Short Summary

The goal of this project was to foster educational access by helping construct a school on the upper level of a children’s home in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Furthermore, through a small goat farming initiative in Grand’Ase (a department devastated by natural disasters in the summer of 2023), I strengthened the financial capacities of a few agricultural families, increasing their ability to invest in their children’s education.

Project Description

The original goal of my project was to foster youth educational development in Little Haiti (Miami, Florida) by organizing workshops and field trips for high school students to learn more about higher education. As I finalized the details for the Little Haiti project in early summer, Haiti was hit by disaster after disaster in a matter of days, and the political situation worsened. First, a heavy flood hit nearly 31,600 homes. Then, a 4.9 magnitude earthquake in the Grand’Ase department left dozens injured. The situation in Haiti felt urgent in a way it did not in Little Haiti. The need was greater, and I felt it would have been irresponsible not to listen to it. Furthermore, while organizing a project in Haiti was going to be difficult, especially considering I could not travel there due to the gang violence and political instability, I realized that said difficulty was further evidence of the need for action. The places that require the most peace are often the most difficult to bring it to. Therefore, I developed a project with a two-fold mission: the first was similar to my original proposal of fostering youth educational development, but this time it took shape in helping finish the construction of a school on the upper level of a children’s home in Port-au-Prince. The second involved strengthening the financial capacities of a few agricultural families in Grand’Ase (with the hope they would be able to afford to send their children to school or pay for school-related expenses) through a goat farming initiative. These families will be able to breed the goats, generate revenue with the sale of their meat and milk, digest it themselves, and/or even sell them. That revenue can hopefully be used for whatever the family chooses, but a special emphasis was put on supporting their children’s education.

There are various issues prevalent in Haiti (like all countries). Thus, I could have taken this project in many different directions. However, research indicates that educational attainment is highly correlated with economic status and is the most significant predictor of health status. Education is crucial to creating long-term peace. My hope was by helping build this school, students would have a place to learn and in turn, some of the other threats to peace could be mitigated as well (illness, poverty, hunger, etc.). Education is often cited as the key to changing one’s positioning in life. But it was also important that some component of my project was conducted in Grand’Ase due to the fact that the area was greatly impacted by natural disasters this summer. Furthermore, I knew for that portion of the project it was important to provide people with the gift of choice, which is often restricted the lower one’s falls on the economic ladder and for those who live in disaster-prone climates. The more money and resources people have, the more likely they are to invest in their children’s education.

I decided on my project host site, Haiti, because of my personal connection to the country. As a Haitian immigrant, I am haunted by the obstacles that prevent peace from taking root in my homeland. It is my life’s mission to help Haiti reach its fullest potential. Furthermore, I knew I would have the necessary contacts and support to implement my project there. Local support was crucial to the implementation of this project, in my case probably more so than others, because I organized it virtually. I believe no one knows more about the community you seek to serve than those who live there on an everyday basis. Fr. Luckson was instrumental in building the school addition to the children’s home. REDHAM (an
Project Title: It Takes A Village
Project Location: Haiti
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Sponsoring College: Williams College

organization in Montreal that does a lot of work in Grand’Anse) and the local parish priest were instrumental in helping to decide on and then distributing the herd of goats to the agricultural families who needed them. It really does take a village.

I did not raise any additional money for this project. However, there is always an opportunity to increase educational access in Haiti such as by helping parents be able to afford the direct (tuition) and indirect costs (uniforms, backpacks, transportation) of sending their children to school.

Reflection

I believe peace is the absence of strife, danger, suffering, and all the elements that contribute to those negative experiences (whether that be hunger, thirst, homelessness, poverty, illness, etc.). Peace is deterred by multiple factors; thus, spreading it requires multiple tools. My project only focused on one tool: education. Adding a school to the children’s home widens student’s claim to a space, thereby fostering a feeling of safety and comfort, which is not always guaranteed in a country struggling with gang violence and political turmoil. This school serves 46 students who all live in the children’s home and would otherwise have nowhere else to go, let alone learn. School is a shelter and refuge. And also, a place for these children to be that—children. They can learn, grow, and develop the skills to put themselves and their country in a better position. The goat farming initiative provides families with immediate resources, betters their economic standing, and increases their ability to invest in their children’s education.

The most significant conflict I encountered was intrapersonal. This was the first time I had been given the financial resources to design and implement a project. I learned very quickly that the world is not short on problems. Thus, there are a lot of ways to promote peace. But there are limited resources, whether that be time, money, or energy. In organizing this project, for the first time, I had to confront opportunity cost. I learned that whenever I pursued one worthwhile path, I left another unpursued. I was especially cognizant of this in my project because I cared about both components: building the school and creating the small goat farming initiative, which meant I had to split my resources. Although I was confident in this decision, I still experienced guilt in knowing I could always be doing more and giving more to one, but not without taking from the other. I could buy more goats so I could serve more families but that would mean less construction could be done on the school. I could invest in decorating the school—in making it a child’s dream space—but that would mean helping fewer families economically. It is this same feeling that inspired me to change course from my original project and conduct it in a place I believe needed the resources more. Opportunity cost is a dilemma, one uncomfortable to sit with, but I believe confronting it is the core of all humanitarian work. It is a balancing act many do not attempt but inspires you to become a more compassionate and thoughtful decision-maker.

Organizing this project was the first time I got a real-world taste of the international humanitarian work I have always wanted to do. I entered this project with an idealism that stems from youth and inexperience and left with a deeper understanding of what it will take to promote long-term peace. The work I did this summer with the resources I was lucky to get has barely scratched the surface. There is so much work that needs to be done, and this work requires money and time, both scarce resources. And in the case of the former, attaining it is a job in and of itself (how do you find time to do the actual work when you have to spend it securing the tools to do said work?). It all can feel impossible. This process has allowed me to think about the world pragmatically and helped me grow up. It has given me a sense of confidence because it is evidence of my competence. It’s given me the ability to say to myself: Look, you can do this. You can promote peace. But I have also learned the proverb that tells us it takes a village to raise a child is incomplete. Raising children is not the only thing we need community for. Everything good in this world, especially peace, takes a village.
Personal Statement

"Due to the support of Project for Peace, I've been able to develop a project that increases educational access and strengthens the economic capacities of a few families in Haiti. This opportunity has inspired me to confront opportunity cost, which is core to all humanitarian work. It has taught me just how complicated the quest for peace (on any scale) really is. With this pragmatic perspective and the skills I refined this summer, I am now more than ever eager to dedicate my life to the pursuit of a more peaceful world." - Shiara Pyrrhus