

Title: Musical Notes: A Composition of Peace
Country: Mexico
Sponsoring College: Princeton University
Students and their home country: Carlos Cortez (USA)

“To think of all the musical dreams, talents, and aspirations we have lost as a result of the lack of resources in our community, is truly heartbreaking,” opened a retired ninety-year-old music teacher at my local school district board meeting. The teacher worked hard as she persuaded the district board to maintain funds for the district’s music program and ultimately, she exited having accomplished her goal. For the next couple of years, me, and my community in my small town in California were given invaluable musical skills that allowed us to foster healthy environments and express our creativity in a positive and gratifying manner. Learning to play the violin opened for me a world of talents and skills that would have otherwise remained hidden and led me to contemplate the impact that music would certainly have on the other less fortunate communities I call home.

Since the beginning of Mexico’s War on Drugs campaign launched by then President Felipe Calderon in 2006, the Mexican state of Michoacan de Ocampo has faced an unprecedented wave of violence and economic turmoil. The effects of organized crime and lack of proper government intervention are widespread throughout the state of Michoacan, with one of the most afflicted areas in the state being the place where my roots originate from, the small municipality of Zinaparo. The total population of Zinaparo is set at approximately 3,500 inhabitants with the youngest age group in the village (0 -19 years old) showing a rapid increase in growth. Even with a growing younger generation, the future of these young inhabitants is dim as they are likely to become engaged with criminal activity in the area.

According to Miguel Ferrera Leon, the current director of Zinaparo’s High School, *Escuela Preparatoria CEMSAD 42*, the future of Zinaparo’s younger inhabitants can easily be projected by examining the current educational and social needs of these youth. Firstly, the youth of Zinaparo lack any form of extracurricular activities that allows for the creation of nurturing environments. Secondly, the younger generation does not have access to a space that allows them to express themselves in a creative and peaceful manner and therefore, to discover hidden talents and learn more about themselves. Lastly, Zinaparo’s youth are not actively encouraged to think about their future life and career as they lack any form of mentorship. The cumulation of these deficits in the lives of Zinaparo’s youth has created a future where Zinaparo’s youth are more likely to fall victim to drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, and organized crime. In response to the current needs of the youth of Zinaparo, the *Musical Notes: A Composition of Peace* Project thus looks to create a ten-week summer program where thirty students between the ages of 13-17 years old are empowered through musical education. By learning to play a wooden instrument, either the guitar or the violin depending on student preference, students will engage in peaceful activities that will teach them a new set of skills and will expand their knowledge of the musical arts. As the project will run for 10 weeks, there will be a speaker invited every week to talk with the cohort of students (1) about their career and the importance of obtaining an education, (2) to motivate them to think about their future and the steps needed to reach their goals, and (3) to educate them about the prevalent issues present in the village in terms of drug abuse, mental health, and crime. There currently exists no local nor governmental measure in Zinaparo that is designed to prevent the village’s youth from participating in crime organizations that are widespread in the state of Michoacan. In addition, there are currently no musical classes or groups in the town where students can learn to play an instrument. As a result, if given the honor of implementing my project in Zinaparo, the project would be filling both the musical and youth-focused voids currently present in the small village.

Through the project’s implementation in the municipality of Zinaparo, the project will meet three immediate short-term goals in the village. 1) To establish an extracurricular program where Zinaparo’s youth will engage in a peaceful, healthy, and nurturing environment that will teach the youth that job alternatives to organized crime and violence exist. 2) To provide the children with music as a novel way to express themselves in a creative and peaceful manner and therefore allow the youth to learn new skills that bring joy. 3) To create exciting, educational relationships through presentations and mentorships for Zinaparo’s youth that will encourage this new generation to think about their future career and the life they envision themselves having.

The project will be implemented in a local and central area that will be provided by the local parish, *La Parroquia de San Juan Bautista*. The project will work closely with this parish, as the parishioner, *Padre Martin Padilla*, has already agreed to let me use a designated church area and is supportive of the project. Working with the local parish is crucial as the church has very close ties with the village and would make the recruitment of the cohort a simpler process. In addition to myself, I have also contacted two music instructors, one violin and one guitar instructor, from the surrounding area that have agreed to instruct the music lessons if the project were to become finalized. In addition, the project would also have volunteers from the local private university, *La Univa de La Piedad*, who would serve to establish the important mentorship connections with Zinaparo youth (college-level students will be incentivized to help as they have mandatory volunteer hours set by their institution). The visiting speakers would also consist of lawyers, doctors, and public officials of both Zinaparo and surrounding regions that are enthusiastic to share their knowledge and wisdom on life, careers, and peace with younger generations. As classes run from Monday to Friday, all five days of the week will begin with ninety minutes of music instruction, followed by either 90 minutes of athletic team-building activities (Mondays and Wednesdays), 90 minutes of open office-hour help for schoolwork and tutoring by the college-level mentors (Tuesdays and Thursdays), or the 60-minute inspirational and educational presentation that was priorly mentioned (Fridays). On Saturdays, the cohort will either engage in planned hikes through the mountainous region in the area to build camaraderie or will have a miniature musical display revealing their musical growth and commitment to nonviolent, creative expression to their families. The end of the project will have a culminating musical display where the students will be able to perform for the community and reveal the beauty and peace that comes with playing an instrument.

Once the immediate short-term goals of the program are met at the conclusion of the program at the end of the summer, the success of the program will be evaluated over the following years. A decrease in the number of criminal activities in Zinaparo because of the cohort that we trained and mentored will be a strong indicator of long-term success and a result that I am positive will be observed after the implementation of this program.

The *Musical Notes: A Composition of Peace* Project will also be designed in a manner that would encourage two main goals after I leave at the conclusion of the summer. The first of these goals revolves around the students gaining an extra form of income by coming together to form their own Mariachi or *banda* group for the village as there currently exists no Mariachi or *banda* group in Zinaparo. The second main goal is centered on the continuation and sustainability of the idea of mentorship and musical teaching with Zinaparo's youth. After having completed the program, the cohort will be asked to share their new musical knowledge and wisdom they learned in the program, over the years with the newer generations. The younger generation can then share the same information they learned to ultimately form a never-ending cycle of musical learning and peace in the small village of Zinaparo. The program is creative in that it utilizes a wide range of community assets such as student volunteers and community speakers to provide community youth with meaningful activities. In addition, the project incorporates entrepreneurship in its sustainability efforts, as one of the long-term goals is to create a musical group for the cohort that will allow them to get an extra income. Lastly, the project is innovative as no similar project has ever been implemented in Zinaparo's history and would cause a great impact in the village.

As a dual citizen that is fluent in Spanish that has visited Zinaparo for every year of my life, I am well known in the community and as a result, see no cultural nor social barriers arising for this project. My experience tutoring low-income students at the Princeton Pace Center for Civic Engagement and prior summer volunteering at Zinaparo's clinic have given me the cultural tools and leadership skills to help this project excel. Ultimately this project will allow me to implement my view of peace in this community. For me, peace can not be defined in a simple definition, but rather it is much easier to identify through observation. Peace in a community can be observed when the youth of that community engage in activities that they find relaxing and enjoyable and most importantly, when they enjoy life and can plan their future in a context that is free of drugs and violence.