Dilruba Sakhizada

Beautiful Minds Challenge

Stolen Childhood

Growing up in Afghanistan, I have always known my Country to be a harsh land that has experienced continuous conflict for decades. Afghanistan and Afghan people have been suffering from a war, a never ending war for political power between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan. This war has broken apart families. Twenty-two million people are living in poverty because the government is focusing not on the Afghan people, but rather on military spending. More importantly though, children have been affected by this war. About six million children have lost their family members, the right to an education, the right to live in a peaceful and safe place, and the chance to live like a normal child throughout this political conflict. Children have been living in poverty, suffering health related problems, and starving from lack of food. Today, growing up in Afghanistan means growing up surrounded by violence. War has taken over children's lives, and has left them threatened and exposed to the problems of living on the streets. These children of war have witnessed the loss of their family members, and have suffered psychological damage through these hardships. Healing and moving past this suffering is a challenge for these children because they do not have the means to better their circumstances; sadly, most children of war are unable to realize the lives and childhoods they deserve to have.

From my personal experience, it was tough to grow up in a place where I did not know what my future would look like. Leaving home everyday, I could never be sure that I would return. Every time my dad would go to work, he would give me advice and tell me to take care of
my siblings. I always had a feeling that something was going to happen to him, and that I might not see my dad again. But despite these fears, I always felt fortunate to have my parents beside me.

War Child of Holland is a program that helps children of war by empowering them to build their resilience, protect themselves and their peers, and claim their rights, by providing skills, knowledge and opportunity. This program organizes events and debates to support children of war who have been abused and forced to grow up too fast. Due to the war in Afghanistan and the large population of orphaned children in my Country, War Child of Holland came to Afghanistan and my school to spread awareness, and to educate the whole community of our school about the problems faced by children of war. In one activity, the representatives from War Child of Holland asked my class to brainstorm solutions in addressing the issues of children of war in Afghanistan. Through brainstorming, my classmates and I decided to write a play in which we would use children's personal stories as the inspiration for the play. We then decided to use the play as a fundraiser to raise money for school supplies and clothing for children of war in my Country. War Child of Holland helped my classmates and me build a connection with children of war.

We put this play together to raise awareness about children of war and to share with our audience the experiences of being an orphan throughout conflicts in our Country. We invited families, faculty members, students and other staff of the school to join us and be part of this change. We raised money which we then used to buy school supplies to give back to children in need. In a way, we tried to provide another opportunity for those children to go back to school and get an education.
The experience of creating this play was one of the most influential experiences of my life. While I was working with War Child of Holland and the children who we spoke to, I learned about their lives and listened to their stories. These children had their childhoods taken away as many lost family members and parents, and were forced to either leave school to support their families, or live on the streets. Through meeting these children, I witnessed how brave they are, and it was amazing and humbling to see how gracefully these children dealt with their hardship. However, despite how moved I was by their resilience, my classmates and I all knew in the back of our minds that our efforts were not enough. No matter how hard we tried in writing our play and sharing their stories, we knew our play could never convey the hardships these children had been through. Although we were trying to help these children in a small way, knowing how much suffering they had been through was very painful, disappointing and depressing. It is not easy losing your childhood. For many of these children they had to become adults far sooner than they should have; they did not have the chance to go to school or play football with their friends. Though our play would raise money and bring awareness to this serious issue, we knew that our play could never give them back their childhoods.

Yet beyond this frustrating reality, I also learned how similar I was to some of those children. I have lived my entire life in war. My own family fell victim to war. I lost my older brother because of this war; he was shot when he was only nine years old. I have suffered like many children of war, but at the time I was not old enough to understand. I was a little kid, my mind was still free and I did not really know the meaning of my brother’s death. Being part of a program like War Child of Holland made me feel strong. I came to realize that by organizing the play, I was giving back to those children of war who did not have a shoulder to put their head on
and cry. I was lucky enough to have my parents by my side when I was suffering. I was lucky enough to have someone who could be on my side and cry with me.

Being part of this experience gave me the chance to give something to those children who had suffered because of the war. Through working with those children I realized that their experiences were not so different from mine; we are brave for still fighting to live even though our peace has been destroyed. Throughout the process of creating the play, I learned not only about these children’s suffering, but also about their resilience. But most importantly, I learned that we can use their sad stories to bring a positive change to my Country.