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Empowering Youth with Paints and Peace
James Town, Greater Accra Region, Ghana

Background

James Town is one of the major fishing communities in Ghana with 16,000 people employed in this industry out of 125,000 residents. It is primarily inhabited by the Ga people and is one of the most popular tourist destinations because of its colonial architecture. It is also increasingly attractive to visitors due to the development of an art festival that occurs every August called the Chalewote Street Art Festival, showcasing diverse Ghanaian art.

Even though the area was heavily developed during the colonial era, the district is known as one of the most notorious areas for crime and one of the poorest communities in Accra. Even though it is a neighbourhood rich in culture and has become an art hub, the youth struggle with little education and engage in criminal activities such as robbery and gang-related agendas. These struggles are rooted in and exacerbated by the Ga Chieftaincy dispute that began when the British enabled the Ashanti people to be enstooled in the Ga Kingdom using the Ashanti traditions which are different from the Ga customs. This caused confusion in enstoolment practices between the different Ga groups after they claimed their full rights to the throne, leading to socio-economic turmoil in the Greater Accra Region. In James Town specifically, it led to violence and imposed curfews that result in a culture of fear and the loss of productive work hours.

The Ghanaian education curriculum and mindset is one that often ignores subjects such as music, dance and art but these are important tools for self and community development. James Town exhibits this community growth through the annual art festival which is also lucrative, as local vendors in the neighbourhood earn money from selling food and custom African pieces such as clothes. Being an avid poet myself, I believe in the power of art to improve creative skills, give confidence, relieve stress and increase visual learning which can boost academic performance. This project intends to give the youth of James Town a haven of expression and comfort to be able to channel their energy into positivity and contribute to the Chalewote street festival in the future, promoting their skills while creating a safer environment in their neighbourhood.

Description of Project

The project aims to help passionate youth to narrate their stories and communicate through artistic mechanisms like poetry, storytelling, crafts and painting, amongst other forms through art, citizenship and community involvement. The project will be implemented in three different phases. The first phase will involve the construction of the art space, in which meetings will be held. The next step will include recruiting and training peer educators that will be involved in training the students and lastly, participating in and hosting community art events and eventually extending the events beyond the shores of James Town into surrounding vicinities. The target groups are primary school children between 10 and 16 years and high school students who are studying visual art at school.

Proposed Activities

The project will start with me going to Ghana in June to meet up with Mohammed Tahir, the program manager at Developing Unity, Nurturing Knowledge (DUNK) and will run until the early weeks of August. DUNK is a youth-led community-based, non-governmental organization located at James Town that aims to create safe spaces for at-risk women and children aged 8-19 living in the most deprived communities of Accra. Through sports, after-school support, life-skills and vocational training, they encourage their members to *Play, Learn & Grow* as well as empowering them to become agents of change in their own communities.

The week of June 10-14 will be spent devising a team by recruiting members for the project, and designing an activity outline. DUNK has a history with dedicated and knowledgeable volunteers who will be aiding in the implementation process. The following weeks will involve the refurbishment of a pre-existing building on the DUNK premises, which will be turned into a safe art space. It will be decorated by the participants and the volunteers by painting murals and designing art pieces to be displayed on the walls. After the space has been created and furnished, it will be stocked with the necessary supplies, furniture and equipment. Volunteer workshops and training will be held and the art space will open with the creation of 4 stations: Graphic Design, Realistic Art, Handcrafts, and Painting stations. Each station will be headed by a group of volunteers.

During the weeks following, volunteers will meet in the art space and work at the stations with the participants, rotating stations to enable the children to explore the different angles of their creativity and the project. The art space will be open four days a week for five hours. There will be an ongoing peace building workshop with peer educators that will also involve gender sensitive topics, active citizenship, and how to recycle waste into artistic pieces. My direct involvement with the project will end on the 13th of August, with a reflection reading from both the volunteers and the participants.

In sustaining the project, DUNK has volunteers year round, committed to continuing the trajectory of the project in James Town. There will be monthly art and peace exhibitions and mini festivals. I will also be keeping in contact with the DUNK team, including Mohammed Tahir, to be updated on continuous progress.

Short term goals (June to August 2019)

- Recruit a core team of project volunteers to refine project implementation
- Create the art space by refurbishing DUNK's pre-existing space
- Purchase supplies, furnish and decorate the art space, including use of recyclable and re-use materials
- Train volunteers
- Host workshops for volunteers and participants
- Hold an opening event that showcases 4 art stations
- Open the arts space for regular hours: 4 days/week , 5h/day
- 40 children involved with DUNK access the art space

Long term goals (Ongoing)

- Participating children having a safe space to think freely
- 150+ children enrolled in DUNK's programs and participating regularly
- An increase in the number of DUNK volunteers and hours
- Participants become volunteers and mentors in the program, participants influence program activities
- Intentional activities strengthen the awareness of gender sensitive issues and the ongoing inclusion of girls
- Involvement of children in exploring and creating their culture and reframing the history of their neighbourhood
- A network of artistic youth that can work together and encourage each other, using art for problem-solving
- Expansion of the art space to accommodate the growing number of participants
- Generation of art pieces using reuse materials and recyclable products
- Art events and mini festivals to showcase work of participants
- Community art pieces like mural projects change the landscape of James Town
- Creation of a youth movement for peace through art, replacing violent activities
- DUNK youth participate in the Chalewote Street Art Festival
- Social media forms create a platform for national and international awareness of the cultural richness of James Town and its community needs