**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. (Cont’d page 2)
Independent Thought and Social Action (cont’d)

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 (www.ITSInternational.org) 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 Lkey 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!

San Francisco Saludable & Sustainability

by Diego Garcia-Montufar ‘09

Access to water and sanitation continues to be a major problem in Peru and a priority for both national and local governments. There are several large programs in place to connect homes to the water and sewage network, but these are usually based in urban areas. Rural communities and villages in the Andes and the Amazon, because of their isolation, continue to be severely affected by the issue.

Founded in 2007, my Lang Project, San Francisco Saludable focused on providing waste management services in a small Shipibo village in the Peruvian Amazon. Once the continued provision of the service was secured through an alliance with the local municipal government, it only seemed natural to move onto the issue of sanitation. San Francisco de Yarinacocha, unlike most communities in the Amazon, has a rudimentary water network that provides water for a few hours every day, but continues to lack sewage. Most families either have a basic latrine or simply don’t have one altogether. Those that do have one, moreover, are usually untrained in their use and maintenance, which generates environmental problems due to climatic conditions in the Amazon like heavy rains.

In March 2015, I visited San Francisco to work on the development and installation of composting latrines in the community. Brian Best, who worked as my partner during the Lang Project, now runs a local NGO—Alianza Arkana—that has continued working on sanitation and other issues affecting indigenous communities. We decided on composting latrines because of their simple design and low cost.
San Francisco Saludable & Sustainability (cont’d)

These latrines consist of two large chambers that are used in alternation to allow complete decomposition of the organic material. After the material is fully decomposed, it can be used as compost, hence the name. Depending on the material of which they're built—which is usually wood—they can last up to ten years.

Perhaps the main disadvantage with this method is that it requires training and education. Composting latrines have been implemented around the country by NGOs and even the government, but the latrines are usually quickly abandoned because of lack of maintenance and misuse. As I learned during my Lang Project, where we spent a large part of our time training families about proper waste separation and storage and even designed our own educational materials, education is key both to ensure that habits are changed and the initiative is sustainable.

Although these latrines are a low-cost and effective solution to the problem of sanitation in rural Amazonian villages, they face the same problem that we first experienced with waste management. Local governments are unwilling to put the time and money into an issue that mostly affects indigenous communities, perhaps Peru’s most marginalized groups. This means that community level projects, such as my Lang Project and Alianza Arakana’s current work, need to be accompanied by wider initiatives to ensure that Peruvian governance structures become more inclusive and democratic. This reflection is what has now led me to pursue a Masters in Public Policy, which will hopefully be the topic of a future contribution to Dogfish Stories.

La Escuelita, by Shadi Rohana ‘09

La Escuelita, Spanish for "little school," is a community-based project that launched in the year 2000 in the south of the city of Tel-Aviv. The project was initiated, formed, and shaped within the community of Latin American migrant laborers in the city in order to answer the communities’ vital and cultural needs: migrant children, whose main language had become Hebrew after their incorporation in Israeli schools, learn Spanish in order to be able to engage in communication with their families either in Israel or in Latin America. In addition, the La Escuelita network of volunteers provides moral, political, and legal support to community members who are threatened with expulsion.

As a Latin American Studies and Spanish Language major, and having lived and studied in South America for a year through the college’s study abroad program…it was only natural for me to become part of La Escuelita’s story. There I learned the fragility of migrants’ status in Israel – a country where humans are privileged in accordance with their ethnic background – and the persecution of the immigration police were the root cause of a series of problems that threatened the continuity of La Escuelita. We were able to identify these problems, which were later addressed by my Lang Project: the lack of permanent space, staff, and support. Through my project, we were able to rent a place for La Escuelita’s activities for a year, cover the expenses of the community members and staff (such as transportation and food during activities), and receive legal assistance in order to achieve a legal status for La Escuelita as a social organization under Israeli law.

Here is what I wrote in my final Lang Project report in May 2009: "My discovery of La Escuelita marked the beginning of an ongoing personal experience that is mind-opening and transformational at the same time. I came to discover that among us, Palestinians and Israelis in conflict, there exists a foreign community that is constantly challenging our perception of our environment, our conflict, and ourselves. It is a community that is foreign to us both and whose members refuse to have their identity reduced according to the postulates of the global market and of government policies; that rejects the imposed identity of inexpensive and mobile laborers and labor seekers."

In the six years since then, La Escuelita continues to provide a vital space that allows the community of Latin American migrant laborers in Tel-Aviv to be a community. As an organization that enjoys a legal status, it carries its activities in the south of Tel-Aviv in a space the organization was able to obtain from the city’s municipality. In addition to the regular Spanish classes, a group of volunteers provides assistance to the community of Latin American families through a variety of activities for children and adults, such as Hebrew and English classes, assistance with homework, dance, and legal support. The space now enjoys a library of books in Spanish, and La Escuelita continues to hold its yearly festival where Latin American cultures and languages are celebrated in a public park in Tel-Aviv.
During the inauguration of Swarthmore College President Val Smith, Vincent Jones ’98 was a panelist in the Changing Lives, Changing the World Symposium, “Changing the World: Local Actions and Global Impacts.”

SUBMISSIONS WELCOME
If you have a “class note,” “dogfish story,” picture, or other information you’d like to share, please send an email to jmagee1@swarthmore.edu. Dogfish Stories is e-published during spring break (mid-March) and fall break (mid-October) each year. Submission deadlines are March 1 and October 1, respectively.

LOS PROGRAM REVIEW
This year, the LOS Program was reviewed by Dr. Jon Isham, Professor of Economics and Director, Center for Social Entrepreneurship at Middlebury College. For a copy of the report, contact Jennifer Magee at jmagee1@swarthmore.edu.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY
Each fall, we receive approximately 25-30 LOS applications from high achieving sophomores. And each year, Lang Scholar alumni offer important insights into the applicants and their projects. You are encouraged to participate in the selection process by reading and evaluating the applications of aspiring Lang Scholars! If you’d like to participate this year, please email Jennifer Magee at jmagee1@swarthmore.edu for more information.

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 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.”

Heartfelt thanks to Eugene M. Lang ’38 for his continued support and generosity to the LOS Program!