Recent images representing the socio-economic and political tensions in Venezuela, from sources such as the New York Times, speak to the power of the photographic image. Overwhelmingly, the crisis in Venezuela is under-reported. While the images reaching US sources are striking, they are also emblematic of the grave misrepresentation that can occur when images are taken by someone who is an outsider to the reality they are documenting. Many of the images representing my family’s home country paint Venezuelan citizens as dirty, poor, and helpless. Contrastingly, native Venezuelan photographers – sometimes with nothing but their cellphones as equipment – are out in the streets documenting the strength, complexity and resilience of Venezuelans during this tumultuous time. Misrepresentation can affect how one understands the situation, how one sees themselves and, ultimately, how one approaches efforts to promote peace in conflict-stricken areas. The question is not only how do we promote the nuanced stories being told on the ground, but how do we engage with young people in Venezuela to reclaim their power over their story? How do we create understanding among and beyond Venezuelans through photography?

The images native photographers are taking showcase the many ways in which young Venezuelans are fighting for their home and for peace. Community, art and education together can cultivate peace seekers and change makers who create such representation. Even more so, storytelling is a crucial practice in creating community and promoting peace. But in a time of crisis in Venezuela, young people are not given access to art or art education. In a time of disarray with both government and opposition politicians controlling citizens’ understandings of daily life, how can we counter-act the conflict? By equipping young Venezuelans with the resources to document their experiences through photography they are being equipped with the tool to claim ownership over their condition, which itself is an act of resolution in the conflict.

Tiuna El Fuerte is one of the community spaces working to foster growth, empowerment and education integrated with art for the surrounding community in Caracas, Venezuela. This collective believes artists are the basis of change, and so they strive to provide an outlet for artistic expression for youth and fulfill other community needs through community cooking meals, dance workshops and music performances. As I gained hands-on experience both in community work and art making, Tiuna’s mission became more and more invigorating to me. Simultaneously, the instability in Venezuela continued to worsen. As a Venezuelan-American with physical distance from the country, I felt there was not much I could do beyond raising awareness. Nonetheless, it was always my hope to go back to Venezuela and work with communities there, but I had no idea how to bring that dream to fruition. That is when I reached out to the founder, Piki Figueroa, not at all sure what would come of it.

Piki was extremely receptive to my proposal of a visual-media workshop focusing on working with youth who live near Tiuna’s space. As Tiuna is a collective that fosters creativity and community, we align in our shared belief that peace comes through understanding, which is heavily tied to our stories and how we share them. We recently discussed the difficulties of creating art with the economic issues facing Venezuelans, and came to the conclusion that a two-part workshop series would be an ideal solution. It would provide the opportunity to create both inside and outside of Tiuna’s space as well as an educational and interactive portion with local photographers and other visual creators. This way, young Venezuelans will be learning photographic technique and exploring new equipment within the security of Tiuna’s walls. Then, participants will take Polaroid cameras for a few days at a time to make images in their spaces, in
their neighborhoods, and with their families. This is intended as an opportunity for young people to explore their everyday lives in a creative sense and discover how they want to represent themselves and share their story. It is our hope that through their exposure to photography and image-making, these young Venezuelans will not only cultivate a new creative outlet, but will furthermore feel empowered to express their voice in this time of crisis. After these intermittent days, the attendees return to Tiuna, where we will create a discursive space to think about images critically, curiously, and with agency.

In addition to learning and creating through this workshop series, Piki and I will provide talks for the community with local visual creators that are centered on understanding and discussing image making in a time of disarray. This aspect of the workshop initiative is inspired by the many talented visual storytellers on the ground in Venezuela. These talks will provide a space for young participants and community members to learn how fellow Venezuelans are using their art to mostrar nuestra realidad (show our reality) and have conversations with a variety of people as to what that reality is in Caracas. At the end of this workshop series, attendees will create an exhibition to show their work – and their subjective truths – as young Venezuelans. This exhibition may be transplanted in locations outside of Tiuna and live online to expand the scope of who may see the stories of these young people. The compilation of images from attendees with varying experiences will not only speak to an underrepresented reality, but will create a physical and metaphorical space that allows these narratives to co-exist, thereby weakening any fragmentations or divides and addressing the community’s varied landscape of experiences.

After these few months of workshops, lessons and public talks, the workshop is intended to live and evolve past my stay in Caracas. Another resident artist along with Piki will be assisting with the workshops, so together they will have first-hand knowledge of how the workshops were successful, and if continued, how they can be improved. Furthermore, with the funds provided by the Davis Peace Prize, Tiuna will be able to acquire the basic amount of equipment – a DLSR, tripod, light, Polaroid cameras and film – needed to continue the workshop in a practical manner. The promotion of the final exhibition will hopefully motivate others to provide film and supplies for future workshops and thus sustain the effort. With the relationships solidified between local photographers and students from surrounding neighborhoods, both Piki and I are confident that further collaboration will evolve. Tiuna has been surviving, but is not necessarily currently equipped to fulfill the enormous potential of these change-makers, these peace seekers, these young, emerging artists. Through exploring photography and the process of image making, interested youth will hopefully find their agency, further engage their creativity, and share their narratives in a time when the world is seeing them not as who they are, but as symbols of what the government or the crisis represent. Not only will they combat this lack of representation, but they will cultivate a space for the storytelling and understanding which, in a time of crisis, are vital to peace building.