Ringling College of Art and Design.

Project leader: Almendra Kovac, Argentina, UWC Atlantic College. Team member: Valeria Guerra-García, Perú, UWC Dilijan.

El Lugarcito was conducted for the duration of a month in the Algarrobal community, located in Las Heras, Mendoza, Argentina. This project focused on building a Recreational center in the space provided by a community leader through the facilitation of workshops and the provision of resources for women and children in impoverished conditions to acquire new skills and strengthen bonds with each other, helping to build bridges to resources otherwise inaccessible.

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?

Through conversations with Katy Javier, a community leader in charge of the Merendero, other women who are part of the community, and others who have worked with them for years, plus extensive research about the structure and history of the place, we were able to figure out what the community needed and would benefit most from. A major goal for us was to make sure that this was a community-based approach, defining the focus of the project by their needs, instead of getting carried away by our biases or uninformed assumptions. After our initial conversations, we made a list of things we needed to purchase/invest in, and then we proceeded to meet with the mothers to get their opinions and hear if there were things they would add or remove. This proved to be extremely helpful and made it a better use of our budget, time, and effort.

It was important for us to focus on finding long-term solutions to some of the issues that they were facing, dividing the budget into major investments for the infrastructure of the community center (roofing supplies, heaters, sewing machines, electrical systems, working sink, chairs, tables, etc.) and into smaller items that would provide comfort and incentive in community activities (speaker, books, art supplies, sports supplies, fabrics, cooking supplies, etc.)

- Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?

With both of the project members being South American, and one of us being from Mendoza, Argentina, where the project was conducted, we wanted to work with a community that we felt culturally connected to. We both grew up witnessing the social and economic disparities of our home countries and wanted to take advantage of our current privileged positions to at least make a small difference.

The project leader knew the community and the community leader beforehand and had worked on projects there previously, building relationships with the people, which made it easier to find a way into such a secluded community. Having seen the unique situations that the people living in El Algarrobal were facing, using the Davis Project to work with them felt like an amazing opportunity. With both project members being South American women it was easy to communicate with the women and children of the community, ensuring they felt comfortable to communicate openly with us.

Local relationships were essential to the success and the feasibility of the project. Relatives and friends of the project leader facilitated workshops, and provided transportation and housing, reducing the cost of our living and allowing us to redirect most of the money to the community itself. Having previously established contact and relationships with the community made it possible to plan meticulously in advance and to conduct the project efficiently.

- What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?

The schedule for workshops and purchasing of goods had to be adjusted due to delays with our flight and the availability of community members and transportation. We also had to purchase and bring resources little by little, as we had to look for them in very different stores and areas, and we relied on relatives with cars/trucks to bring them safely to the community without compromising our safety. As we continued conversing with the women, new needs became apparent and we had to add things to our purchase list or adjust workshops.

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When we arrived at the community, an indigenous people celebration was happening soon and we adjusted our schedule and goals to participate in this and help to make it accessible to more people as well as less of an economic burden on the community center. The mural was not possible because of the children’s tight school and work schedule, as well as the structure of the walls not allowing for paint to be laid down on them. However, instead, we worked on developing a design for a flag for the community to use in their events.

The project to revamp the electrical system of the community surfaced when we realized how much of an issue this was, and a significant amount of the budget went to these expenses, which was a better alternative to directly leaving money for them to spend, as we realized doing this would be logistically impossible and would cause safety issues.

- Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?
  It was not necessary for us to resort to further fundraising due to the economy of Argentina, which made the US dollar budget especially useful, allowing us to purchase a lot more than we expected to be able to purchase.

- Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue?
  Continuing work on this project is something we would love to do. In fact, we have already identified future projects for this community that we would like to help accomplish, such as a proper soccer court with fake grass for the women to play, they currently play in a dirt terrain that creates clouds of dust or slippery muddy surfaces creating a safety hazard. Other projects are expanding the improvement of electrical connections to the rest of the neighborhood, as there are many unsafe precarious electrical situations that have caused fires and deaths in the past.

  Working on the improvement of access to potable water and easier, safer transportation to the rest of the city and in between houses in the community would also be a goal. We are keeping in contact with the community and will be looking for funding and resources to make these things happen eventually.

- How do you define peace?
  “Peace is a sense of community and belonging. It’s having a support system to rely on, and knowing that one will be safe and cared for. Our idea of peace can be achieved through education and recreational spaces which open doors for a different future from the one imposed onto impoverished communities, providing hope and strengthening social bonds.”

- In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred?
  Short-term? Long-term?
  The project focused specifically on strengthening the community that we visited, providing them with a space in which they could feel like they belonged and there was somewhere to turn, besides resources that would be there to help them and provide them with new opportunities. This was particularly important with this community because of the way that the government has constantly neglected them. Providing this support system reduces the likelihood of children ending up in dangerous situations, it allows them to see a different future from the one imposed onto them, as well as giving hope to the mothers.

  Immediately we saw the children play happily with the toys we brought, the women playing with their new footballs and soccer shirts, and them learning to use their new machines to make clothes and blankets, besides planning the things they would sell. They used the ingredients provided to make food for their event and to sell pastries to make money for the community center. We saw people attend, participate, and enjoy the workshops, getting a space to share and talk about things they usually don’t talk about and also gaining more interest in different arts.

  Long-term the improvement of the space and the connections forged with teachers and organizations will help to provide the community with an escape from the brickyard work, and the

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possibility of having fun while practicing useful skills. Furthermore, the provision of sewing machines, fabrics, and threads will allow for a constant income and access to more affordable clothing. The electrical project will ensure safety, and provide warmth and comfort, which is already having a significant impact on El Lugarcito and its surroundings.

- Identify a significant conflict you observed or encountered in your work.

A significant conflict we observed during our time in Algarrobal was the mistreatment of the women of the community by healthcare providers. The women were refused proper treatment on multiple occasions at local hospitals because of their nationality (most of them being Bolivian and living in Argentina.) This discrimination was a serious threat to their lives and it violated their basic human right of having access to healthcare. A lot of this medical neglect was present in the form of obstetric violence, which affected both the mental and physical health of the women of Algarrobal. This came up during the “Obstetric violence workshop,” where the women conversed with professionals on these topics about their experiences, sharing trauma, and finding ways to improve the situation in the future.

- How did you navigate the conflict and what would you like to learn more about as a result.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

This conflict was explored in the obstetric violence workshop that took place during the project. We were able to facilitate contact between the women of the community and three experts in that specific field. The women were able to freely talk about their experiences to each other as well as the professionals who later gave an informative talk about birth rights. The obstetric violence professionals were also put in contact with Katy Javier, the community leader in order to have another workshop after the project is finished. Even though this by no means solved the large and institutional conflict we observed, it is our hope that it helped the women take care of each other and know that what happened should not be normalized.

We definitely want to learn more about how to help mitigate such institutionalized discrimination in places that are supposed to help communities, like hospitals. It was deeply disturbing to see such deep-rooted issues and not knowing how we, as students, could help make a change.

Although there were issues too out of our scope, being able to help this community changed how we see the reach we have. Being students awarded with such an incredible opportunity allowed us to realize that even though we can’t change everything at once, we do have the chance to bring peace in smaller ways that we hope will eventually add up. This project inspired us to challenge ourselves and consider the different ways that we can use our privilege to help others in a way that is both long-term and non-invasive.

Personal Statement

“This project was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to truly make a change in a community often looked down upon. It was a gift to be able to be with them almost every day of the week and get to know them better, observing the impact that our work had and learning from them how to improve. Their kindness and the way they welcomed us was a gift, and I learned from the way that they view community and how they work together. We formed such tight bonds with everybody there and I miss them every day. These are just a couple of small crumbs in a mountain of change that needs to be brought to this neighborhood, but little by little improvements can be achieved, and it's truly satisfying to see it already happening.”

-Almendra Kovac, Project Leader

“Having had the opportunity to take part in this project was truly incredible. I was able to learn so much from the women of El Algarrobal, their community-driven spirit, resilience, and drive inspired me in ways I can't express. They welcomed us with open arms and let us be a part of their lives which was such

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an incredible experience. I can truly say that I will admire these women forever and am excited to keep in contact and continue to help them if I am able to. Working with el Algarrobal was a beautiful experience and it warms my heart that we were able to add our grain of sand to this incredible community.

Valeria Guerra-Garcia, Team member