

## **Hūlili Project**

United States of America  
Randolph-Macon College

Benjamin Selimotic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Randolph-Macon College, United World College in Mostar  
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Tajra Karabasic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Randolph-Macon College, United World College in Mostar  
2018-2020

Nikoleta Ivanovic, Montenegro, Randolph-Macon College, United World College in Mostar 2018-2020

## **FINAL WRITTEN REPORT**

The main goal of our project was to bring students from different cultural backgrounds, views, and mindsets together to compare and contrast the differences and similarities in the Balkan and Hawaiian cultures, by focusing on restorative practices and social-emotional wellbeing in both communities. Apart from being supported by The Davis Project for Peace foundation, the project was also supported by the Dean of Students Office at Randolph-Macon College.

We come from multiethnic and multicultural communities where conflict was present in the past and is still prevalent and has a strong effect on people's everyday lives, somewhere in smaller and somewhere in larger doses. We wanted to find a community that also experiences a multiethnic conflict to try and understand it and possibly share and come up with a new mechanism for conflict resolution and resilience. Hawaii as a community is clearly separated from the native Hawaiians/Polynesian and White people; therefore, identity and multicultural conflict are recurring issues in their society. Due to identity and conflict problems that the population of Hawaii experiences, they represent almost an identical copy of the issues that we face coming from the Balkan region, namely multicultural tensions and cultural restoration.

Hawaii was chosen as the host site because of the ever-growing tensions between native Hawaiians and White people, which are similar to the conflicts present in the Balkan region. The overgrowing tension between different ethnicities has led to many challenges which are familiar to us. While doing research for our project, we came to the conclusion that Hawaiian youth does not have the adequate support they need as they grow. As we read about mental health and support in Hawaii, we noticed that many articles reported a heavy burden of depression, anxiety, and alcohol use, and high perceived need for services, yet low levels of help-seeking, which made Hawaii a perfect site for us to share our knowledge. In addition, environmental issues in Hawaii are very present and problematic. While searching for a partner institution, we wanted someone who could show us firsthand both the issues and what they are doing to tackle those same issues. Hawaii is such an amazing place to explore and has such a rich cultural and historical background. We had the honor of being guests of Le Jardin Academy, a school that focuses on community, connection to nature, and multicultural understanding for students from kindergarten all the way to high school. More specifically, we had the pleasure of working with the Wild Kids Program at Le Jardin Academy, an immersive afterschool program that allows kids to grow in ways that they could not in a classroom setting. We could not have imagined how much we both were to go out of our comfort zones through this program. Exploring forests in Hawaii barefoot and becoming one with nature was an experience that was one of a kind for all of us. Le Jardin Academy offered us more than enough support while in Hawaii, supporting and checking in with us every step of the way.

Throughout the project, we have been faced with multiple challenges. The major challenge we faced is the global pandemic. While preparing the project, there were multiple times where we questioned whether or not we would be able to enter the state of Hawaii because of the restrictions, as well as whether the schools would function at all once we arrived there. Furthermore, our project was cut down to 9 days in Hawaii due to the pandemic, four of which we spent preparing workshops because we were unable at first to get a COVID-19 Test in Hawaii due to the surge of the Delta variant. Additionally, we were limited to including only Le Jardin Academy and not other Hawaii Schools due to the restrictions. Mask mandates, as well as social distancing rules and regulations, made it harder to create a proper project atmosphere. However, thanks to the excellent communication between us, Le Jardin Academy, and public health officials in Hawaii, we were able to conduct the project successfully with the goals we had set in the beginning.

Peace is difficult to achieve; it requires strategy, investment of time, dedication, resources, and beliefs, alongside community-building. Most importantly, peace requires action. Creating peace means that we are committed to the next generation, a collaborative wrap-around approach where all are invested. Peace is a hope for a better future, a societal harmony in the absence of violence. We believe that our project has the potential for contributing to long-term peace. That is due to the fact that the participants of our workshops were all young people under the age of eighteen who have the potential to better the society they live in. As conflict and identity issue points were clearly pointed out and resolution mechanisms suggested, the young people of Hawaii can use the resources discussed to create a long-term peaceful community. This project has certainly had a big impact on both groups, us and the students in Hawaii. We believe that both sides have not only a better understanding of the different cultures, but also are very similar, even though they are separated by two oceans and two continents. The new cultural understanding, combined with the new experiences, has taught students to think outside the box of Hawaiian culture. We also believe that this new understanding of similarities will show students that no matter where you come from, what the color of your skin is, what your religion is, there is a very high possibility that you have something in common, even if it's something as random as taking your shoes off before entering one's house, which is both present in the Hawaiian and Balkan cultures. We anticipate that our group will continue cooperation with the Le Jardin Academy and its students. By doing so, every new generation will be able to either continue or improve the existing conflict resolution mechanisms and build on them. Furthermore, as part of the cultural exchange, Le Jardin students, as well as their professor, are planning to visit the Balkan region as part of the Impact term as a cultural sharing opportunity, most probably collaborating and cooperating with the students of the project and the United World College in Mostar.

This project taught us to appreciate the differences between cultures and the way of living. We've had a chance to compare our cultures and recognize many similarities, as well as expand our views on differences. It was interesting to compare two completely different sides of the world and find out that they have so many similarities. Saying this, one of our main strategies for healing was nature. We've learned the importance of natural resources in Hawaiian culture, unlike in our cultures where natural resources are important but are not used as a source of inspiration and source of healing. Nature is considered as healing because of the conductive support to the earth and while spending time in nature, we get reconnected with our power source - the earth. Being in nature allows us to focus our senses: we are not occupied with technology or hearing all the noises of the world, but rather focusing on our mental and physical wellbeing. We've learned that the longer we stay out, the better the benefits. While we slowly integrated into the Hawaiian community, we've learned to appreciate natural circumstances which in our culture can be seen as negative. Our favorite Hawaiian saying is: "Rain is not a bad circumstance; it's a blessing." This has really impacted and changed our way of thinking, such that we should appreciate everything that nature has to offer and that the unexpected circumstances have a deeper meaning and value.

Doing the Project for Peace is no easy task, even in "normal" conditions. This year's generation of PFP grantees has experienced many challenges with the global pandemic, but we did it. Our project was affected in many ways, but we have found other and more creative ways to adapt to the problems. Our project did also have a small internal virtual part in April, where we presented guest lectures to students at our partner institution. When later talking to students, they said that the in-person experience was better, more immersive, but that they still managed to learn and grow through the virtual lectures in April. There are many challenges in any project virtual or in person, and it is our job to learn, adapt, and overcome them.

Tajra Karabasic: "Our cultural exchange project was a truly amazing experience. We had a chance to learn about Hawaiian culture and live the way they do, which in my opinion is one of the best opportunities a person can get. However, the most valuable thing that we've gained from this project is our new friends, and I truly hope that they will have a chance to visit us in Bosnia as well!"

Nikoleta Ivanovic: "Balkans and Hawaii, although geographically distant, share various similarities that I am grateful we got the chance to experience. I hope in the near future the friends we made there will get the chance to experience the Balkan region and all its wonders in person."

Benjamin Selimotic: “Our cultural exchange was a truly amazing experience. We had a chance to learn about Hawaiian culture and live the way they do, experiencing a culture firsthand. For me personally, this is the best way of learning about any culture. Understanding the differences and similarities between our two cultures showed me that there are more similarities than differences that bring people together. Lastly, I hope that this is not the end of this project, but merely the beginning of a long-lasting friendship between Hawaii and Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

**Team leader:**

Benjamin Selimotic

Email: [selimotic.b@gmail.com](mailto:selimotic.b@gmail.com)

**Team members:**

Nikoleta Ivanovic

Email: [nikoleta.ivanovic987@gmail.com](mailto:nikoleta.ivanovic987@gmail.com)

Tajra Karabasic

Email: [tajra.karabasic@gmail.com](mailto:tajra.karabasic@gmail.com)

Photographs

