Title of Project: Chai wa Dastan (Tea and Tale) Podcast
Country of Project Implementation: Global Focus
Sponsoring College: University of Richmond
Designated Project Leader: Lina Tori Jan, Afghanistan, University of Richmond
Website: www.chaiwadastan.com

Goal: Chai wa Dastan (Tea and Tale) is an initiative aimed to share stories and lessons of empowerment, resilience, and leadership, through the revitalization of the oral tradition of storytelling. The CwD Podcast is designed to provide refugee and immigrant women from Afghanistan, who are often overlooked by society, with a platform to share their stories and culture with each other and the wider world. Influenced by traditional Afghan storytelling, CwD aims to harness its beauty and strengths to aid participants in their attempts to use their voices, connect with others, share life lessons, and celebrate one another. Two main issues that CwD aims to play a small part in are addressing the lack of a greater community to connect to and a lack of literary/language skills to communicate with which is often experienced by refugee and immigrant women.

Financial Support: Thanks to the generous financial support of Katherine Davis’ Projects for Peace, awarded through the University of Richmond, CwD has been able to turn into a sustainable project. Initially, this project was aimed to take place in person with a small group of women in Richmond, Virginia, however, due to the obstacles and inequalities created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Founder, Lina Tori Jan, came up with the idea to turn the project into a podcast where Afghan refugee and immigrant women from all around the globe can participate and find a sense of community in each other’s stories.

Issue: Persistent instability and conflict involving civil war, political upheaval, and persecution continues to displace millions of people around the world. Women and girls represent almost half the displaced migrants and refugees worldwide. Even when resettled in their new host communities, women continue to face challenges in rebuilding their lives. The feeling of isolation and a lack of community are two of the main hindrances in enabling these women to see their potential and be able to contribute to their host communities as they intend. Of course, the anti immigration rhetoric in some of their host countries along with the inequalities created by the pandemic continue to contribute to the issues and obstacles these women experience.

Host Site: Given the hindrance to gather in person together as initially planned, the Founder had to switch host sites, partnering with Long Story Short Podcast (LSS). LSS, co-founded by Tori Jan and Pal, focused on the importance of civic leadership through storytelling which provided the avenue to tie in CwD which was also focuses on storytelling. CwD is inspired 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. However, since the pandemic made the initial project impossible, there was a unique opportunity to turn this project into a podcast with the help of LSS, and enable refugee and immigrant women to tell their stories of perseverance, strengths, struggles and hopes verbally to the rest of the world.

Patterning with LSS was a great experience as it enabled the different team members to bring their skills, backgrounds and passions together to ensure CwD was successful in its mission. CwD and LSS were able to create a unique bond and a wonderful coalition through the role of storytelling, eventually leading to LSS becoming a chapter of Chai wa Dastan initiative.

Challenges: There were various times in which the sustainability and success of the project was questioned. There were three main ways in which these challenges came about. 1) While a great number of audience existed, the concern was whether all the audience would be able to download the app and listen to the
Given the importance of physically meeting in the same space, the uncertainty of how successful would our audience be in finding a sense of community and connection through the podcast which was mainly online. The humanitarian and refugee crisis of Afghanistan in August of 2021 impacted the team directly, leading to uncertainty of the completion of the project on time. Thanks to the support of the community and the participants, CwD podcast was able to be shared and heard via various platforms and not solely on an app. While the pandemic created many challenges, it proved to be an opportunity for people to connect online and find more time to listen to the stories produced by CwD. Lastly, thanks to support of the CwD team, the University of Richmond and Davis Projects for Peace, we were able to complete the project and bring it to a place that can continue forward.

Defining Peace: The CwD Team defines peace as a setting void of war, conflict, economic, social and political instability, persecution and violation of human rights. Peace is also the ability for people of all backgrounds to feel safe and thrive.

Contribution to Peace: The Chai wa Dastan initiative features three projects, CwD Podcast, Long Story Short Podcast and the Young Readers Series. These three projects contribute to peace short-term and long-term in these two specific ways. Short-term, the initiative sheds immediate light on the consequence of war, the lack of peace and forced displacement through the journeys of immigrants and refugees who endured years of trauma, discrimination, violence, and a lack of equal opportunity. This enables one to reflect on the importance and the need for peace in our world. Long-term, the initiative opens the door for the community to come together to empathize with the obstacles and challenges one may go through in seeking refuge in another nation, and find ways to help those resettled in the new host countries. This enables building unlikely coalitions around the importance of peace in our world and for each individual to do their part to create an environment that is economically, politically and socially stable where people of all backgrounds can thrive and feel safe.

Project Changes: The project was initially planned to be 14 weeks but given the need to connect with our audience one on one before organizing an episode to ensure they felt comfortable with sharing their story, and the necessary steps were taken to reflect about the conversation before and after the episode, turned the project to take a lot longer than anticipated. Additionally, the team was not able to partner with organizations in the summer to set up a small children’s library but instead bought children’s books to send to different military bases hosting refugees in the US. Lastly, during the month of August, the team became occupied with the ongoing Afghanistan refugee crisis and had to put a pause on recording episodes.

Anticipated Changes: Going forward, the project will continue to take it’s time to release episodes, possibly once a month. This is largely due to taking the necessary steps that both the participants and the team have the time to prepare for the conversation, become aware of trigger warnings and have the space to reflect on the conversation. The team will continue partnering with different organizations who have reached out to share its resources and raise awareness on the situation of refugees and immigrants.

View on the World: The project has definitely improved the team’s understanding of the world. One of the members who is a refugee herself shared that despite the story of a refugee and immigrants being of displacement and dispersion, such communities have found a way to stay connected, making the world feel a lot smaller than it seems. This shows the importance of access to technology and the benefit it provides in connecting people. Additionally, it shows that despite where we are, that desire for community and connection, encourages us to find a way to break barriers present in the world. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, this desire to stay in touch and use technology as one of the main tools of communication became vital for keeping relationships and checking in on each other, especially the vulnerable. Chai wa Dastan had to completely rebuild its project in a way that was compatible with being remote due to the
COVID-19 impact on our world but yet accessible to the audience to serve its purpose of creating a sense of community online.

Advice for Future PfP Grantees: The Chai wa Dastan team highly encourages everyone to take care of your mental health especially if the pandemic is to continue while your projects unfold. Secondly, there are always ways and support systems to navigate the obstacles created by the pandemic. We experienced this first hand with completely having to shift our project and find a new host organization but thankfully, we were still able to move forward and implement our vision in serving the world.

Highlights of Being Remote: The main highlight was our guest speakers - they are all so phenomenal and so inspiring. It was such an honor to speak and meet each of them. We look forward to following their journeys of how they will continue to make our world better. The other highlights of being remote was that it was a great opportunity to learn new skills. For example, our team had to learn how to build a website, start a podcast, and promote the episodes online. This enabled us to bring to surface some of the skills that we never even were aware of. Additionally, the team was able to come together online, each having a cup of tea or coffee to listen to the episodes together, empathize with our speakers and each other, suggest edits, and turn the episode into something that we were all proud of and excited to share with the world.

Challenges of Being Remote: The main challenge was that there can be many cancelations regarding meetings due to the challenges that all people are facing as a result of the pandemic. Sometimes, the internet and electricity was not cooperative and at other times, people just needed space from spending another hour online. Our team, which is made of mostly students, faced this obstacle as most of us were having online meetings and classes the whole day and would experience Zoom fatigue and needed some space from being on our screens. Overall with a collaborative team, these challenges too can be solved in a manner that is respectful to each other and by making slight changes that enable the project to move forward.

Quotes:

“CwD has provided me with an outstanding opportunity to apply my learning and skills to help build bridges across cultures and raise awareness of the lived experiences of Afghan women.” - Jasper Johnston

“The project is valuable because it highlights the stories and experiences of everyday women who have much to contribute to humanity. CwD project does so, by providing each guest the space to be heard and to share freely and without the constraints of expertise, academic knowledge, or other professional eligibility and holds that all women and their story is important and consists of lessons and insights that can enrich human understanding and make room for more empathy in the society. Being part of CwD has been an enriching and empowering experience personally. I have learned that there are so many common experiences and mutual understanding amongst refugee and immigrant women, that although we may live in various parts of the world and away from our homes, we have a community and are not aliens amongst ourselves; this is a place of comfort. I have also learned that the stories of each woman consist of new lessons that are powerful for those within similar communities and backgrounds, but also to others. I have realized that there is so much beauty and hope in the midst of loss, and sadness and these stories can teach us how to find the courage to find hope when there is none on the horizon.” - Zohra Hunter

CwD In Media:
https://news.yahoo.com/richmond-grad-earns-10-000-214041862.html
https://www.wtvr.com/rebound/richmond-grad-earns-10-000-podcast-prize
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