Project Summary

Students Helping Hands created an educational opportunity to support immigrant students who are undocumented, underprivileged, and struggling in school in the city of Miami Beach. Our aim was to address disparities in public education with fun STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) enrichment experiences that tackled summer slide of math skills and built confidence in the classroom by introducing students to community-oriented experiences, future careers, and STEM skills while collaborating and using new skills to envision a better future.

Project Description

An achievement gap exists in lower grades between underprivileged students and their peers, which only widens as students' progress. Upper and middle-class, mostly white, parents advocate for their children and supplement school with specialized camps, tutors, and outside home experiences like museums and travel. Less privileged families, conversely, cannot advocate or buy opportunities because of language barriers, socioeconomic challenges, or immigration status fears. Starting in elementary school, parents with time and money can designate their child as "gifted" and be placed in smaller classes with better teachers and more funding. In middle- and high school, this inequitable access continues with pre-college tracks. The effects of this system are clear: disadvantaged students suffer learning loss year after year and lose their self-confidence to become changemakers.

Our project addressed these issues by offering a free summer enrichment program for 136 elementary and middle-school students, and community service opportunities for 14 high school students. We had students whose families had arrived just months ago from South America, children who stayed late because of parents' work schedules, and at least one homeless student living with her family in a car.

We partnered with the City of Miami Beach, which runs 12-week summer day camps at its Parks and Recreation facilities. Camp is free for children who qualify for free school lunch under Federal poverty guidelines. We chose to work in the four centers that predominately draw campers from the city's three Title 1 elementary and two middle schools. We taught 4th and 5th grade boys and girls as we engaged them in building their own smart city with model houses while learning environmental science (climate change, sustainability), art and mathematics (architectural design), and engineering (electricity and construction). They also collaborated in neighborhood design that advances disabled accessibility and creates a peaceful community. We taught 3D printing to middle-schoolers and introduced them to assembling prosthetics. Our instructors were college students, and our assistants were high school volunteers.

Leading this project, we all have experience working with younger children but pooled our individual talents to make the ambitious goals of this project possible. David designed lessons to excite students of all ages of all backgrounds with STEAM activities that provide value to communities and society — such as creating hurricane-proof model houses or 3D-printed prosthetic hands. Paola’s strong empathy and personal experience of arriving in the USA eight years ago from Venezuela meant every student felt valued and listened to — especially those who cried goodbye to her at the end of the program. Jonathan used his experience of uniting people for a common cause and motivated the whole community, including high school and college student volunteers, teachers from local schools, and staff and politicians with the city, to create this project.

Jonathan had previously worked with City of Miami Beach and school officials to create an after-school robotics mentoring program for third graders with his high school FIRST Robotics team. Jonathan met with City of Miami Beach Commissioner David Richardson and Parks and Recreation Assistant
Students Helping Hands
USA
Clark University
Project leader: Jonathan Tamen, USA, Clark University; David Tamen, USA, Boston University; Paola Cedeño, Venezuela, Valencia Honors College

Director Cynthia Casanova to develop this project. Several iterations were drafted starting in January and a final version was not completed until May. In the beginning, the project was envisioned as a two-day STEAM workshop for each group of 4th and 5th graders and then changed into a weeklong specialty camp. Finally, it was agreed to provide a week-long STEAM enrichment program for four groups of campers. In exchange, the city allocated a time and place for the project.

No other fundraising efforts contributed to our project, however the City of Miami Beach agreed to fund this project, if we did not receive the Projects for Peace grant.

At the conclusion of the project, there was lots of demand from the students for it to continue, with 93 percent of them responding “Yes” to the question asking if they liked this program. Some students even asked, eagerly, “Are we doing this again next year?” The City of Miami Beach continued to agree to fund this project if other sources of funding cannot be secured, and other community leaders offered to help apply for more grants from the Knights Foundation and Miami Foundation, both Miami-based organizations.

Reflection

We define peace as the unification of communities to address common problems and prosper together. City, school, and volunteer groups, working together to support struggling students is vital to creating a harmonious society.

During our program, students of all backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, and grades worked as a class to incorporate principles of sustainability, accessibility, and coexistence into their city. The start of a Students Helping Hands session was always the same: students would discuss in small groups the unknown struggles they experience every day. The struggles of our 4th and 5th graders ranged from being stuck in morning traffic to a family not having an affordable place to live. However, after listening to each other, we could formulate a new city in which all our problems would be addressed.

On the first and last day of each week, we had the students complete surveys to gauge awareness of STEM careers, educational aspirations, self-efficacy, and overall experience. Most significantly, our program averaged a 72% increase in students’ belief they can help improve their neighborhood. Additionally, we recorded a 22% increase in students' belief they enjoy being in school. By the end of the program, 81% of students felt more interested in STEAM, 73% felt they made a new friend, and 79% planned to go to college.

We had a troublesome experience with one group of students all comprised of immigrant boys who did not speak English. During a drawing activity, some of the boys started drawing swastikas. Our high school student volunteers working with this group were sensitive to these actions, asking us for a different volunteer role, and even the City Youth Center staff were quick to respond with reprimands for the young boys. However, Paola wanted to understand the boys’ perspective and gave special attention to learn about their backgrounds and experience. Paola discovered the boys did not know what they were depicting, but after learning from Paola, quickly apologized to the student volunteers and adult staff.

From our experiences this past summer, we believe in the power of positive role models, and the lifechanging impact that a good teacher can have on someone. We wanted to provide that moment for all the students and always paid special attention to the quiet student in the corner or disruptive ones because those are the problems we can address, and lets our students prosper.

Personal Statements
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**David:** When we were getting started with the project, I was not sure exactly how the kids would feel about the camp since this was our first time doing this. A lot of people came together and put a lot of care into producing the curriculum and I feel like the effort we put in spoke for itself with the smiles and positive feedback we got from the children. My favorite part was leading the lessons on electricity. The kids often experimented and started creating their own circuits that were not just the ones I taught them, and their enthusiasm was great to see. What is great about the program is that the kids are able to have a lot of fun with their teams while also learning with hands-on activities. I believe the more kids that participate in the program the better our communities will become.

**Paola:** Initially, I felt a mix of nerves and excitement as I prepared to start the camp. The nervousness stemmed from not knowing what to expect from the kids, especially during the summer when their behavior can be unpredictable. As the weeks went by, I encountered a few “troublemakers”, but I was determined to work with them individually, and I observed significant improvements in their behavior by the end of each week. I truly related to them; most of them were students who had just arrived in the country, and I know firsthand how hard it is to not know the language and not be able to understand. I applied various strategies and lessons I had learned from my introductory education course to my teaching at the summer camp. Over time, I formed strong bonds with the kids, and it began to feel like we had our own tight-knit community. Saying goodbye at the end of each week was always bittersweet. My experience at the summer camp taught me a great deal about being in a teaching role, and it further fueled my passion for pursuing a career in education. The sense of community and the impact I had on these children encouraged me to continue along this career path.

**Jonathan:** I am so proud of the work we have done with this Project for Peace. Through this experience, I have learned the power local relationships can provide for creating positive change in my community, and I hope Students Helping Hands grows for every student to prosper in their community.