Stories of Engagement

We all have our own unique path towards shaping a more just and compassionate world. Alumni, community partners, faculty, staff, and students, share your story here! Simply email your story (250-500 words in length), image, slide show, video, etc. to Jennifer Magee (jmagee1) by the 1st of the month. New stories will be added to this page by the 15th of each month.

Building an Ecosystem for Social Change

A treasure hunt across Ho Chi Minh City gathers more than 100 youths to raise awareness about issues facing HIV children. Pictured above, the children form the shape of an AIDS ribbon in a culminating activity.

Orphans are an underserved population in Vietnam. The total number of orphans under 18 years old, according to UNICEF (2009), is 1.4 million. The actual number, however, can be much larger because most orphans live in smaller foster homes, which are often unregistered and numerous, and on the streets. Knowledge of this population is largely undocumented among Vietnamese government agencies, NGOs and INGOs that serve this population. Orphans come from all walks of life, but most are orphaned because their parents cannot afford their education, food and shelter. A large number have a family history of violence and alcohol abuse. Many have spent time living on the streets, fending for and supporting themselves. A small percentage of the orphan population is also living with HIV/AIDS.

Minh Vo’s Lang Project, Life Skill and Mentorship Program for Young Orphans in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, stemmed from his desire to pioneer change in the lives of this vulnerable population. At first, Minh piloted a mentoring and character development program located at a single orphanage – the first of its kind in Vietnam – with 110 orphans from age 5 to 25. Since summer 2014, Minh has been engaged in replicating the volunteer-as-mentor model he piloted as part of this initiative with an organization called Project Sugar. Project Sugar, a 6-year-old
volunteer corps, has more than 1500 alumni volunteers and strong relationships with more than 15 children homes. Says Minh, “Like my project, Project Sugar seeks to improve social outcomes for orphans, but they do so by mobilizing public support for orphanage children in Ho Chi Minh City while my prior work focused primarily upon capacity building among volunteers and program development...They were therefore my ideal partner as I could turn this volunteer corps into a mentor corps for orphans!” Looking back, Minh reflects, “Since the beginning of my project, I have graduated from the role of a service provider at one particular orphanage to an ecosystem-building role, which will support many more orphans across Vietnam and leave a legacy for the next generation of youth entrepreneurs.” Minh’s vision for the organization from 2016 onwards is to become the largest volunteer-as-mentor corps with a sustainable presence in more than 20 orphanages in Vietnam.

Project Sugar

Son Jarocho in Philadelphia

Yared Portillo ‘15 and Maria Castaneda ‘18 were recently awarded a grant through the Lang Center to develop workshops of son jarocho -- a traditional style of music from Veracruz, Mexico that is rooted in African, European and indigenous music and is a strong representation of Mexico’s mestizaje, or blending of cultures and races -- with the Latino community in South Philadelphia. The team writes, “Through these workshops we hope to use son as a tool of cultural preservation and a way to reflect on the immigrant experience through music and creation. As we develop a fundamental understanding of the music, we also plan to integrate this into the social activism we do at Juntos [the team’s community partner].” Workshops will focus on three parts: jarana, versada and zapateado. The jarana is the primary instrument used for son. It is a small guitar-like instrument with 8 strings and carries much of the rhythm. The versada is the verse-writing and singing component of son. Zapateado is the dance style, much like tap dance, danced on a wooden platform called a tarima, and thus also the main percussive element of the music. Given the centrality of the fandango to the communal practice of son, the team plans to host at least one fandango in the summer where talleristas can play and dance the sones they’ve learned as well as share the versos they’ve learned or written. Yared, a Latin American Studies special major, describes, “Since developing an interest in son I have shifted the focus of my studies within my major to son jarocho. I’m currently working on a year-long independent study project [with the help of Professor Milton Machucha-Gálvez] that pairs the study of son jarocho and music as a tool for social movements with an internship at Juntos. The internship is focused on the development of son jarocho workshops in the community. I also worked with classmates to develop a student-run course on son jarocho. We developed the syllabus for the course and take turns leading weekly discussions. By the end of the course we will update the syllabus based on our experience and pass it on to students who hope to run the course next year.”

Swarthmore Foundation

Now You SEE It

For two thirds of the world’s population, who live on less than two dollars a day and do not have vision insurance, a pair of prescription glasses (coupled with an eye exam) is unaffordable. Tyler Alexander ‘17 (Astrophysics), Kate Amodei ‘15 (Biology), and Drew Mullins ‘17 (Neuroscience) believe every person should have the opportunity to see clearly -- and

SEE It seeks to provide cost-effective prescription eyewear to those in need. In February 2015, Tyler and his team earned a seed grant from the Project Pericles Fund of Swarthmore College to prototype and pilot their idea. The three main goals of SEE It are: provide people with cost-effective prescription eyewear, promote environmental sustainability, and support economic and community development. Presently, the team is able to produce eyeglass frames and purchase lenses in order to offer a complete product at under $3.00 – using pure recyclables. So far SEE It has support from two eyeglass manufacturers in Philadelphia (FEA and Philadelphia Eyeglass Labs) that have agreed to edge lenses for free for the SEE It.

In May 2015, SEE It was named one of the Anti-Poverty Solution Summit Winners by Social Innovations Journal and Lab. In late Fall 2015, Tyler and the SEE It team will participate in a formal pitch event with regional foundations, angel investors, and family foundations. In the meantime, the team will continue to refine the project plan and forge essential community connections for implementation. Tyler, a sophomore and Astrophysics major, reflects, “creativity is a gateway to success. Sometimes, we need to step off life’s beaten path. Sure it’ll be new, there’ll be failure and surprises. We’ll always learn, though. Maybe some people will even start to follow our fresh footsteps. Then, we’ll start to see change – that’s where the impact lies.”

Project Pericles Fund of Swarthmore College