Introduction and Rationale for Project

Hidden in the bayou of central Louisiana lies the small town of Colfax, which is the sight of the largest mass murder in United States History. The Colfax Massacre, as it is known, left 150 freedmen slain in their attempt to exercise their right to vote. The air of segregation and oppression still holds the town in its grip. A railroad track separates white Colfax from black Colfax, but poverty and a lack of opportunities unites the town’s population of 1,659. Colfax is devoid of opportunities, with 89% of its residents having to commute 30 minutes or more to find work and only nine% of the population received some form of higher education or training beyond high school. The average income per capita is $10,155, with 41% of the population living below the poverty line, including 60% of those under the age of 18. Colfax is a persistently poor community which has led to a permanent underclass.

In Colfax young girls are extremely at risk. The teen pregnancy rate in Colfax is 17.4%, more than four times the national average. This fact alone places them at a higher risk of living in poverty. Additionally, Colfax has no resources for its youth; there are no nonprofits, after school programs or community centers. These youth are entrapped by the cycle of poverty, confined to their rural community and lack the ability to see beyond it. However, they are not powerless and must understand that they have the freedom to see beyond their current situations.

Peace is often defined as the absence of struggle or conflict and we want to free these girls from the struggle by giving them access to the resources which can give them the freedom to see beyond their circumstances. We propose to implement a project for peace in Colfax, Louisiana that will empower girls preparing to enter the 7th grade through encouraging ten girls to pursue higher education by providing them access to resources through an eight week camp and lifetime mentorship.

Scope of the Project

The main goal of this project is to prepare these girls for college or some form of higher education and foster in them the belief that they have the ability to achieve outside of the constraints of their environment. Therefore, upon completion each student will receive a “vision packet” which includes a HP laptop complete with educational math, science, English, and ACT help software, a TI89 calculator and an inspirational book of poetry.

We will partner with the Southern Baptist Minister’s Alliance (SBMA) as a community resource. SBMA is the only working community organization located in Colfax. There are currently no other nonprofits located in Colfax. There is also no community center or schools within the Colfax city limits. Therefore SBMA will provide a number of church classrooms that we may use for free space. They will also provide vans to aid in transporting the girls as necessary.

We will also partner with the Grant Parish school district, in particular Colfax Elementary, to identify and contact our targeted population (students who suffer from generational poverty and a family history of a lack of education). Sixth grade teachers at Colfax Elementary have agreed to identify the students that will best fit our criteria and whom they feel will best benefit from the program. Teachers will be asked to complete a student evaluation form for each student, outlining the academic skills that need strengthening and the major problem areas of each student. Teachers will also be asked to set three reachable academic achievement goals for each student and a plan of action that we can enact during the program. We want the girls to reach these goals by the end the program.

Our final partner will be with the middle school Counselor at Grant Middle School who has agreed to make bi-weekly visits, to provide resources and give the girls a sense of present day hope since she will be their counselor for the next two years. This will also help the counselor and the girls build a relationship that is important for the girls’ future success. The school district has also agreed to provide additional materials, guidance and volunteers.
Throughout the course of eight weeks (May 30-July 24, 2011), we will meet four times a week (9 a.m-2 p.m.) with a cohort of 10 girls preparing to enter the 7th grade and conduct a number of workshops, seminars and tutoring sessions that will provide them with a sense of empowerment and an access to resources. The days will be split into two segments: academic work and personal work. We will spend the academic segment working toward the academic goals set for each girl with innovative and creative approaches that will instill a love and value for education. We will spend the personal segment engaging the girls in discussions and workshops that focus on developing positive self-esteem, self-worth and empowerment.

Over the course of eight weeks we will take the girls on eight day trips to local colleges and universities, art galleries, museums and wildlife preserves in order to expose the girls to a world outside their rural community. We want them to experience art and culture as well as the math and sciences to allow them to see beyond what they have deemed possible.

The girls will be asked to organize a community project. They will select from three pre-determined options while also being allowed to develop their own projects such as organizing a clean-up of their neighborhood, conducting a fundraiser for a charity of choice or helping an elderly member of their community. We will help them identify attainable goals and conduct this project so the girls will see firsthand that they have the power to create change in their own community.

Our program will also feature a parent resource component. We will conduct bi-weekly parent “dinner and a meeting” led by teachers, counselors, principals and former educators. During these meetings parents will also be provided with updates about their daughters’ progress and chances to view projects that the girls are working on. The goal of these meetings is to foster in the parents the belief that they can and must be advocates for their child’s future. Parents with limited financial resources have lower efficacy beliefs. Therefore we must build within the parents a sense of efficacy and confidence in their power as parents. Research shows that parents, who view themselves as competent, despite economic adversity, tend to set higher goals for their children and become more committed to achieving those goals. Parental involvement will improve the girls’ chances for success. These meetings will be held in the evening and a meal will be provided to further encourage the parents to participate. The meals will also decrease parental stress around having to provide a meal for the family after work as the girls’ younger siblings will also be welcomed at these meetings.

Women from the local church will host weekly teas and book clubs. These events will build solidarity among the girls and members of the community. We will all meet every Wednesday evening to have tea and discuss the book Red River. Red River is an Oprah Book Club novel that was written by a woman of color and former resident of Colfax. The novel gives accounts of the Colfax Massacre and focuses on the resilience of the former slaves as they fight for equality and the right to an education. This book will provide the girls with a sense of pride and history while also building a connection between them and their mentors.

Sustainability and Outcomes

This project will do more than just provide the girls with eight weeks of resources; it will also provide the girls with the tools needed to be successful in life. Our partnering agency, SBMA intends to integrate the ten girls into a tutoring program that will start after our project ends and continue for the next five years. The girls will also continue to be mentored by us as we plan to conduct yearly check-ins every summer until the summer after the girls’ 12th grade year to make sure that the girls always feel supported.

We believe that within every child is a seed of greatness that must be nourished. This program would do just that; nourish within ten girls the belief that they have the power, despite their environment, to achieve greatness. When this project is complete we will have empowered ten girls and provided them with resources and privileges that they would not have been able to afford.