Chai wa Dastan (Tea and Tale)
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Background & Context

Persistent instability and conflict involving civil war, political upheaval, and persecution have displaced millions of people around the world. Women and girls represent almost half of these 244 million displaced migrants and half of the 19.6 million refugees worldwide1. With the help of resettlement agencies such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Virginia (VA) has welcomed thousands of refugee women fleeing war and persecution from countries such as Afghanistan2. These women have endured years of trauma, discrimination, violence, and a lack of equal opportunity that restrains them from achieving their full potential. Even when resettled in their new countries, these women continue to face challenges in rebuilding their lives. They feel isolated and incapable of contributing to their new society when in actuality, they are remarkable women filled with rare and powerful experiences that give them the potential to positively contribute to their new communities. The main issue that prevents them from tapping into this potential for progressive contribution is that these women are illiterate; most of them have never even held a pen before. This issue has resulted in these women internalizing the thought of themselves being worthless to their communities when it comes time to contribute to group betterment.

To combat this, I plan to revitalize a culture of oral storytelling that will provide these women with the opportunity to feel welcomed, empowered, competent, and valuable regardless of their literary skill. Storytelling is an inclusive approach that will aid these participants in their attempt to find their voice, connect with others, and share life lessons that will ultimately progress the communities and people around them. Chai wa Dastan (Tea and Tale) is an initiative influenced by traditional Afghan storytelling in which people gather at one another's houses and share stories of myths and legends around a tray of cups filled with tea. Instead of focusing on titles and heroes, Chai wa Dastan will allow refugee women to tell their stories of perseverance, strengths, struggles and hopes verbally in their native language. This platform will empower them to feel appreciated as people and help them see the potential in themselves to contribute to society and create sustainable changes in their communities.

Proposal and Relevant Skills

I propose, with the Davis Projects for Peace grant, to address the issue of illiteracy that leaves refugee women feeling isolated and incapable of giving back to their communities. My goal is to help these women build self-confidence and advocate for themselves, rather than simply integrate themselves or have their stories tokenized. Chai wa Dastan will take place over 10 weeks in Richmond, VA in partnership with the International Rescue Committee (IRC)3. The IRC is based in Richmond, which is home to more than 2,000 refugees who have fled conflict and crisis4. Due to the racial segregation and the history of Richmond, refugees face often obstacles in feeling welcome in their new communities. I will hold this program in my native languages of Dari and Farsi, to help foster productive conversations through storytelling with women who speak limited English. Dari and Farsi are also the native languages of the women who will participate in this project. The IRC will help select a group of 15 refugee women from different communities and ethnic groups who are already involved in the organization's resettlement program.

Being a refugee myself, I understand the obstacles and challenges in seeking refuge in another nation. When I was young, my family sought refuge in Iran and currently, I am seeking refuge in the United States. Additionally, I have experience working with refugees and the IRC. As a Bonner Scholar through the University of Richmond, I taught a group of immigrant and refugee women English as a Second Language (ESL) at the IRC office. I also started a program called Mommy and Me in 2017 with the help of the IRC. This program was aimed to provide refugee and immigrant women and their children an outlet to explore

3 https://www.rescue.org/united-states/richmond-va
4 https://www.richmond.com/opinion/columnists/kate-ayers-column-the-right-resources-help-refugees-connect-/
the city, gain access to additional resources, meet other families in their communities and learn basic language skills. These women were moms to young children who did not get the chance to step out of their homes due to lack of transportation, familiarity with the city, and language barrier. While the women were busy in class, their young children were watched by volunteers from the program, so the participants didn’t have to worry about childcare while they were learning. The reason that the program was successful was because the women were excited to have a space to come together, create new relationships, and have the opportunity to share their culture through bringing food. Additionally, the commitment of IRC to continue this class for the young moms contributed to its sustainability. Chai wa Dastan will follow a similar model to the successful Mommy and Me program because it will bring the participants together, promote empowerment through the use of their voice, and continue as a sustainable program into the future.

**Project Design**

The women are required to attend class and other workshops from 9:00 am - 3:00 pm on weekdays as part of their resettlement program with the IRC. The IRC will help incorporate Chai wa Dastan into their programs. Using a classroom allotted by the IRC, Chai wa Dastan will be held twice per week for 2 hours each day. Storytelling and reading will be the main components. I will have a story prepared each day for the participants to hear. The participants will spend the majority of their time analyzing, discussing and reflecting on their story. They will be encouraged to share their perspectives and any relatable stories they may have. Every day, they will be asked to bring a story to share with the class. To keep the environment comfortable and welcoming, I will have tea and cookies for the participants to enjoy while they share their stories. Additionally, I will provide childcare for women who will be accompanied by their children. Throughout the program, we will have 3 speakers come and share their stories with the class. These speakers are community leaders who are immigrants and refugees in Virginia and eager to help other refugees. I will also provide the participants with tools to do art projects, learn necessary conversational skills in English, attend workshops on financial literacy held by the IRC, and take trips to community centers in addition to storytelling. The community centers will include the public library, museums, a tour of the Capitol, and the World Refugee Day event which occurs during the summer. During World Refugee Day, we will set up a booth to give away goodie bags to refugee families and also reach out to new and future participants of this program.

Furthermore, with the grant, I will set up a small library with audiobooks and elementary level books carrying stories in various languages, mainly in Dari and Farsi. This is to help introduce the participants and their children to different types of languages and culture as well as reinforce their empowerment by learning more stories of their own culture; these books will be read in class and available for checkout. There will also be two community events hosted by the participants to invite their friends and families and will serve as an opportunity to share a story they wish for others to hear. Apart from myself, there will be qualified volunteers who will lead the workshops and support community trips and events; the IRC office will approve of these individuals. I will communicate with the IRC throughout May to finalize program details and prepare supplies for the program. The program will start at the beginning of June and will run until the end of July.

**Sustainability and Expected Outcomes**

The mission of Chai was Dastan is to help refugee women who are illiterate recognize their potential, build confidence, and advocate for themselves through storytelling. The lessons that these women learn will have the ripple effect to create sustainable change in their lives, those of their families, their communities and the greater Richmond. After my departure, under the supervision of the IRC and other community partners, this program will continue as they will incorporate this project into the services they offer. The participants of this program will serve as future leaders to host similar programs for other women in their communities. These new leaders will serve as role models to those women interested in joining the program. I will contribute educational materials for the class, a guidebook for leading conversations, and funds to carry on the library. The resources will be managed by the IRC and used for its intended purpose.

Lastly, during the program, I will work with museums to donate free entrance tickets to future participants of the program. I have already spoken with community leaders who are excited about the library and want to contribute to its sustainability through donating books and supplies after I leave the program. In addition to leaving a lasting impact on each other’s lives, each participant will deliver a ten-minute presentation that includes telling a story, introducing themselves in English, reflecting on their experience and graduating as leaders who will continue to foster progress and peace within their communities.