

Connecting a global service initiative to the classroom

Tenaflly Middle School students raise landmine awareness and aid those affected in Cambodia

by Mark Hyman

I watched with pride as tenth-grader Ben Gallagher stood before the classroom of electronics students to deliver a short statement of encouragement. Ben, along with five middle and high school student-ambassadors from Tenaflly, had traveled halfway around the world to this outpost town called Kompong Cham along the Mekong River in large part for this moment. Ben was addressing a classroom of Cambodian landmine survivors who were being given a chance to reclaim their lives through vocational rehabilitation, largely funded by Global Care Unlimited, a youth-led humanitarian organization inspired by the commitment of young people from Tenaflly. With this visit, our humanitarian mission had come full circle; the students and I were able to meet and speak with some of the 105 mine-affected Cambodians whom we had worked so long and so hard to assist.

But the story neither begins nor ends with this moment. My purpose in this article is to retrace the path we carved that led to this moment while suggesting ways in which our journey might provide a roadmap—or at least some signposts—to assist you in developing a homegrown global service learning initiative of your own.

In Tenaflly I have worked with middle and high school students on global humanitarian initiatives since 1999. Initially, we focused on the global landmine problem. We formed a school-based club—The Tenaflly Middle School

Landmine Awareness Club—and our own nonprofit organization—Global Care Unlimited, Inc. Each year the Club created and delivered presentations in our school and the community. These appearances garnered funding for Global Care and our selected humanitarian service initiative, which involved either landmine removal or rehabilitation for landmine survivors.

This process worked very well. However, only a small number of students reaped the benefits of this project. So we looked for ways to incorporate it into the curriculum.

We started by sponsoring a symposium on Cambodia and landmines and included a unit of study about Cambodia for all sixth-grade students in Tenaflly Middle School. Fortunately, my colleague on the other sixth-grade team, Miriam d'Adolf, offered to participate in and help to facilitate this unit.

Following this unit of study, the sixth-grade student body brainstormed ways to provide assistance to Cambodia. They set a goal of raising \$10,500, or \$100 for each of the 105 Cambodian landmine survivors enrolled in the vocational rehabilitation program of Clear Path International. The students wrote letters describing their discoveries and showed them to interested persons—family, friends, relatives, etc.—in an effort to raise funds. They also organized a highly successful faculty-student basketball fundraiser. This entire experience embodied service learning in a rich form.

Our accomplishment deepened my appreciation for the power of such a unit of study and provided me with some important lessons, which I sought to transfer to our next humanitarian project: The Cambodian Humanitarian Initiative. We had previously focused on landmines worldwide, now we would concentrate on the humanitarian needs of one country.

In the fall of 2004, we held the “Eye on Cambodia” conference at school. Thanks to a keynote address, musical performances, breakout classroom sessions, and a photographic display, the entire student body learned about the Cambodian Humanitarian Initiative.

As part of the Initiative, I selected six student ambassadors to join me in representing Global Care on a trip to Cambodia. After raising sufficient funds to support our journey, the students and I, joined by parents and Assistant Superintendent Dr. Judith Greenwald, traveled to Cambodia in February 2005. Our objectives were both generic (to learn about the culture and history of Cambodia) and specific (to visit and document the work occurring at the sites of our prospective implementing organizational partners). We also assumed that the youth delegation would return to Tenaflly with greater capacity and motivation to assume leadership in our Cambodian Humanitarian Initiative.

The trip was truly a life-changing experience. Guided by James Hathaway, co-founder of Clear Path International—a Global Care Unlimited partner for assisting Cambodian landmine survivors—the delegation visited sites linked to the Khmer Rouge Genocide (1975–79), the magnificent temples of Angkor Wat, and a wide array of prospective implementing organizations. This gave us an opportunity to place Cambodia’s impoverished status in context, as well as to meet the directors of the organizations and their beneficiaries. Needless to say, the experience and the personal connections we all made were invaluable.

Upon our return, the students and I decided which organizations we would support as a means of realizing our goal. Then we shared our findings with the Tenafly Middle School Global Care Unlimited Club (formerly the Landmine Awareness Club). We established a strategy and a timetable for achieving our objectives. This included presentations delivered to each grade level. Sixth-grade students incorporated our project into their studies by producing poetry and essays. Seventh- and eighth-grade students were given a packet of materials and encouraged to garner donations for the project. We planned an evening event that included presentations from the students who visited Cambodia, the Global Care Unlimited Club, and the sixth-grade student body. In class, sixth graders generated products (a mural, a video, a class booklet and a class website) that represented what they had learned about the history, culture and humanitarian issues facing Cambodia, and we held an evening event so parents could view the projects.

This year our big event was a “Concert for Cambodia,” which featured professional artists and student presentations. About 350 people attended and we raised \$6,000.

Starting your own service initiative

What the students have accomplished with regard to our Cambodian Humanitarian Initiative is impressive, but telling you about it is not the purpose of this article. My goal is to help you visualize how you can apply our experiences to your own service learning initiative.

Once you and your students have a clearly articulated vision, you must craft a

series of educational experiences that will bring this vision to fruition in the minds and hearts of your students. Establishing a road map to your vision requires the following actions:

Organize a high-profile, educational kickoff event to raise awareness of, and to motivate interest in, your initiative. Remember to invite the media. Finding quality speakers for such an event can be difficult. Be sure to tap into your students, parents and community members for any possible ideas or contacts. Our proximity to New York City and along the northeast corridor is a plus—you’ll find a rich source of speakers and organizations for which public presentations are one of the best vehicles for promoting their own



Tenafly’s six student delegates pose with a Buddhist monk at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. (Photo by Michelle Biasucci.)

organizations. Thus, you can often get a speaker free of charge. If an honorarium is requested, organizations such as your home-school parent association can be a source of support.

Begin an ongoing unit of classroom study that maintains the “profile” of your initiative and empowers your students with a sufficient knowledge base so they can gather information and see the need for action.

Establish a partnership with an implementing organization; i.e., one that will provide direct service to your intended beneficiaries and supply ongoing reports regarding the benefits derived from their services. Research is needed to make a confident determination about the genuine needs of the potential beneficiaries and the capabilities and reliability of your implementing organization(s).

Establish realistic and tangible objectives for providing humanitarian service and a clear explanation of the prospective benefits of such service. Then

create a strategy and a timetable for achieving your objectives. This should be in the form of a concrete plan through which your classroom students may both express their moral voices and participate actively in providing assistance to the identified population in need.

Close your global service initiative with a **high-profile event to honor and celebrate the efforts** and achievements of the students who participated in the humanitarian initiative.

This list of activities and responsibilities can appear overwhelming. We are all busy enough with the day-to-day demands of our teaching responsibilities. Why, then, should one consider such an enormous undertaking?

The best answer I can give is to share my own motivation for involving myself so intensely in promoting global service learning initiatives among schoolchildren. I believe that those of us who work with children on a daily basis undertake a responsibility to serve as facilitators for the intellectual, emotional and moral growth of our students. Each of us brings our particular strengths, interests and passions to our work. My passion is for the development of humanitarian qualities such as compassion, selfless service, and moral courage as well as global awareness in the minds and hearts of my students.

This is a professional and personal commitment that informs my sense of mission as a teacher.

My experience shows me that children can be transformed mentally and emotionally through participation in a global humanitarian service initiative. They can begin to see the world through a wider lens, a keener mind, and a more humane sensibility. They can also learn how powerful their moral voices can be and how those voices can change the lives of others, even people living halfway around the world. That is reason enough for me to persevere in facilitating such humanitarian initiatives. If these sentiments resonate in you as well, I hope you will consider initiating or facilitating a humanitarian project in your school. 🇺🇸

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