



Educating with the Peaceful Puppets

By Rebecca Krisel

Affan Javed, 28, received a Kathryn W. Davis Project for Peace Prize to implement his Peaceful Puppets project in Pakistan over the summer of 2015. Javed, a Fulbright scholar from Pakistan, is a second-year MPA student concentrating in urban and social policy and specializing in United Nations studies. I spoke with him on September 23, 2015. The following is an edited version of our conversation.

What is Peaceful Puppets?

At Peaceful Puppets, we are using puppets to educate children about the concepts of peacebuilding, negotiation, and conflict management at an early stage in their lives so that they can avoid conflict later on.

The point is enabling children to have conversations that lead to stereotypes being broken. To me, it's not about puppets. The puppets are a means to an end. The absolute

dream is that we have peace. And the puppets are tools toward peace.

What inspired you to begin this project?

I've always been interested in education, youth leadership, and entrepreneurship. When I got my Fulbright and came to Columbia, I was exposed to peacebuilding and realized that all the work we do in development cannot really sustain itself

unless the peacebuilding infrastructure is in place.

Pakistan is a country that suffers from a security problem. No matter how much effort we put into making our education good, making our health good, there's always a chance of the security situation overriding that progress. It is important to build peace to sustain development, right? I started understanding that maybe peace needs to be taught in schools from the very early stages.

You received a Davis Projects for Peace award for Peaceful Puppets. How did you decide on this particular project?

I knew I wanted to do something in Pakistan. That was clear. But I wasn't sure whether it would be entrepreneurship, whether it would be education, and how it would link to peacebuilding.

When I went back to Pakistan [over the winter break in December 2014], I talked to a couple of organizations. And I met a friend of mine, Amna Yamin, whose family was successfully running this school called SAYA Welfare Society. The school was near Islamabad so there were no transportation costs, and it had Christian, Muslim, Baloch, and Punjabi students. There were very interesting cultural differences among the students themselves, but they were studying together and were from an underprivileged background.

I asked my friend Amna if she would support my idea to work in this school with puppets. She consented, and we started brainstorming about different partner arrangements and what the curriculum could look like.

I wanted to find information stating that teaching peace at an early age would be useful. But, to be honest, there's not much research available. There's no way to predict that if you teach peace building to 8- to 12-year-old children, it would be useful in later conflicts. But I had a hunch that creating a space where children can comfortably talk about issues leading to conflict would be good. That space is very easily created when you are not

using human faces. The puppets break the ice.

And if the puppet is asking, "why won't you play cricket with your Christian friend?" it's more legitimate than having the same question asked by a Muslim guy or a Christian girl, or a teacher.

When children are engaged in stories, which are basically a little tough to digest, through puppets they tend to respond very differently. That was our premise.

Why puppets?

I remember one of my friends had a hand puppet, and he was cracking jokes and experimenting with ventriloquism. I found it really funny and also inspiring. I watched Sesame Street growing up; there was an Urdu version where the yellow bird would keep on singing. Somehow that stayed in my head. And there was Mister Count trying to teach counting.

Since I had no experience with puppets, I started looking for organizations that could deliver this curriculum. There weren't many options in Pakistan, and many organizations were expensive, so we ended up partnering with Gogi Studios [whose projects actively address social issues]. The stories were mostly written by my friend Amna. And I got help from Nida Zafar, also a Fulbright student from Pakistan, who is at Columbia's Teachers College. She had expertise in education and was very excited to help me develop the curriculum.

Can you give an example of one of the shows?

We did a puppet show for the whole school with two puppets: a chicken and a crow. They did not know that they lived in the same place. The chicken said that the crow "didn't come to the mosque so how would I know you live in the same place?" And the crow replied: "my mosque is different, I go to the church." Suddenly they realized they were not supposed to talk to each other. But since one of them was a really good ball player, they decided that they

could still play cricket together and be a very good team.

After that show, a couple of students mentioned that their parents often fight. They said they don't want to fight with those who are different because it is easier to just be friends. So that kind of critical thinking started showing. But, to be honest, it's too early to judge how strong an effect it had.

Were you able to notice an impact on the children?

We had students from ages 5 to 12. With the youngest students, it was hard to tell because they are generally more accepting. But with the older students, we had one-on-one meetings and activities with them post-puppet show, and they had a discussion about it.

What do you have in store for the future of Peaceful Puppets?

When the program was over, I began thinking about the next steps. Is the program replicable? Can it be adapted elsewhere in the world? Can what we learned in the field be incorporated into the curriculum and deployed in a place where there may be stronger conflict?

The teachers were impressed by the new learning techniques and wanted to introduce them in their classes. I still had funds available and worked with the school in helping with their needs. The teachers required training and more supplies, so they were paired with a teacher-training program in Islamabad.

What are your future career plans, and how do they relate to peacebuilding?

I am very inspired by the TEDx movement and want to see if one day we can have people do independent peaceful puppets events. I am using the opportunities here at SIPA to develop a strategy that can enable me to create a grassroots movement with puppet-based interventions brokering peace discussions. It's ambitious, but I am in no hurry. I want to take it slow and steady and make something worthwhile in due time.