

Youth Making Sense of Lives Touched by Fear and Terror

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It was proven long ago that engaging in the visual arts can serve as a therapeutic outlet and provide direction for the troubled soul. Creating an artistic piece not only gives one an almost indescribable sense of worth and accomplishment, but it can also give hope to someone who feels lost in a senseless world. "Youth Making Sense of Lives Touched by Fear and Terror," a presentation led by Program Director Alex Fattal and President Shin Takeda of the AjA project, focused on an organization whose goal could be described as just that.

The AjA Project is a charitable organization that educates youths of countries in conflict through the encouragement of artistic self-expression. It currently has programs in Colombia and Thailand/ Burma, two countries which were described by Takeda as some of the "poorest and most oppressive" in the world. Takeda spoke about how countries like Burma used to be very wealthy and prosperous before they fell under the jurisdiction of the Socialist coupes that seized control in the forties. Takeda attempted to give his audience an idea of what daily life is currently like for the Karen, a Burmese ethnic group that lives on the Thai-Burma border in a refugee camp of over a hundred-thousand people. The slides that Takeda showed depicted refugees engaging in their day to day activities, illustrating the challenging conditions in which the Karen live.

Yet in spite of the obstacles an environment like this might present, the members of the AjA Project managed to bring some hope to refugee youths. In June of 2002, photography classes were started in the area's locally organized schools. "The students were given cameras," said Takeda, "and told to capture their experiences - to show

their identity." This assignment was called the "Fairy Tale Project," and the youths took pictures on themes ranging from "family" to "fears." Some photographs depicted loved ones, while others depicted the upsetting effects of a country in conflict.

In addition to this, the AjA members sat each of the students down and had them talk about their own photographs, later on having the youths write down what they had said. These pictures and descriptions were put together into an exhibition which was able to be viewed on January 8, 2002, in the Joan Kroc Institute.

The "Fairy Tale Project" is only one of the projects the children engaged in. Some students, not just from Burma/Thailand, but from Colombia, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq as well, came to the United States and documented their trip with photographs and recorded narratives. Their journeys were organized into four stages: homeland, leaving, arriving, and new community. Students like Yonis, a 15-year old Somalian boy, commented on his arrival, stating "I was seeing all these people of different colors and religions and I thought America is a good country." While the section on his arrival praised his new home, he commented on his new community in San Diego, claiming, "what I don't like about San Diego is all the trees - I can't even see outside my house."

These documentaries were made into exhibitions and multimedia presentations, both of which were also presented at the conference. Many of the students even attended the conference acting as a panel, and answered questions that varied from their experiences in their homeland to their thoughts on September 11. The youths were shy, answering in timid voices, but their responses remained honest - one girl commented on the fear she felt facing the public after the bombing of the World Trade Center.

By the end of the discussion, attendees found themselves feeling just a little bit better about the world around them, thinking twice about the powers of artistic self-expression.

