SECTION ONE

a) I traveled to Buenos Aires, Argentina, to conduct a literacy workshop for a group of young adults from two slum neighborhoods (called “villas” in Spanish). My main goals were to write a book of short stories with them, and to provide a safe space with books within the neighborhood, all in order to emphasize the importance of reading and of education in general.

b) I did not use funds from any other sources to conduct my project.

c) I ended up spending the bulk of June and July trying to organize my meetings with the young adults so that we could work on our stories. In the middle portions of my stay, I went around Buenos Aires on foot, by subway, and by taxi to collect individual donations of books from various contacts, in order to furnish a small library space in these villas. In the last part of the summer, I designed the children’s book that we ultimately printed, and worked on distributing the 500 copies to various organizations and schools all over the country.

During the first month, I faced many practical challenges; nearly every aspect of the original proposal that I’d submitted to the Davis Projects for Peace program was rendered invalid or problematic. Firstly, the primary contact for my project, a social worker named Susana, had unexpected health problems and was unable to accompany me to the villas. Susana’s inability to drive me to Villa Jardín and Monte Chingolo, the neighborhoods in question, meant that I had to commute to an unsafe part of town by myself. In Villa Jardín, Susana and I managed to recruit a young woman named Maria to serve as my gatekeeper, who I paid 150 pesos per month to accompany me from my bus stop. Given the racial differences between the people of the villas and myself, it was always obvious that I was a foreigner. As a woman traveling alone, I had to be especially guarded, which was emotionally taxing over the weeks.

Another difficulty was the scarcity of participants. I was working with a municipal government effort to reduce juvenile crime, called Program for Vulnerable Communities. The system involved the municipal government paying the participants of this Program a small stipend, which was their incentive to come every week. Having shadowed Susana during my previous semester abroad in Buenos Aires, I had seen at least a dozen young mothers come to the public soup kitchen where I would also conduct my workshop. I had not expected any changes to this city-regulated welfare system, and thus I had anticipated that these young mothers would continue to attend weekly and participate in my workshop. Yet the city government recently rendered inactive the original social plans that had stimulated the people of the villa to attend workshops like mine. I ended up working with a much smaller group of people than expected, and only a few of them were young mothers, the original proposal’s target group.

Fortunately, such challenges did not deter us from achieving the goals of my original proposal. With the eight young adults who participated in my workshops, I put together a children’s book of ten stories, all dealing with children’s rights in Argentina. Called Por una vida digna (For a life with dignity), it is intended to be used as educational material, especially in other marginalized areas of Argentina. Each story deals with a specific children’s right and contains a positive moral for young children to understand. The participants, ages 16-22, were urged to think of the children in their family – either their own kids or siblings – and encouraged to write stories with the types of messages they wanted to share. Every story contains two questions for discussion, as well as specific references to their corresponding articles in the Argentine Constitution, or the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child, which Argentina has ratified.

We printed 500 copies of the book, and they have been distributed not only to various locations within the capital city of Buenos Aires, but to other provinces of Argentina. I sent 150 copies to a children’s rights activist on the Argentine-Bolivian border who works with issues of child-trafficking, and who has enthusiastically agreed to use the books as educational material in all the classrooms of the area. I sent 100 copies to the Toba community (an “indigenous” community) in the northern province of El Chaco. The rest of the books are being distributed among other villas in Buenos Aires and among various schools near Villa Jardín and Monte Chingolo, in order to show other youths of the area what their
neighbors have accomplished. Finally, I also left copies with SIT: Argentina, a human rights and social movements-based study abroad program that will use the books in their community service activities every semester. I could not have accomplished much this summer without Susana, who helped me as much as she could despite her health problems, and Nuria Pena, the academic director of SIT: Argentina, who helped me edit all the stories as well as find organizations that could benefit from our book. Both women helped me pro-bono, although I did thank them each with a bottle of wine before I left.

It is difficult to measure the exact number of people who will benefit from the publication of *Por una vida digna*, but it is safe to say that hundreds of schoolchildren all across Argentina will be reading them in the classroom. These are kids from impoverished regions of Buenos Aires or Argentina in general, who are not well informed about their rights as citizens, so it is particularly important for them to know that their rights matter just as much as anyone else’s. In terms of definite numbers, the 600+ books I collected for Monte Chingolo’s library space, as well as the computer I purchased with Projects for Peace funds for the cultural center in Villa Jardín, will serve everyone in the two neighborhoods.

Finally, the eight young adults from Villa Jardín and Monte Chingolo are very proud of the work they have accomplished, of reading their names printed on a book, of knowing that they are capable of contributing to society. Especially considering the fact that half of them had already dropped out of secondary school, they have every right to be proud of themselves. For all the younger kids of the neighborhood, the participants of my workshops are clear role models: during our formal presentation of the book in Monte Chingolo, Jonny, the 19-year old who is a construction worker by day and high school student by night, told all the younger children of the neighborhood that just like the protagonist in his story, they should all stay in school, “because education is the most important thing in the world.”

SECTION TWO

a) “Peace” can mean many different things, but within the context of my summer in Villa Jardín and Monte Chingolo, it means to motivate youth to think of the rights they have; to use their creativity; and to write fiction to explore other worlds.

The kids in the villa are not any less human than are middle or upper class members of Buenos Aires, but it is difficult for them to understand this when they face so much discrimination for their neighborhood of residence, for the color of their skin, for their physical appearance. Also, more than anything, the literary workshops were an immediate source of peace; each session was a respite from the reality of life in the villas: urban poverty, drug abuse, unemployment, illiteracy, young parenthood. In the long-term, the book is a tool with which these young people can challenge others’ unfavorable preconceptions about them, challenge their own preconceptions about themselves (“I’m powerless to do anything because I am from a poor villa”), and feel confident that they have contributed to a work that will help hundreds of other children across the country. I wrote in the prologue that for various circumstances, many of the youths of Villa Jardín and Monte Chingolo had to leave their childhoods behind at an early age. Thus they understand more than others the importance of childhood, especially for children from marginalized sectors. That they can draw from their own experiences so that others can learn from them is a remarkable thing.

My experience with Projects for Peace has been powerful and invaluable. As a resident of Queens, New York City, I have always been somewhat socially conscious and aware of differences among people – class, racial, ethnic, religious. Yet in Buenos Aires I was confronted with truths about poverty and discrimination in a way I never had to face in my home city. In NYC, rarely do I walk so close to housing projects, and certainly not alone. In NYC, it is not often that I interact closely with non-college bound youth or with people who’ve had to leave school. But in Buenos Aires, I befriended the kids of the villas – kids who’ve lost cousins to stray bullets in the same neighborhood, kids who suffer because of family members’ drug addictions, kids for whom surviving each day is quite literally a tremendous fight. What is important is that I realized early on that these are phenomena that are not unique to the villas of Buenos Aires, New York, or any other major metropolis in the States, has its share of the same issues.

b) I can definitely say that my time in Buenos Aires has opened my eyes to the social parallels that exist in my own country. It seems that I have developed more of a perspective about my own home, and ideas about how to better it, only after I have left it for a time. – Ellen Song
Reading in the Slums / Leer en las villas: Argentina/Williams College
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