

Empowering Youth with Paints and Peace
Ghana
University of Alberta International House
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www.dunkgrassroots.org

Project goals

To create safe spaces for at risk children in James Town in Accra through art programming. In a vicinity known for high rates of teenage pregnancy, low education levels, and rampant criminal activities, this project aims to expand the successful programming of our partner organization, DUNK, to include the arts.

Additional fundraising

There was no additional fundraising to help with the project.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

James Town, a town with high poverty and crime rates, is gradually being transformed into a lucrative area due to the introduction of street art festivals. This project aims to keep children involved in art to be able to participate and contribute to the growing art scene in James Town as leaders and change agents in their community. The idea of establishing a creativity centre, with four stations including graphic design, realistic art, handcrafts and painting, was meant to equip the children with an array of art practices: art theory, technical skills, cultural knowledge, community building, and business experience, whilst taking the children off the street and diverting their energy into creativity.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

Fishing is the main industry in the area in a time where it may no longer be sustainable socially or ecologically. Reconciling traditional customs with the demands of a globalized economy requires sophisticated policies and practices to ensure the well-being of the community and resolve the issues of poverty:

access to and attitudes toward education, large families that rely on the labour of the children, idleness that leaves youth vulnerable to crime or gang-related activities, gender inequity, teen pregnancy and the continuation of the cycle. Even though a lucrative arts industry is becoming a part of James Town's culture and history, it seems that local youth are not actively involved, nor do they identify with or benefit from this new stream of opportunity and growth in the area. Arts has redefined the limits of James Town, yet there is a stigma around arts programming which limits the participation of those who might most benefit from it.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

I chose my host site, the premises of DUNK, because they have already established a successful after school library, a sewing centre and a phenomenal basketball court on their premises for the children to come and utilize after school in James Town. DUNK is a safe space and a well-established NGO that already impacts youth immensely, playing a central role in keeping kids active after school (or if they don't attend school), and during their vacation periods, through workshops and active sports participation.

What was it like to work in your host site?

Even though we were in one of the most impoverished areas of Accra, working at the DUNK premises was incredibly comfortable. For example, in a neighborhood where garbage is dumped near the ocean in an open field, DUNK has a garbage room with a neatly painted mural encouraging recycling and disposing garbage appropriately. Whereas in public, pay-toilets are the norm, and most houses do not have inhouse bathrooms, in the DUNK facility, the bathrooms were well equipped and they were working on a hygiene workshop for the children as well. There is a constant supply of electricity and water (a rare find), and the staff and children always cleaned up together to make sure the space was always spruced up. The classrooms were always arranged, and the art space was always kept in a meticulous order after and before sessions. Lastly, the staff and children were extremely welcoming and constantly cheerful! It was also busy with the cheers of the children from basketball and football practice or tranquil with the

silence of children intently reading their books in the library. The art space added a thrill of excitement and the opportunity for the children to learn extra skills. This created a peaceful atmosphere for growth.

Challenges faced

Constructing a strict timeline was easy but in the first few days upon arrival, I realized the intense activity required to renovate the art space. The early days of renovation were delayed a bit so the space was not fully ready by the anticipated start date. However, our determination encouraged us to use the library room for art projects until the space was fully renovated. Even though we had an alternative, timing was a problem in the first days because the NGO followed a busy schedule for each day; inserting a new activity in a space regularly used was a little hectic but everything fell into place.

Communication challenges

The language widely spoken in Accra Central and James Town is Ga, but since I am a speaker of Twi, there were slight communication problems with children who were not fluent speakers of English. However, this barrier was blurred when the children made efforts to speak English with me, or the other children that were more fluent in English would translate for me. This occurrence happened rarely.

My definition of peace

Peace is creating opportunities to reach one's full potential in a safe space that is open to receiving differences and challenges. Using education as a tool to create avenues for growth and expression is an important part of peace because it opens our minds to be able to work together and be tolerant of other people regardless of our differences, as well as enabling individuals to reach a self-actualization that enables one to fully understand their limits, strengths, weaknesses and possibilities.

Long Term and Short Term Contribution to peace

When one of the participants after an art session said, "I think I want to study Visual Arts now", I knew the goals of the space were manifesting. In the short term, we built a space that holds 80-90 new artists, sturdy furniture, an abundance of art supplies, and a caring team. Still in its early days, the team hopes to continue hosting around 60 children twice a week, rotating between stations in the space and keeping the children occupied in creative ways. They are still working hard to offer weekly art lessons that will equip the children with knowledge to help with their course selections in High School and unleash their internal cultural expressions. In the long term, it will encourage more children to be engaged at the NGO; it will dissolve the stigma surrounding art since the children will personally know about the benefits of Arts; and they will eventually pass on the information to their parents. In the end, I hope it gives the children more freedom to express themselves, the courage to participate in the street art festivals, host exhibitions and even sell art to earn income for themselves or the organization. Essentially, I look forward to the creation of a vibrant youth movement through art.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

Empowering Youth with Paints and Peace has taught me that the world is a small place that gets better with one act of kindness at a time. It made me want to volunteer more and create a volunteering agenda in Ghana. I realized how meaningful the arts could be in changing the dynamics of the NGO and the entire James Town as a whole, and how transformative an ethic of giving and community participation can be.

1-2 Sentence Personal Statement

"An act of kindness should make a heart smile. Be it sharing a pencil, giving a hug, or providing an art space. It is not the quantity of the act that matters, but it is the quality of the intention that counts."

- Akua Annobebe Anim

