Computers and Childcare: Training Mothers for a Peaceful Future

The objective of this project is to provide a computer/learning resource center, computer skills training program, and childcare center for the Sol Naciente (Rising Sun) home for single mothers and women in situations of homelessness and domestic violence, on the edge of the largest and most violent ghetto, villa 1-11-14 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This project will provide the shelter’s current and future inhabitants--teenage, lower-class, under-educated, abused and/or homeless single mothers--with valuable computer skills that will help them gain employment, offer them resources they can use to plan for life outside the shelter, keep them connected to the shelter’s coordinators and services, and give them “grown-ups only” space and time. The organization of a corps of volunteer computer skills teachers from high schools and universities will guarantee the future sustainability of the computer training program, while training and employing structurally impoverished women from the neighboring ghetto as caretakers in the child care center assures that the project also benefits women from this community.

In May 2007, at the end of my study abroad program, I began doing research and volunteer work at Sol Naciente, spending a total of four months working with its directors, coordinators, and community volunteers. During this time, I not only learned about the inner workings and politics of the organization and became a familiar face in the community, but I also spent every day working and interacting with shelter’s residents. The majority of the women living in the shelter are single mothers from poor neighborhoods all over Buenos Aires, often as young as fifteen with usually only an elementary school or high school education. Currently, the shelter provides them food, beds and counseling services for anywhere from several weeks to a year, but their ability to look for, or even hold a job when they leave the shelter is inhibited by the fact that they have no job skills, and can never leave their small children alone to seek such training. Even when they make progress in counseling and are sent out of the shelter, they often return when, unemployed and needing to support a child, their only options once again become living in the street or in the home of an abusive male partner or relative. The shelter has received funding to continue work on its new building, which is currently under construction in a large empty factory. However, Sol Naciente has been unable to provide an educational space for the women, or a safe space for their children to play. As a result children play in the dust on the cement floor, picking up nails and scrap wood, constantly exposed to dangerous building materials, while the women spend time that could be used helping themselves, monitoring their young ones.

Creating both a computer/learning resource center and a playroom, and hiring both a weekly computer instructor, and everyday childcare givers, would benefit the women currently living in the shelter and future shelter dwellers in five ways. Firstly, it would guarantee that the women would have time and space to learn valuable computer skills which they could put to use in the future though work as secretaries and assistants. Argentina is becoming increasingly more “wired”, and small businesses are in need of staff knowledgeable in basic computer skills such as typing and data entry. Secondly, the computer resource center would be a place where the women could access information about medical care, educational opportunities, government funding, and potential jobs using both online and printed resources. Statistics show that information and computer technologies that have been put to use in similar ways have been extremely beneficial to women’s NGOs similar to Sol Naciente. Learning how to access the internet and having information at their fingertips would allow the women to plan their lives outside the shelter, decreasing the risk they will need to return. For example, once a woman has gone through counseling, Sol Naciente tries to find government-funded housing for her; when she knows where she will be living she could use the computer center’s resources to research schools, doctors and jobs close by. Thirdly, knowing how to use a computer will help the women stay connected to Sol Naciente, and help the organization monitor those women that have left the shelter. The majority of the women in the shelter are estranged from their families, and as poor single mothers navigating the world alone, they are particularly vulnerable to violence. Staying in contact with Sol Naciente through e-mail will decrease their isolation, and provide them with a social network. According to the coordinators of the organization, the women who manage to stay connected to Sol Naciente upon leaving are the least likely to need to return. Lastly, the creation of both a children’s space, and a grown-ups only space would give the women a much needed break from the stress of screaming children, creating a sanctuary to which they could retreat for peace and self-reflection. While the shelter is a safe space, it is not always conducive to the healing process that is key to re-entering life outside the shelter. Often the women spoke of longing for a few moments of peace in which they could think about their lives and their sessions with the counselors; however, amidst the constant chaos of children this was rarely possible. A child care center, supervised
by a hired caretaker, would not only give the shelter’s children a safe place to play, it would give the mothers time to be alone and to reflect on their lives.

While this project primarily benefits the current and future residents of the Sol Naciente shelter, it also will benefit the female residents of the ghetto, which is located across the street from the shelter. In Buenos Aires, walking through the middle of the city past small, neatly kept houses and shops, one suddenly comes upon what looks like another world; crumbling cement walls enclosing hundreds of brick shacks with tarp roofs, children in rags leading horse–drawn carts full of cardboard boxes, air filled with smoke from garbage fires. These “Villas de Miseria”, or villages of misery are expansive, walled-off ghettos, where thousands of people have lived for generations in structural urban poverty, joblessness, and social isolation. Although it currently caters to lower-class, rather than ghetto-dwelling women, Sol Naciente actually began in 1998 as a grassroots effort on the part of a group of women living on the edge of one such ghetto, 1-11-14, to help their impoverished ghetto-dwelling sisters. Sol Naciente’s first women’s shelter was located in the ghetto, but violence forced the women in charge to relocate it, which they did in 2006 with the help of outside funding. Moving across the street from the ghetto made the shelter safer, and soon hospitals were sending Sol Naciente young teen moms, and it became a shelter less for ghetto-dwelling women, than for lower-class mothers abandoned or abused by male partners. This project, in addition to helping shelter mothers, will help ghetto dwelling women by hiring child care takers to give them childcare training, and then employing them as caretakers for the shelter women’s children. These women, who traditionally rely on soup kitchens and charity to feed and clothe their families, could bring their own children to the child care center, and watch all of the children (theirs and the shelter women’s) collectively, giving them a source of income that they would never be able to obtain otherwise.

I will work with the company that the organization has hired to build and refurbish the shelter building to create two new, large rooms with electricity. I will then purchase six computers and two printers, and a two year internet service contract, as well as furniture, bookshelves, and lighting fixtures for the room. I will also buy and receive donations of learning materials, anything from books, to learning games, to pads and pencils, textbooks, and the like. In addition to the above, the resource center will also have binders of informational material which I will research and compile. The play room will be outfitted with an easy to clean carpet and child size furniture, as well as new games, and toys will be bought and donated. While the projects funds would provide for a computer teacher to come three times a week, eventually the paid teacher could be replaced with volunteers from the outside community. Having made extensive connections with students from various high schools and the University of Buenos Aires during the six months I spent abroad, I know that there is interest in this project, and that volunteers would be easily recruited. The child care center would eventually be operated completely by ghetto-dwelling women who would be paid a small hourly sum. Additionally, to cover internet costs, local women, whether ghetto-dwellers, or neighbors from the community outside the ghetto could be charged a small fee to access the resource center, and to attend computer training classes. By only allowing women to access the resource center, the shelter would remain a safe space for women, while making money to support itself in the future.

Experiencing the daily realities of the women living in the Sol Naciente shelter and in the ghetto community was profoundly moving. The strength the shelter women showed in protecting and raising their children against unspeakable odds was matched by the selflessness of the organization’s directors, who, mothers themselves, gave every last hour and penny to making the shelter function. The directors and I have been in communication, and this proposal is reflective of our mutual understanding of the ways in which the shelter’s ability to help its women could be improved. My role in this endeavor will be to bring the directors and residents of Sol Naciente together to create change, while organizing volunteers and researching information to include in the resource centers library. My extensive experience with this community, as well as my knowledge of the organization’s politics will allow me to navigate between Sol Naciente’s directors, the shelter women, and the ghetto-dwelling women in a way that is crucial to the success of this type of project. In a world that is marked by sadness and hardship, the opportunity to learn new skills, connect in new ways, and know that for an hour, one’s children are being taken care of is invaluable. Giving the women of the Sol Naciente shelter the means to gain autonomy, and thus to avoid violence, will change their lives and the lives of their children forever.