



BUILDING BRIDGES



"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

- Mahatma Gandhi

KIDS TO KIDS LINKS WITH THE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

In 2005, four young girls (10 and 12 years old at the time) were inspired to figure out a way to help children who had fewer opportunities than themselves. Julia and Amelia Haney and Emily and Sarah Nuss are the motivated young women who started Kids to Kids. Their mission is to provide kids in the US with a way to help kids in the developing world achieve their athletic, artistic, and educational aspirations. Initially, the project started by collecting supplies and raising money to send to the Dominican Republic, a country where their families had already been working. However, with the help of Christa Thoeresz, now the Executive Director, 11 students raised enough money to travel to the Dominican Republic and help 5 schools in the region. After the trip, the group set up a board of directors, a kids advisory board, and a strategic plan. Within a short period of time,

schools and student groups all over the United States became involved, holding fundraisers and events to help support Kids to Kids projects.

Although Kids to Kids was not originally connected with the Peace Corps, Thoeresz felt that the organization would be "an ideal connection to the developing world." Kids to Kids now works with the Partnership Program to support Volunteer projects in the Dominican Republic, Belize, and Costa Rica. "It has been a really powerful experience for me and for the kids in the US that are involved. The kids (10 to 16 years old) read the applications (and visit some of the communities annually) and learn a lot about the countries and communities where we work."

JULIA'S STORY - HER FIRST KIDS TO KIDS TRIP

The concept of poverty was difficult for me to fully grasp until I was thrown head over heels into it. True, I knew there were people in the developing world, people who were in devastating circumstances. I was thankful for what I had, but I was not well informed about the conditions these people have to deal with in everyday life. When my dad and my best friend's mom started a charity for Latin America, I wanted to help, but was unaware of where to begin. So my sister Amelia, our friends Emily and Sarah, and I began talking about how we could help. We began by collecting supplies to send to the Dominican Republic.

After several years of collecting supplies, we persuaded our parents to let us go to where we had been shipping sports equipment. After months of working to make money for the journey, we went to the Dominican Republic for our first trip as Kids to Kids. Once we arrived, we helped the organization, Infante Sano, with a temporary health clinic in the Bateys, one of the poorest areas in the country. They are made up of sugar plantations where mostly Haitians work and earn very low wages. I was completely unprepared for what we would encounter that day.

It was simple at one level – we were in charge of distributing the supplies we had collected to the people who came

through the clinic. But out in these terribly poor villages, full of folks who had walked long distances in the blistering heat just to see us, we ran out of supplies. We had no more to give. All

of the bags we had brought were turned upside down and it was clear that we had given everything we had away. We stripped off any extra clothes, emptied our back packs and then gave away the backpacks. We had nothing, absolutely nothing, left. These people were begging us for simple everyday items: a toothbrush, a pencil, a notebook. It was heartbreaking. We were unable to provide these things that we have such easy access to at home. However, I cannot put into words the happiness felt by the people who received some of the items that we brought. But even more than the material things, it was the notion that someone from a world beyond them cared about them and wanted to help. Happiness radiated from them, at the seemingly miniscule gift of a pair of socks, and it was contagious. The

feeling I got from being able to help these people was incredible, and that's why I do it. This is the scene I picture whenever I catch myself sounding ungrateful. This is why Kids to Kids is important to me - simple gifts, and the caring they represent, can change people's lives.



Christa Thoeresz (Executive Director) with Julia Haney

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TOGOLESE GIRLS - BELIEVING IN THEMSELVES AND THEIR FUTURE

This past September, thirty Togolese girls left their villages and traveled to the capital of the Plateaux Region. They came from different areas, ethnic groups and economic situations for a week-long camp dedicated to the one thing they all have in common: being a woman. The girls spent Take Our Daughters to Work week in sessions dedicated to leadership, communication, self-confidence, gender equality and a variety of other topics. The days were long, and the sessions intense, but in spite of how tired the group of girls felt, "rather than going to sleep, they stayed up every evening talking with each other," said Volunteer and project organizer Natalie Best.

The girls, a group of students from middle and high schools in the Plateaux Region, convened under the leadership of four Peace Corps Volunteers and two Togolese counterparts. Throughout the week they were introduced to successful Togolese women including a paralegal, referee/athlete, midwife, pediatrician, professor, and University student. These successful women encouraged the girls to continue their schooling, and to stop limiting themselves based on their gender. In one poignant session, girls buried the phrase "I cannot", pledging to believe in themselves and their potential for future success. In a country where female school dropout rates are high, enrollment rates are low, and many women never learn to read,



write, or even speak the country's national language, such affirmations can truly shape the way young women view their roles within society.

Field trips during the week included a visit to an AIDS clinic, a soccer stadium (where the girls played a game refereed by a female) and a local Internet Cafe. "Seeing the looks of awe on the girls' faces as they got their first glimpses of the Internet made it all worthwhile," said Best. The girls also visited a woman living with HIV/AIDS, an experience that illustrated the reality of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and helped them to understand the effect it is having on both their country and its people.

In past years, Take Our Daughters to Work Week has proven a successful project in regions throughout Togo, and this camp was no exception. These girls came together to share their stories and experiences, and at the close of the week took the stories they had heard and the lessons they had learned back home. "We have already heard communities express gratitude for the ideas their participants brought back to share with them. Each participant will surely share their knowledge with friends and family," Best said. "There is no doubt that a transfer of knowledge and skills took place and that those ideas will continue to be disseminated throughout the region."

EQUAL EDUCATION FOR ALL ETHNICITIES IN MACEDONIA

Emin Eminov is driven by a vision where every Turkish and Roma child in Macedonia receives a productive and equal education. However, as the Macedonian educational system continues to improve, ethnic minorities are largely disregarded. This has contributed to cycles of poverty and desperation among Turkish and Roma communities across the country. Eminov, a local educator and the President of KUD Kardeslik, a Macedonian Turkish cultural NGO, believed that one solution was to provide marginalized students consistent access to education through the School Children's Fund project. The project consisted of two parts. The first part provided twenty "at-risk" students with supplies such as shoes, lunch money, and school books. The second part was a training for community leaders to learn how to create fundraising programs, effective marketing strategies, and sustainable business practices.



In spite of his inspirational dedication, Eminov and his community did not have all of the resources necessary to make this project a reality. However, with the help of two Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs), Shaela Nay and Anne Withers, and the Peace Corps Partnership Program, the School Children's Fund was able to get started. With community resources and gen-

erous donations given through the Partnership Program, essential items such as shoes, schoolbooks, lunches, and backpacks were purchased for the participating students. Also, the project developed comprehensive fundraising plans to ensure that the School Children's Fund would be sustainable and regularly replenished through community support. Finally, Eminov and his NGO utilized the knowledge of the PCVs and local business community to learn project development, management, and sustainable budget practices, as well as crucial computer literacy and advocacy techniques.

Despite the constant support and passion of the PCVs and community leaders, the project did experience some challenges. For example, local primary school directors were initially resistant to enrolling additional ethnic Turkish and Roma children because they required classes to be taught in Turkish. Though ethnic tension is still an obstacle throughout the education system, this project is a start to ending the discriminatory practices in Macedonian education. Through the School Children's Fund project and the generosity of Partnership Program donors, Macedonian children of all ethnic backgrounds are beginning to build a hopeful future with the help of their own community.