FINAL REPORT PART A. NARRATIVE

Summary: My project focused on empowerment by providing accessibility and quality education to underrepresented and economically vulnerable children in my village through library infrastructure, adequate bathroom facilities, and community involvement. Quality education sought to end social stigma associated with the school as a “Gorkhay (Nepali ethnicity) School” meaning “school for children of the laborers” and bring the Ladakhi and Nepali children together to decrease class inequality between the two different ethnic groups, ultimately contributing to a more peaceful world.

Project Description:

● How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project? As a child growing up in Thiksay Village, I had the luxury of attending private school. While waiting for our bus to school, I used to see poor and Nepali children making their way to the Kelibuk school which lacked adequate educational facilities. This poor education offered no perceivable hope for the future and established a hierarchy and class divide in society starting from a very young age between the two ethnic groups. I wanted to address this unwritten/silent class divide by providing the means to equalize educational opportunities for all young minds in my village and make an impact in the world. Sustainable and measurable changes can only be achieved by involving the villagers and bringing them together to raise awareness about the lack of school educational resources. One project strategy was to equip the school with modern educational resources and to encourage a grassroots community involvement program that drew the attention of the locals to the severity of the issue and need to promote better education. The goal was to have village leaders recognize the issue and mobilize the community to show consistent participation in activities that supported and improved social wellbeing.

● Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project? I was born and raised in this village and, therefore, was able relate to this issue on a personal level. Being an insider also provided the leverage needed to discuss key points and act swiftly to address taboo subjects such as social stigma between ethnic groups, child labor, and the importance of female children’s education to the local villagers, parents, and students. Knowing the locals and village leaders helped a lot in the process, including understanding the teachers’ challenges, fulfilling the requests of the locals, and acknowledging their suggestions for successful project implementation.

● What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why? We made a few changes to the original plan. Firstly, this project was conducted remotely in 2022 due to a change in my visa status, Covid-19 travel issues, and job responsibilities. This helped better utilize my travel funds towards the project. Further, the delay in the execution of the project gave us enough time to raise additional resources of $3848 in crowdfunding through the GoFundMe platform. These funds were pooled together to help with the overall goals of the project. With more funding, we were able to increase the overall dimensions of the library (from 14x14 feet to 15x18 feet) and built a new bathroom. Instead of renovating the latrine pit bathroom facility, we were able to provide a fully functional attached bathroom facility adjacent to the library with running water and an appropriate septic tank drainage system. The larger space will encourage the use of the library as a “Multi-Purpose Room” (MPR) that could be used for other school events and a range of functions. We also decided to maximize the funds and use them towards students' scholarships and educational resources. After doing a cost analysis, we decided to use reusable charts instead of wall paintings, which allowed us to allocate ~45,000 Rupees towards other useful purposes. Further, more funds were put towards scholarship and further education for (from $700 to $2550). This will greatly benefit the students.

● Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they? Yes, apart from the Project for Peace grant funds, I was fortunate to raise $3848 from crowdfunding (link provided above).

● Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe. Being from this village, it has been possible for me to see the impact on both a short-term and a long-term basis. I will continue to bridge the gap between the two ethnic groups through social empowerment and hosting educational workshops on a yearly basis. I will find like-minded people and funding to guide and support education. The Project for Peace grant helped provide an initial foundation and accelerate the much-needed educational momentum in my village. Additionally, I wish to express my deep appreciation for the grant funds for this meaningful project, which has significantly benefitted the youth of my village.
Reflection

● How do you define peace? Although societal and structural oppression causes the development of caste systems and race inequality while also diminishing the shared value of humanity, this oppression is often normative and invisible.

The definition of peace for me requires first to determine what the opposite is. For me, the opposite of peace is conflict. This is a state of disagreement - disagreement about how society and culture treat and prioritize different ethnicities and genders in an education system that leads to a silent divide. I am not at peace with how this school and its children are treated in my village. Other villagers are not at peace with how certain children experience maladjustment. Due to the government’s negligence, this school suffered from a lack of basic dignifying amenities like a working bathroom. Children needlessly suffer because of their background, their location, and ethnicity. Peace for me then means to break down this structural oppression, end child labor, and improve accessibility and quality of education.

● In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term?

Long-term? Nearly all Kelibuck students in are children of Nepali immigrant laborers. At a very young age, they are stripped of their dreams and career aspirations. Instead of immersing themselves in books and learning, they are forced to work and contribute to household income. Parents do not want to educate their children because they believe money is wasted when daughters will marry into a different household. By empowering underrepresented children through education, this project restores hope and strength to fight against these social stigmas in a fast-paced developing world. While it is too early to determine long-term changes, we have seen some positive short-term changes towards peace.

These changes include community involvement with people physically helping or being engaged in the construction or logistics of the school. As mentioned, I was unable to be on-site, and had to rely on family members, key contacts, and other people in my network to be involved at the school location. Through GoFundMe, we were able to attract several grassroots contributions that allowed us to increase the money invested to by 50% and get people involved for the betterment of the students in my village.

Additionally, the project raised a lot of awareness and attention for the school. One important event was that the government also took a stake in making improvements and built a kitchen facility for the school. We were able to bring attention to the school’s overall neglect and, as a result, more aid was given to the school by the government, which is a huge achievement for students’ overall outcomes.

Most importantly, I recently received a video with footage of the children receiving the new school supplies—they were excited and smiling. This genuine reaction from the children and school staff shows the difference being made already and the tremendous improvement in the quality of the school day.

● What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issues or utilized approaches/strategies? I learned that for any change to occur, the initial momentum is important to start a ripple effect that contributes to overall project success. One of the challenging tasks was to coordinate the project remotely. However, with patience and planning, we can implement needed changes, such as incorporating the suggestions of the teachers according to their needs for educational supplies. It was bizarre, yet rewarding, for me to learn that teachers discouraged the purchase of computers and internet connections because they lacked the digital skills to use them. Instead, teachers requested books and other educational materials. This showed their enthusiasm and also allowed us to spend the money where it could make the maximum difference. Finally, due to the Covid-related economic impact and limited available resources, some supplies not immediately available locally had to be ordered from a bigger city such as Delhi, which slightly delayed the timeline of the project.

● Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you? The meaning of “peace” is as simple as seeing glowing eyes full of hope and aspiration. Seeing these young minds getting excited about learning and going to school was the most rewarding experience of the project. Oftentimes, people in the more advantaged group fail to recognize their privilege because it is taken for granted. It is important to bring communities together for any peaceful change. The project has strengthened my ideologies about the right to equal education as a first step towards eradicating cultural disparities and class inequalities.

Personal Statement: “Our fundamental goal was not just that of a school renovation but rather the engagement of the community, and empowerment of the children to pursue further education. To encourage youth leadership, we must demystify the silent divide set in place by poor education and associated social stigmas affecting underrepresented children. Only then will the children feel empowered to connect their voices with other children and people around the world and take leadership roles to create a peaceful world.” ~Stanzin Idga