Introduction

In the summer of 2010, I propose to set up a literacy project for young women in two slums of Buenos Aires. The goal of the project is to empower the women intellectually so that they can instill in their children the importance of reading and the importance of an education.

Background

In Argentina, a *villa miseria*, or “neighborhood of misery,” is just one of several types of shantytown. In Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, city agencies estimate that between 300,000 and 500,000, out of a total 3 million inhabitants, reside in such slums. Precarious life in the villas is exacerbated by the nation’s economic situation. The destructive economic crash of December 2001 sent tremors of social unrest that continue to impact Argentina’s citizens today. A country dedicated to workers’ rights under Peronism in the 1950s now shows an enormous gap between the wealthy and the poor, who are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, violence, and desperation.

In these shantytowns, young mothers are among those individuals who have the most difficult time finding work. Teenage girls who become pregnant usually leave the formal educational system, which renders them undesirable candidates in the already scant job market. After giving birth, they must stay home to raise their children and returning to school is oftentimes not a feasible option, even if night classes and alternative schooling are offered. Without education or means of earning a living, young mothers cannot be self-sufficient. They are forced to rely on others, especially on boyfriends or husbands, some of whom are abusive or addicted to drugs, and are thus constrained to inferior positions in both their homes and in society. They find themselves stuck in the boundaries of their slum neighborhood, unable to find reprieve from its violent shocks and worried about the safety of their babies.

During my fall semester abroad in Buenos Aires, I shadowed a social worker who worked with an anti-crime government initiative called Programa Comunidades Vulnerables (PCV; “Program for Vulnerable Communities”) in two shantytowns of Lanús, Greater Buenos Aires: Villa Jardín and Monte Chingolo. I met several young mothers in their teens and early twenties who love and want to support their children but do not know how. Their favorite activity of the PCV was short story-writing and the discussion that followed, as they were allowed the rare opportunity to exercise their intellectual and creative aspirations. I learned that writing fiction allowed them to sort out their own experiences, ideals, and beliefs; it also provided a brief mental escape from their harsh reality.

Project

I want to collaborate with PCV Lanús to set up literacy workshops specifically for young women: we will read passages from various texts and discuss them; we will write our own creative responses to prompts; we will set up mini-libraries in the community centers where the meetings will take place. The topics will be ones that are relevant to these women’s lives: motherhood, womanhood, class struggles, etc. I would like to work with 20 women—10 women from Villa Jardín and 10 from Monte Chingolo, both high-violence areas. PCV participants are offered small monthly stipends ($60USD/$255ARG) to participate in various workshops that strive to prevent crime, encourage integration into society, and offer job assistance. I will use Davis Projects for Peace funds to provide stipends to the women to compensate them for their participation and to cover any small costs they might encounter (such as childcare) while they are attending the program.

Through their participation in this group, the women will be allowed to express themselves in ways they normally would not be able to, considering their marginalized roles in the community and, oftentimes, at home. They will work on their reading and writing skills and be introduced to significant literature, which will give them confidence and improve the way they view themselves. In the long run, these necessary skills can increase their potential for employment and translate into better parenting. They will teach their children the importance of reading and writing, as well as self-expression and empathy, so that in the future their children can focus on their education and leave the omnipresent cycle of poverty.
Qualifications

At Williams College, I am an English literature major and Spanish minor. I speak Spanish fluently; as a part of my study abroad requirements, I wrote a 40-page paper in Spanish that examined the relationship between the activities of PCV and the initiative’s goal of social integration. During my month-long term as a volunteer, I established relationships with many of the young women who participated in PCV, as well as with Susana Mediavilla, the certified social worker of the Ministry of Justice who manages the PCV workshops in Villa Jardín and Monte Chingololo. She will gladly serve again as my gatekeeper to both neighborhoods and will drive me from her house in the center of Lanús to the community halls where PCV workshops take session. Other volunteers who regularly work with Susana Mediavilla, such as Marcela Vietri, a postgraduate student of theater, will be present to participate in our proposed workshop.

Logistics

Susana meets with the participants for two-hour blocks in both locations on Mondays and Thursdays, so I will be joining her in Lanús on those days. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, I plan to meet with the women in a rented space in a church in Buenos Aires Capital, for three-hour blocks. As mothers and wives, the women have responsibilities to tend to at home and cannot spend all of their time in the city. Because Susana can only supervise me on the two given days, I cannot safely enter the communities on the other days. Thus, my alternate meeting location is in the Capital, where I will be residing, and not in Greater Buenos Aires. Lanús borders the Capital, however, so that transportation should take no longer than half an hour by car. I will provide transportation so that the women can come to the church, with their children if necessary.

I plan to stay in Buenos Aires for nine weeks. In the first week, I will finalize all the logistical details, such as the hours that I will be renting the church, as well as hiring a bus for the hours when the women will need transportation to come to the church. From the second week onward, I will be meeting with the women four times per week in the workshop, where we will read, write, illustrate, and share. In my time off, I will be preparing the material—various texts, short stories, poems, excerpts from novels—to bring to the women. Around the fifth week, I will start focusing on the two tangible attributes of the workshop: the installation of small libraries, filled with children’s books, for the kids of the Villa Jardín and Monte Chingololo; and the printing of a collection of all the pieces written during the project. With both the libraries and the record of their writing, the women will be left with physical, lasting reminders of the work that they have accomplished.

Objectives

Before I leave, I will prepare packets of texts and prompt questions for the women so that any of the volunteers who have participated in the project will be able to conduct the workshop in the future. I will work with the volunteers as well as Susana to identify ways to continue literary activities in the twice-weekly PCV meetings in Villa Jardín and Lanús. In addition, having already met many of the young women who will participate in the program, I know that several of them would gladly lead discussions in the future. With the help of Susana, the volunteers, and the participants themselves, our literacy group can sustain itself. I will add to the libraries that we will install in both locations with any funds that are left over. In addition, I have been in touch with Brenda Peyrera, the Academic Director of the SIT study abroad group in Argentina, who has told me that there are various organizations willing to donate books. Through phone and email contact, I will periodically check on the libraries’ status, and I will find other sources of book donations from the United States as well.

With the help of a Davis Projects for Peace grant, I could help the young mothers of Villa Jardín and Monte Chingololo to discover that they can hope for a better life and that it is possible to work toward one. To this end, I hope to share with them the great power of literature. In reading, writing, and even creating books, they will feel self-confident and empowered and create intellectually and emotionally safe havens in a harsh external world for both themselves and their children. They will pass on the importance of literacy and education to their children in hope that they may be able to leave behind the devastating cycle of poverty and hopelessness.