

Balkan Children & Youth Foundation



International Youth Foundation



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This e-newsletter is produced on a regular basis by the Balkan Children & Youth Foundation and the International Youth Foundation to keep you informed of their activities in the Balkans.

In March, violence once again erupted in Kosovo, a stark reminder that peace in the Balkan region is fragile and not to be taken for granted. It's also a reminder that peace comes not with a declaration, but with steps taken daily toward a far-reaching goal. Through its efforts to promote positive youth development and strengthen the civil society sector serving young people throughout the region, BCYF is taking such steps towards long-lasting change.

Below is a summary of our most recent activities, including the adaptation of a violence prevention curriculum in Macedonia. We also take this opportunity to share with you profiles of two BCYF grantees. The first promotes youth employment training and entrepreneurship, while the second encourages greater tolerance and understanding of differences.

Recent Events

In late February, BCYF Chairman Martti Ahtisaari and Senior IYF staff met with Andrew Natsios, USAID Administrator in Washington, D.C. to inform him about IYF/BCYF activities, as well as about the current status of the regional program being implemented with support from USAID. The meeting underlined Mr. Ahtisaari's commitment to BCYF and BCYF's focus on employment, entrepreneurship and civic engagement. Mr. Natsios reiterated USAID's strong emphasis on post conflict areas.

In March, BCYF Executive Director Agon Demjaha participated in the Regional Youth Forum: "Youth – Regional Cooperation and European Integration" held in Sarajevo within the framework of the South-East European Cooperation Process. At the invitation of the

organizers, Mr. Demjaha delivered a presentation on youth employment as well as BCYF's efforts to address the situation.

Identification of Effective Programs

Seven programs located in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, and Romania were added to BCYF's database of effective programs. The database currently includes 33 model programs. This growing databank represents a valuable resource for directing funding, exchanges, and technical assistance.

Communications

BCYF is pleased to announce the publication of its 2003 Annual Report. The report is available for download at www.balkanyouth.org/about_publications.html or in hard copy form by emailing: bcyf@balkanyouth.org.

In June, copies of *What Works in Youth Employment in the Balkans* will be available in hard copy form through BCYF and IYF, and for download via their respective websites. This latest issue of IYF's "What Works in Youth Development Series," profiles three youth NGOs operating



Upcoming Events:

May 24-25 BCYF Board of Directors Meeting, London, England

Sept. 6-12 Balkan Youth Forum, Croatia

in Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania and their efforts to provide young people with employment and entrepreneurship training. Authored by Cathryn L. Thorup, PhD, the report opens with a foreword by Maria Livanos Cattai, Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce.

BCYF Adapts Violence Prevention Curriculum in Macedonia

What do young people in inner city Detroit have in common with those living in Skopje, Macedonia? Along with the typical challenges of growing up, both are navigating those challenges in environments characterized by decades of conflict that has, at times, erupted into violence.

Developed in the early 1990s by Quest International and piloted in Detroit elementary schools, "Working Toward Peace," is a violence prevention curriculum now being adapted by BCYF to meet the needs of Macedonian youth, with hopes of expanding its approach to other Balkan nations.

The curriculum focuses on strengthening young people's interpersonal skills through making them more aware of why they think and act in certain ways, explains Steve Dunn, PhD, an IYF educational consultant and leader of the team responsible for adapting the curriculum for use in Macedonia.

Divided into four parts, the curriculum includes instruction and exercises that help young people identify what makes them angry and how to manage their anger and other emotions appropriately. Through a series of learning experiences, young people learn skills and strategies for dealing with real and potential conflicts, how to develop and maintain positive relationships with friends and family members, and how to be in respectful relationships with people of different cultures, ethnic origins, and belief systems.

As a first step, a local adaptation team comprised of six Albanian and six Macedonian translators participated in a four-day seminar in which they explored how the curriculum works. By the end of the four days, the group worked closely together, "almost like a family," says Dunn,



mirroring the healthy communication and self-awareness promoted through the curriculum. When the team has completed their work, the curriculum will be reviewed and fine-tuned by two Macedonian educational experts working in collaboration with Dunn.

Will it work? While acknowledging the differences between the American and Macedonian cultures and school systems, translator Sinisha Evitimov sees great promise for the program. Still, he admits that teachers in the region can be slow to embrace new methods of instruction. "Teachers can be hard to convince," he says. "They're used to being the experts."

IYF's Education Vice President, Joyce Phelps, acknowledges this potential challenge and also adds optimism. "We've adapted and implemented this program in several countries where teacher-centered instructional approaches were the norm," she explains. "Almost without exception, teachers were able to understand the value of changing their teaching approach and were able to move from being the 'sage on the stage' to being the 'guide on the side.' Their incentive for change was enhanced student learning and increased pro-social behavior."

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By the fall of 2004, it's expected that 30 teachers and nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders will be trained in how to implement the new curriculum, which is expected to reach more than 1,000 12- to 13-year-olds during an initial pilot phase.

Equipping Young People with Entrepreneurial Skills and IT Training

Haskovo, Bulgaria — At 17 years of age, Peter Uzunov dreams of one day starting his own computer programming business. And while those dreams are still a long way off, he's learning the basics of entrepreneurship through the Youth Centre for Business Innovation, an innovative training program targeting 15- to 25-year-olds throughout this city of 100,000 in southeastern Bulgaria.

Peter is one of 18 young people selected to participate in this intensive year-long program that stresses learning by doing. The Youth Centre was created in response to high levels of unemployment in the area and the need to equip young people with practical, job-related skills for the 21st century. An added impetus is Bulgaria's projected accession to the European Union in 2007, with its implications for higher standards and expanded markets.

"While the unemployment rate in Haskovo is estimated at 15 percent, in some surrounding municipalities it can go as high as 28 percent," explains Ivanka Dushkova, Executive Director of the Recreation and Development Union (RDU), a local nongovernmental organization that launched the Centre's activities in early 2004. "With existing employers unable to absorb even trained youth," says Ivanka, "the Centre targets young people with the potential to develop their own businesses, and eventually employ others."

Through the program, participants initiate group projects, develop business plans, refine their computer skills, and train other young people in basic computer

literacy. The strong focus on information technology (IT) is designed to strengthen the youth's marketability, and the competitiveness of local businesses.

For the first six months, the group's primary focus will be the development of a website that will provide aspiring entrepreneurs with detailed information on how to start or strengthen a small- to medium-size business. Participating youth are responsible for developing specific sections of the site's content, including how to carry out a market analysis, research potential competitors, draft a business plan, and incorporate e-commerce. Information will also be posted on steps for registering a small business under Bulgarian law, ensuring patent protection, and obtaining proper financing. For those lacking easy access to the Internet, the group also plans to publish a handbook with similar content, including material on how to establish a virtual enterprise.

In working with participants, Centre instructors emphasize the importance of goal-setting and teamwork. When the youth first started their weekly meetings in January 2004, the group was far from cohesive, explains Ivanka. "Stronger personalities tended to dominate and a competitive atmosphere emerged," she says. But soon the group's dynamics changed with the realization that reaching goals depends on teamwork and consensus-building. In developing their website, for example, group members disagreed on which design direction to pursue. The stalemate ended with the group agreeing to vote on the most popular designs.

Succeeding in today's fast-changing business world also requires confidence and the ability to think "outside the box." With the Bulgarian educational system largely based on passive learning through lectures, the Centre pushes participants to think creatively and express their ideas. The program encourages young people like Ivelina Nedialovcova, a somewhat reserved 16-year-old with an impressive track record at school, to move beyond her own comfort zone in embracing new challenges.

"We're learning from each other," says Ivelina, "and learning how to work as a team." In addition to gaining concrete business planning skills, Ivelina says that she's learned how to listen and respect others' points of view.

To put into practice what they've learned, this summer each participant will intern with a local business. Each will be required to submit a plan to the company outlining how it might improve business performance through improved use of technology. A special event is also being planned whereby the group will unveil its website dedicated to entrepreneurship before an

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audience of young people, business leaders, and the public at large.

When program participants finally “graduate” in December '04, each will receive a formal certificate; yet the experience they've gained and the products they've produced are expected to impact the lives of hundreds of others for some time to come.

Using Drama as a Tool for Self-expression and Learning About Others

Skopje, Macedonia — Home to families of Albanian, Macedonian, Roma, and Turkish heritage, Bit Pazar is known as one of Skopje's most ethnically-diverse neighborhoods. Here, at the Jane Sandanski elementary school, children gather in a third floor gymnasium to rehearse two plays – “Diadora” and “Dinotopia” – that they've researched and developed themselves.

What brings them here is “Street Stories,” a project of the Children's Theatre Centre (CTC), a nongovernmental



organization launched in 1999 by a small group of professional actors and directors. Street Stories' non-formal educational approach uses the medium of drama to equip children, ages 10 to 14, with vital skills – confidence, self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking.

“Our goal is not to produce professional actors but to educate through theatre, to break down barriers, and teach expression,” says Petrit Neziri, a professional actor and Executive Coordinator of CTC's Education Department. Valuing and respecting the creativity and insights of children is central to the program's philosophy, with children themselves deciding what issues they want to explore and highlight through the medium of drama.

With support from the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation, Street Stories is now working with more

than 160 children in eight communities in Skopje and the towns of Tetova, Kumanovo, and Debar. Participants are chosen following an audition. Those selected engage in a four-phase process lasting throughout the school year. During initial games and exercises barriers are broken down and bonds forged among participants. Parents are also invited to orientation sessions at the outset of the program to enlist their full support.

Next, a story gathering phase provides participants with the opportunity to explore, sometimes for the first time, the area's diverse ethnic cultures and communities. Given that Macedonia's ethnic groups often live in segregated communities, the project immerses such children in new environments so as to counter prevailing prejudices and stereotypes. By visiting churches, mosques, airports, train stations, and rural environments – and conducting interviews with the people they meet – participants test their own pre-conceived notions and expand their world view.

Back in the classroom, they discuss what they learned and translate that experience into storylines and dialogue. The actual script writing is left to professional playwrights, who shape and refine the children's work. The group then self-selects a director, costume maker, set designer, and actors. During the final phase, performances are staged before audiences comprised of parents and classmates, as well as the general public.

For disadvantaged children with few positive ways to spend their free time, Street Stories offers friendship, fun, and the opportunity for personal growth. “I really like it because it fills my time,” says Sureja, age 11. “Otherwise, I'd be sitting at home. Here, I learned how to behave outside my neighborhood and how to be a director and actor.”

More and more people will soon have the opportunity to attend CTC performances when it opens its new theatre. The brightly-colored, professional theatre, underwritten with support from the Open Society Institute, USAID, and other donors, pays tribute to the power of drama and storytelling to enlarge actors' and audiences' perceptions of themselves and the world.

