingly positive (though short, at times). Parents also filled out a survey where many were happy with the impact of the program on their children and have noticed a significant difference in their demeanor and outlook on the future. I look back on this summer and think of all the little moments and find it difficult to come to a single conclusion, yet in spite of setbacks and hard questions I still believe the program has done good. It was unorthodox, difficult to understand for students and parents, challenging in new ways, and sometimes missed the mark. Yet, the kids rose to the challenge with grace, effort, and curiosity and came to achieve results they themselves may have thought impossible at the beginning of the summer. Above all, they seemed happy to be together. I hope the time for reflection on the world and on their inner lives this program offered them helped them build the emotional and social tools they need to navigate a post-war reality in Ukraine and support their paths into the future.

Personal Statement

This project was many things for me: a personal journey, a professional experience, and an inspirational life lesson. Navigating my own identity as an American-Russian-Ukrainian through my work with the participating students created many opportunities for creating understanding, sharing experiences, and finding commonality. I continue to be in touch with many of the students and hope to continue to serve as a mentor to them into the future. This summer also taught me many integral skills in project design, budget management, flexibility and adaptability, and community organization. I have made friends with many colleagues who will continue to contribute to strengthening civil society in Ukraine and will be integral to redeploying Peace Authors with a new cohort. Above all, this summer has left me with much hope for the future of Ukraine and the world. The students I worked with, in spite of the violence they and their families have experienced, remain open, empathetic, and deeply caring for others. As I have seen through reading their work and listening to them discuss environmental and social justice, they are willing to envision a better, peaceful, and harmonious future for themselves and others. Though I played the role of teacher this summer, I felt I left with more lessons than I had prepared myself. I hope that this summer will not be the last time the *Peace Authors* project is put into effect as I genuinely believe it has the potential to positively affect many refugee youth in Ukraine and around the world. As I finish off my senior year, I will continue to explore pathways to make this happen. I am thankful to Projects for Peace, Georgetown University, and many of my professors, mentors, and friends for making this summer possible!