

Building a Brighter Future for Kids at the Amazing Grace Children's Center

A Project for Peace by Alexander Tedeschi and Shazia Shahnaz, St. Lawrence University

Peace can be defined in a variety of ways and has different meanings to different people. Some would say that peace is the absence of conflict and violence; others envision a tranquil place where one has clarity of mind to contemplate their role in the world. Peace can be as simple as giving an abandoned child hope for a bright future. We believe in creating a sustainable peace through education, knowledge, and the healthy upbringing of children, who are our future and the future of mankind. It is important to foster a well-rounded education which will enlighten children and empower them to choose the path of peace and diplomacy over violence when they become the next leaders of the world. Having a positive influence on children now can help to build a sustainable world peace in the future.

Our project links the past with the present by taking a previous experience to the next level. In the process of brainstorming ideas for the design of the project, Shazia thought back to the two years she spent at Waterford Kamhlaba UWCSA in Swaziland. As an active volunteer in the UWC HIV/AIDS community service group, she helped to stage a play for kids at the Amazing Grace Children's Shelter in Malelane, a rural village in neighboring South Africa. In South Africa, there are an abundance of children who come from disadvantaged homes with abject living conditions. Prevalence of HIV/AIDS has torn apart many families, leaving children orphaned without any kind of social support. Other children take to the streets to escape domestic violence in a post-apartheid society of instability. Amazing Grace, named after its founder Grace Mashaba, is one of the few grassroots organizations whose object is to provide a safe shelter and living space for these children and other disadvantaged youth in the community. The shelter also provides counseling, care, and security especially for women and girls who are subjected to domestic violence and kids who are HIV positive. Meeting Grace was an inspiration to Shazia, who admired her selfless dedication toward a virtuous cause. The seed of inspiration has flowered, and now we view Projects for Peace as a great opportunity to contribute to the shelter's humanitarian mission.

Housing about seventy children and young adults, the shelter receives minimal assistance from the government and suffers from a severe lack of funds. Scarcity of resources prevents the development of creative projects, which takes away from the educational and wellness initiative of the organization, depriving kids of healthy recreational activities and means of self-expression. Our project for peace intends to make the shelter a better place to live, where the children and youth can learn to discover their own innate creativity and express themselves outside academics. We intend to inspire these children and spark a motivation to create something for themselves and acquire good habits as an alternative to choosing a destructive lifestyle in the streets involving drugs and gangs. By giving the children these tools and helping to enlighten them, we hope to promote peace and have a positive impact on these future leaders. Ideally, the children will spread this concept of peace to their families when they become adults and will initiate positive changes in their communities. Thus, the cycle of peace would begin with the foundation of education.

We propose to spend about one month at the shelter in Malelane, South Africa. After contacting Grace Mashaba and giving her a basic outline of our plan, we received a positive response and permission to go ahead with the project. Our project will be divided into four components, each addressing a different aspect of growth and potential outcome:

Intellectual growth: This part of our project will be focused on the care of younger children who do not yet attend school. Developmental psychology research shows that young children who are more stimulated in their early years of development perform better in school than those who are not. Life in an under-funded children's shelter may not be an ideal place to get the intellectual stimulation needed to succeed in school, which could make them fall behind. We propose to provide books,

puzzles, and toys that are appropriate for intellectual stimulation of pre-school children and engage with them using these tools. The second part of this component will focus on school-age children. We plan on providing interactive games such as Scrabble, chess, Sudoku, Monopoly, Twister, Uno, and playing cards. These dynamic games and recreational activities will help develop social skills and provide intellectual stimulation. We also propose to start a library at the center. This implies introducing basic books such as an encyclopedia, the world Atlas, dictionaries, classic novels, story books, and even videos to a designated area of the facility. In addition, we will include literature devoted to the history of South Africa (including apartheid and colonialism) as well as other books that are regionally and culturally appropriate so that the children will have access to their own heritage. All books and materials will be in English as it is an official language of South Africa, and early proficiency in English will help the children should they pursue higher studies and work/study outside of the country. We hope that establishing a library will help to spread intercultural awareness and generate a sense of intellectually curiosity and that children will use the books as both a reference for their schoolwork and as a hobby for reading in their free time.

Creative growth: The shelter in Malelane already has a sewing center and a garden. We plan to obtain supplies (sewing kits, gardening tools) that would enhance the productivity and the working conditions in the center and the garden. We also plan on providing art supplies and other creative accessories for the center. Such resources can potentially turn into activities that we will host where children will create a work of art based on a theme or idea (e.g. what is peace?). We believe that children in troubled states of mind can use arts and crafts in imaginative ways to express themselves and discover their own talent. These expressions have therapeutic value as they are a healthy outlet for stress and anxiety.

Physical growth: Physical growth and fitness are equally important to the intellectual and creative components. Exercising the mind and body together is key to healthy living. We plan on providing some sports equipment (e.g. soccer balls, cricket equipment, volleyball) for team sports which develop good communication skills, require cooperation, and build social skills.

HIV/AIDS awareness: The final piece to the puzzle is reinforcing the AIDS/HIV awareness mission of Amazing Grace by donating relevant brochures, booklets and posters and other information which can be acquired from the Center of Disease Control and Prevention. Although we are not certified to teach about HIV/AIDS, we hope that providing these universal materials (i.e. non-culture specific materials) will aid the shelter's purpose of creating awareness within the facility and the surrounding community.

Tentative daily schedule: Morning (9-12 am): Spend time with younger children not yet attending school, read stories, teach arts and crafts; Afternoon (1-3 pm): Engage with kids returning from school, introduce games, help with homework, bonding interaction; Late afternoon (3-6 pm): Physical activities, videos, reading time; Other time: Help out with running the shelter.

Expectations: We expect this project to help the children's center become a more welcoming place for children to live and grow. We hope to introduce elements into the facility that are conducive to a healthy lifestyle and fostering a well-rounded education. We also expect to advance the center's sustainability by providing permanent resources like books and gardening tools which can be used in the future. As active mentors at a local elementary school for the past year, we would both apply our skills, knowledge and experience from mentoring locally to working with children in the shelter. This includes offering moral support, advice about life, being a shoulder to lean on, or just being a friend who listens. Most importantly, we expect to make a positive and lasting impact on the children in the center by giving them the opportunity to express themselves through art, grow intellectually by having access to books, and develop social skills through team sports. We hope to construct a better and brighter future for children in the center, who are the future of South Africa. We expect that our efforts will project a broader message of peace and create a positive cycle of peace for all, beginning with the inspiration and opportunities offered to a small group of children.