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.

“The Creative Studio” Provides Healing Post-Earthquake in Nepal,

by Sneha Shrestha ‘11

The group of 25 individuals from 15 organizations whom I trained in psychosocial healing through art and storytelling in 2008 through my Lang Project, The Creative Studio, have additionally trained 60+ trainers in Nepal who have in turn impacted about 1000 individuals in schools, non-profits, and other vulnerable groups.

After Nepal's devastating earthquake (7.8 richter scale) that took 9,000+ lives in April 2015, a strong need for psychosocial healing through art and storytelling became evident. I worked with groups to implement The Creative Studio program. For instance, I trained a team of dynamic and creative girls who are leading various art and education programs at Quixote’s Cove in Nepal. They hope to incorporate learnings from The Creative Studio in programs that Quixote’s Cove is currently conducting like the Book Bus (a mobile library project in Nepal sponsored by the US Embassy) and Write to Speak (a campaign run by the Word Warriors, to introduce performance poetry to urban youth across Nepal, funded by Center for Culture and Development, Denmark).

In another example, one of the private schools I worked with, Kashtamandap Vidyalaya conducted The Creative Studio program with 15 teachers when the second aftershock (6.7 richter scale) took place. Here is a reflection from teachers of Kashtamandap Vidyalaya in Kathmandu who conducted the training: “I felt more revived and happy after conducting the training on psychosocial healing through art and storytelling. The session always began either with a warm-up activity or sharing the reflection of the previous session. There was lot of sharing, some personal and some related to
everybody; some humorous and some very serious and emotional. Our group was an
excellent one. We laughed together and we cried together. We supported each other at
the time of need and consoled each other in times of distress. Whatever was shared in
the trust circle remained within the circle."

Lang Opportunity Scholarship (LOS) Program

Independent Thought and Social Action, by Riana Shah ‘14

It has been five years since I started Independent Thought & Social Action International
(ITSA), which I was able to grow into a non-profit organization as a result of the Lang
Opportunity Scholarship Program. ITSA is an education reform organization that works
with students and schools to implement critical thinking workshops and inquiry-based
education through experiential learning. ITSA works to educate future leaders of social
and environmental change by training teachers and students to build their
capacity as innovators in their communities.

ITSA was born out of my desire to disrupt authoritarian education. Raised in the Indian
education system, which emphasized rote memorization over independent thought, I was
inspired by the critical thinking skills that Swarthmore College embraced as a necessary component of social, environmental,
and economic progress. I was also inspired by the position that the Lang Center
occupied in between the academic curricula of Swarthmore and its community-based
learning courses. My education, economics, and statistics classes at Swarthmore were
central to developing the mission and vision of ITSA.

As part of my Lang Project, I created an incubator space for educational programming
used by students, educators, activists, and community members. The space also leads
an annual social action design challenge that rewards grants to innovative social action
projects. Students learn social entrepreneurship tools that help them identify, plan,
initiate, and execute community-based action projects.

One such project that comes to mind is the story of SaniStitch, a social action project
that works on women’s health by addressing the taboos associated with menstruation.
Sensing the project’s potential in India’s current socio-economic climate, I served as the
group’s mentor, teaching them management and marketing skills. I also helped them
build an effective, accessible marketing campaign. The mixed gender group has worked with over 300 hundred women in rural India to teach them how to stitch reusable pads. They have also produced a short documentary that details the negative effects of poor menstrual hygiene, coupled with an ethnographic exploration of cultural taboos against menstruation.

The group went on to win a Disney Social Innovation Design Grant last year. I continue to work with them on their financial planning to maximize the social investment that ITSA and Disney made in their project. The project now continues to provide economic livelihood opportunities to women in rural communities through their sanitary product training.

Recently, ITSA also formed a partnership with Omprakash Foundation, a nonprofit that creates transformative educational experiences by connecting grassroots social impact organizations with an audience of volunteers, donors, and classrooms. I was inspired by the partnership that Alex Frye ’11, Deivid Rojas ’11, and Andres Freire ’11, formed with Omprakash for their work on Taller De Paz [a grant recipient of the Project Pericles Fund of Swarthmore College] and we have been excited to welcome Omprakash Foundation on board as our fiscal sponsor and partner. In the past year, we have also been lucky to receive support from the Advisory Board Company, a higher education and healthcare consulting company, founded by David Bradley ’75, in redesigning the ITSA website and our branding.

While I am now working as a Business Analyst for a higher education spending analytics platform in Washington D.C., ITSA continues to grow as a result of the support of the LOS Program and the administrators of the Lang Center. I would like to thank Eugene Lang ’38 for the incredibly generous support throughout the years – ITSA’s scale of success would never have been possible with the LOS Program. I would also like to thank Jennifer Magee, Deb Kardon-Brown, Cheryl Jones-Walker, Lynne Schofield, and George Lakey for their guidance over the years. Finally, I also greatly appreciate the countless Swarthmore students and alums who have dedicated many hours and months to ITSA. ITSA would not be possible without the support of the entire Swarthmore community!

Configure

South Asian Young Writers Collective,

By Sabrina Singh ’15 and Afsana Oreen ’15
We started the South-Asian Young Writers’ Collective (SYWC) in the summer of our sophomore year as a leadership and writing summer program for high school girls in Philadelphia. It was an intensive 7-week course based at Asian Arts Initiative where we critically analyzed issues of race, gender and diaspora, practiced creative writing, and invited exemplary South Asian writers and media personnel as guest speakers to further inspire discussions.

The idea for SYWC was born out of our shared drive for social impact and a desire to have a hands-on and unique summer experience. As first years, we were constantly and critically engaging with issues of race, gender, identity and social justice in our classes, at student groups like Deshi as well as at dinner conversations at Sharples. At the same time, we both shared an interest in South Asian and other diasporic fiction writers. It made sense to combine this interest with the critical thinking and community-building skills we were learning at Swarthmore College to build a summer program of our own.

In many ways, SYWC was an ideal summer project for us at the end of our sophomore years. For one, it was a chance for us to share and put to practice the issues we learnt about in class outside the Swat bubble. It was a learning opportunity for us as well: we had to be creative in how we sparked difficult conversations and encouraged critical thinking about topics like race, gender, identity, and social justice because our audience was comprised of high school girls. Not only did we have to grab and retain their attention for hours at a stretch, but we also had to make sure our lessons catered to their varying backgrounds and interests. Moreover, because it required months of planning and preparation during the academic year, it was also a chance to refine vital professional skills like teamwork, community outreach, and taking on leadership roles. Leading a classroom with seen high-school teenagers was not easy— and that was precisely why we thoroughly enjoyed the process. But most of all, we continue to cherish the experience of SYWC because our small-scale project was successful at creating a fertile ground for larger-scale dialogue about social issues: program participants have started their own summer projects for Asian high school girls (DAWN) and continue to critically think, speak and write about social justice issues.
We launched a blog to share and document the work created by SYWC, and in hopes that it will inspire young womyn of color to share their writings, thoughts, and commentaries. If you would like to learn even more about SYWC or peruse SYWC participants’ writing pieces, please visit SYWC’s blog.

The South-Asian Young Writers’ Collective (SYWC) was supported with a grant from the Swarthmore Foundation.