

Origami at an Orphanage

Though I worked as a teacher trainer on the island of Mindelo in the country of Cape Verde, West Africa, I took on a secondary project at a local boys orphanage. The orphanage housed about 50 boys ranging in age from 12 to 18. In my initial interactions with the boys over games of soccer drew me into their world. Placed on the outskirts of town, the boys in residence were encouraged to attend school and get an education but beyond school and soccer, they lacked extracurricular activities to stimulate them.

In the Fall of 2006, I began visiting with a group of the younger boys a few days a week at lunch time. Initially, we hung out and talked and got to know one another. I began to develop relationships with this small group and the group grew and grew and grew, until about 15 or 20 boys would gather around when I arrived at the center to spend time with them (even the older boys began to participate). A friend had given me an origami book when I began my Peace Corps service, so I dug it out and began rounding up scraps of paper to practice with the boys. Not only did I have to learn the folds to create an object in order to teach them, I also had to learn the terminology for folding (in Portuguese)! At first we made paper cranes, flowers, and stars. Eventually, this small project developed into a regular class where the boys advanced their origami skills and I began collecting their creations. After a couple of months, I had a cardboard box full of treasures created by “my boys.” I wasn’t sure what to do with the art, but I held onto it waiting for the perfect opportunity to share their talent.

By the Spring of 2006, the boys were quite proficient at following directions and folding clean lines. They continually impressed onlookers and visitors with their talents. As the classes developed, I made a rule that the boys had to attend their classes at the local school (attendance was not mandated by the orphanage staff) in order to participate in our origami classes. Though the boys grumbled a bit, the orphanage staff reported that they all encouraged each other to attend classes so they could attend origami. Interestingly enough, the local school teachers began to report that the boys were focused in school and were much better at following directions, which are two skills attributed to learning origami. I was so proud of “my boys.”

In June of 2006, the Orphanage director announced that an “exposition” would be held to display the boys’ work in conjunction with an annual soccer tournament amongst the cities various boy’s group homes. She thought it a perfect time to display the origami projects we’d worked so hard to create.



Not only were the boys able to show off their work, they won the soccer tournament as well!!! As a reward for their great work, I bought a 1,000 crane project. It is believed in Japanese society that the act of folding 1,000 paper cranes is a blessing and will bestow luck and fortune upon all who complete the project. It took about 2 months to fold the 1,000 cranes and then another couple of weeks to assemble them for display. Upon finishing the project, the boys hung the cranes in their cafeteria area for all to see! It was the most rewarding experience I've ever had. These boys were amazing and dedicated to the effort. They took it on with pride and became better students, better citizens, and learned about commitment to a job well-done.



I will never forget “my boys.” On the day I left the island to end my service, I walked down to the Orphanage, as I had done so many other times. This time, the boys came out to the street to meet me when they saw me coming. I hugged each one of them and told them how much I'd miss them. I also told them something special that I'd remember about each and every one of them. I donated all of the origami books I'd acquired by that point to the orphanage and all of the remaining paper that friends and family sent to me for our project. In the spring of that same year, I offered an origami class to about 20 adult educators who worked at various children's facilities throughout the island in hopes that someone would continue the project with “my boys” and with more children as well. Though no one took up the charge at that particular Center, I do know that origami is being taught at several centers and that the boys continue to practice their hand at folding increasingly complex figures. I, too, still fold paper cranes and think of “my boys.” This summer (2010), my husband and I folded 1,000 paper cranes for our wedding ceremony and in memory of the time I spend with “my boys.”