Finding EKATVA (oneness) in the Tenderloin

Written by Laura Choe, TNDC’s Tenderloin After-School Program Manager

A cultural exchange with youth from India allows TASP participants to learn what it means to be cultural ambassadors.

Over the years, I have been extremely fortunate to share in many beautiful experiences with TASP participants; each one is a precious gift that reminds me of the infinite capacity, strength, brilliance, and inquisitiveness of the young people we serve. One such experience happened in late May when TNDC’s Tenderloin After-School Program hosted a group of 16 children from India. The Indian kids were doing a 3-week dance tour entitled “EKATVA” (meaning “oneness”) that brought them to San Francisco. The San Francisco stop on their world tour and the visit with TASP were made possible by Ranjan Dey, owner of New Delhi Restaurant, and an exceptional group of dedicated volunteers. Compassionate Chefs Café, founded by Dey, has
been funding TASP and Manav Sadhna (part of Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad) for 6 years, and it’s been his dream to get kids from TASP and EKATVA together in person.

“I have been connected with TASP for many years through music, and it was beyond incredible to be able to help facilitate this miraculous meeting between the children of TASP and the children of EKATVA, who hail from the slums of Ahmedabad. There were so many moments of creative exchange, all resulting in true friendship and learning. To see these children engage in constructive dialogue about their lives, their families, their neighborhoods, their struggles and their dreams, made the world feel very connected, very close. There is a purity and innocence in the way children talk to one another, and when art and music are involved, their dialogue takes on a truly inspiring quality.”

Robin Sukhadia, International Grants Program Director – Project Ahimsa

In preparation for this exciting visit, TASP organized a project-based learning series that started April 2012. Our goals were: 1) to build engagement, curiosity, and investment on the part of the TASP youth so that they would take ownership of the process and lead the way, and 2) to create the foundation for a truly unique cultural exchange. We began by framing a question for the kids: “How can we, as cultural ambassadors, model learning and generosity for the EKATVA kids and ourselves?” We talked about what it means to be a cultural ambassador, shared what we knew individually about India, and then reflected on the importance of generosity and learning as goals in and of themselves. Over the next 5 weeks, our group of 14 TASP participants, ages 7 to 16, spent time learning about India, visiting the EKATVA website to research the performers’ names and personal stories, sampled Indian food (compliments of Ranjan of course), shopped for and organized individual gift bags for each EKATVA guest, and even learned phrases in Gujarati, the language spoken by the EKATVA kids. TASP participant Nidhi Patel reflected on this process: “I learned that it’s important to help people because I might need help sometime too. We talked about the importance of generosity and the way I modeled this was to make personalized cards for the gift bags we gave to each of the EKATVA kids. I wanted them to be happy and excited about visiting TASP.”

What was most amazing to me was watching how our TASP kids, from the youngest to the oldest, immediately stepped up and took over. They were curious, committed, and excited. They asked lots of questions and made even more suggestions—exemplifying the values of learning.
and generosity throughout the workshop. When the EKATVA performers finally arrived at TASP on May 26, it was more like a family reunion than a meeting of strangers from foreign countries. I saw TASP kids run up to the EKATVA kids, call them by name, and immediately start talking to them in Gujarati! (A few TASP participants and parents are from the state of Gujarat so they served as translators throughout the day.) After a tour of TASP and an ice-breaker game involving lots of balloons and silliness, we all walked to the nearby New Delhi Restaurant. Each group presented a slide show about their lives. The presentations touched on gentrification, poverty, police brutality, family life, school, cultural holidays, and field trips. Then both groups performed choreographed dance routines for each other. The routines were punctuated by roaring applause and a spontaneous jam session with all the kids (and several adults) break dancing on the floor of the restaurant! There is no way to adequately capture the moment in words, but suffice it to say that afterwards, the kids were inseparable. Ranjan then treated everyone to a huge, gourmet Indian lunch during which the kids chatted and laughed like they had known each other for years. When I went around to all the tables, I saw all the kids laughing, talking, and gesturing, and I was reminded that sometimes we, as adults, just need to get out of the way so that kids can do their thing.

As an extra special treat, TASP participants also got to attend the EKATVA dance performance on May 27 at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley. The two hour performance featured elaborate choreography, beautiful costumes, and narratives about social justice leaders from around the world such as Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, and Nelson Mandela. We hung out after the performance to see the EKATVA kids one last time, and again, it felt like a huge reunion, with laughing, chatting, and lots of picture-taking. I’m still in awe of the energy and love that was so effortlessly generated throughout the weekend and deeply moved by the investment shown by TASP participants through the whole process. I’m not sure how it all happened—how the magic ignited and spread so organically—but it was one of the most amazing experiences I have ever had the honor of witnessing. More importantly, I know this is an experience that will stay with our participants for many years to come.

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