

JACK KENT COOKE

F O U N D A T I O N

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Building Dignity: Raising the Voices of Young Women in Peru

By Emily Hedin, 2009 Scholar

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation believes that each student deserves the chance to fulfill his or her potential. Every young mind should be set free to think big and achieve. As a recipient of the Jack Kent Cooke Graduate Scholarship, I am inspired and motivated to spread this philosophy. This summer, I brought the spirit of Jack Kent Cooke to the shantytowns of Lima, Peru. As the co-founder and co-director of Building Dignity, a non-profit organization based in Minnesota and Lima, I work to encourage leadership and improve access to education among marginalized populations.

Building Dignity was founded in 2008 with the mission of creating community gathering spaces, offering high-quality community education, and empowering neighborhood leaders. In 2009, we built the Center for Development with Dignity, an innovative community center in the poor neighborhood of La Encantada in the south of Lima. The center is free and open to the public and includes classrooms and meeting space, a library, public bathrooms, and a community kitchen. In our first year, we offered academic resources to students (such as English and math classes), recreational activities for children and youth (such as art and dance workshops), and support for local schools. The center also became the home of a "Wawa Wasi" ("children's house" in Quechua), a daycare for the children of working mothers.

In August 2010, Building Dignity launched an exciting new program: Voces de la Juventud (Voices of the Youth). This program is a series of workshops for young women, ages 11 to 16, which combine art projects with discussions of human rights and women's leadership. The goal of the program is to empower young women, give them the tools and the confidence to assume positions of leadership, and encourage them to participate in their community.

Through games, art, and discussion, we explored a variety of topics including universal human rights, women's rights, female leadership in Latin America, and the challenges girls face in different cultures around the world. The girls applied these lessons to their own community, discussing which rights are not protected in La Encantada and what can be done about it. At the end of the month, we hosted a community dinner at the Center for Development with Dignity during which the girls presented the work we accomplished together.

Young women throughout the world face challenges that prevent them from fulfilling their potential. In La Encantada, and many communities like it, girls suffer from high levels of domestic abuse and sexual violence. In their day-to-day lives, they encounter machista attitudes, patriarchal family structures, and devaluation of women in media and popular culture. These factors combine to perpetuate low self-esteem among girls, which then translates into low levels of participation and leadership among women when they enter their adult lives.

The Center for Development with Dignity aims to give young girls the space to talk about their fears and concerns, express and develop their creativity, and foster the self-confidence and empowerment necessary for social change. By investing in these girls now, we believe we are contributing to positive change for women in the future.

"Voces de la Juventud" is just a beginning. There is much to do in order to defeat the barriers to achievement for young girls. In the years to come, the Center for Development with Dignity hopes to offer a wide range of services that combat gender discrimination. But to begin, Building Dignity believes that broadening educational opportunities for everyone is an essential step towards building a more just and equitable world.

To learn more about this and other programs of Building Dignity, visit www.buildingdignity.org. The Center for Development with Dignity is always looking for energetic and motivated volunteers. Email emily@buildingdignity.org for more information.