Occidental College
Art as a Tool for Empowering Youth in Namibia
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Goal: To pilot an arts program focused on empowering female students in a public school in Windhoek, Namibia.

Project Background: Prior to their independence in 1990, Namibia’s education policies reinforced apartheid rhetoric. Although Namibia now supports a democratic constitution, their education system faces serious weaknesses in its efforts to provide equitable and accessible education for all. In lieu of educational disparities, the Ministry of Education implemented the Education and Training Sector Improvement Program, executed through three five-year cycles. Specifically, secondary schools in Namibia are experiencing a deficit of arts education. Many African countries utilize the arts as a powerful tool for rebuilding communities. More than any cultural group in Namibia, women face the harshest realities in their domestic and educational spaces. While the country may celebrate its recent high ranking along the African Gender Index (AGI), cases of gender-based violence still loom in Namibian society. Female youth especially are less likely to report gender-based violence taking place in their homes and schools. Art can inspire young female students to express their emotions, which may lead to strengthening their self-confidence and communicative abilities.

Personal motivation: Throughout my college experience, I have dedicated myself to uplifting communities through creative activities. During my sophomore year of college, I founded a partnership between Occidental College and Rosemary Children’s Services, a nearby group home. Under my leadership, we created a program in which eight Oxy students regularly connected with six young women from the housing center. By the end of our semester together, creative activities fostered the girls’ verbal abilities and self-confidence, allowing them to establish meaningful relationships with us as mentors. I plan to adapt the skills from my training with Rosemary’s to my project in Windhoek. This project will fulfill my dual passion for community engagement and arts education to expand my educator toolkit for all learners.

Adding on to my excitement to pursue “Art as a Tool for Empowering Youth,” I frequented Namibia as a young child due to my parents’ involvement with the University of Namibia. Moreover, I will work with the Namibia Institute for Democracy (NID) who will facilitate my partnership with Free Your Mind, an artist collective, and Sister Namibia, a non-governmental organization focused on raising awareness about issues that affect young women in Africa.

Project overview: My community partner is the Namibia Institute for Democracy (NID), a non-partisan institution that consults with the government, schools, interest groups, and the media in the design and implementation of its programs. NID continues to seek contemporary solutions to endemic challenges, by utilizing technology, art, and other methods of healing and reconciliation. I will be working directly with the Executive Director, Naita Hishoono to execute this project. Naita’s knowledge of Namibian arts and cultural organizations will support my
project by connecting me with female-focused companies and arts groups focused on peacebuilding within Windhoek.

This project will take place over the course of five weeks as an after-school program at one school, the Immanuel Shifidi Secondary School, with approximately 20 learners (students).

**Timeline:**

**Week 1:** Female students will learn about prominent Namibian and African American visual artists. Through this cultural exchange, students will absorb historical events from Namibia and the United States. This activity will assist in breaking the ice, while also providing students with an understanding of cultural events in the U.S. and Namibia and how much they have in common.

**Week 2:** We will embark on a field trip to the National Art Gallery of Namibia and one smaller sized gallery in Windhoek to study works from national and international artists. This visit will allow students to observe various artistic practices and inspire them to think about their own art projects.
- We will return to the classroom during the second half of the week to learn the historical and cultural significance of 7-10 of the works we visited. I will then ask students to draw, in their own artistic ways, each visual work.

**Week 3:** I will introduce students to our project theme, “Art as a Tool for Empowering Youth,” encouraging them to reflect on experiences as young women in their households and schools. Sister Namibia will provide me with appropriate reflection questions for them to answer in their personal journals. We will use these reflections as inspiration for their art projects. During this week, I will ask students to complete blind contour drawing exercises to feel comfortable drawing what they see. We will do this exercise several times and each student will have an opportunity to serve as a figure model for the classroom. This activity will also allow students to develop security with their own bodies.

**Week 4:** We will build upon our blind contour exercises to draw a self-portrait or a portrait of a female role model in their life. During this week, we will divide the class period into two parts: 1) discussing issues of gender-based violence in Namibia (utilizing resources from Sister Namibia) and 2) working on our self-portrait. After each class, I will ask students to take five minutes to write reflections in their journals (sharing will be optional).

**Week 5:** We will finalize our portraits and students will access painting materials to color their works of art. We will end our five-week session with a presentation of their paintings, along with a short verbal discussion of their reflections.

**Lasting impact for creating sustainable peace:** This program will inspire future art classes to take place at Immanuel Shifidi Secondary School and with other school partners of NID. Since I will leave and donate more art supplies to the school, students and teachers will have access to artmaking materials. Moreover, NID will utilize my program intervention as a tool for existing programs and structures at other secondary schools and civic groups in their network.

**Expected outcomes:** Through the implementation of this project, I will encourage all 20 learners to explore their creative capacities which, will inspire reflection and foster new avenues of expression. Female students especially will self-reflect about their experiences through figure-drawing and writing exercises. I anticipate that all students will discover a newfound interest for the arts, and for artists living and working in Namibia and the United States.