

2014 Greenfield Peace Writing Scholarship Entry #92

Let Peace Begin with You

When I arrived at Kateri Park, a low-income housing complex in Portland, Oregon, children from a diverse array of ethnic backgrounds greeted me with skeptical stares and stifled whispers to one another. The volunteer coordinator told me to take a seat and wait for a child to approach me when he or she needed homework help. Hesitantly, I seated myself on the edge of a chair. I was afraid none of them would want my help, but after a few minutes, a little Thai girl named Naw Say came over, set her homework before me and gave me a hopeful look.

The first few times I tutored her, Naw Say was extremely quiet and her English speaking and reading ability very elementary. As much as I wanted to reach out to her and develop a relationship, she seemed to want to simply finish her homework and then race back to her family's nearby apartment. I dutifully helped her once a week, but I began to become frustrated. Why wasn't Naw Say warming up to me? Some of the other tutors mentioned the sweet notes their tutees gave them, or how much improvement they were noticing in the children they worked with. I wanted that too, and sometimes I wished I could have worked with a different child.

One day, however, after finishing her homework, Naw Say paused at the table, not scooting her chair out and hopping out of the tutoring room with little more than a goodbye, as usual. Hesitantly, she glanced up at me and asked, "Could we read a story maybe?"

"Of course!" I replied overenthusiastically. Delighted, I led Naw Say into the closet-sized library so that she could pick out a book. For a half hour, I read her several "Amelia Bedelia" stories, altering my voice to fit the various characters. I will never forget the grin that spread across her face as she pointed at the silly pictures and

helped me turn the pages. It was the first real smile I had seen on her, and in that moment I knew I had finally gained her trust.

After that, I began to notice vast improvements in Naw Say's English skills and self-confidence. Soon, an energetic and loquacious little girl replaced the timid one I had originally become acquainted with. Each Monday when I arrived, Naw Say would immediately grin widely and run towards me with excitement and we would spend the next hour and a half working through her homework and reading children's books.

Naw Say had changed, and so had I. Instead of simply guiding her through her homework problems, I integrated in connections to her own life and interests. Math became a game of counting family members and grammar a slew of silly sentences from which she had to pick the correct one. Naw Say no longer wanted to leave after finishing, rather begging to read three or four stories before I left—and now she could read them herself!

Progress takes time, and acknowledging the process towards attaining eventual goals, not just focusing on the end result, is the foundation of our journey towards a better world. After working with Naw Say for an entire year and seeing her slowly but surely bloom both intellectually and socially, I realized that expecting a quick change in her was unreasonable. A peaceful world may not arrive in our lifetime, but if we each strive to make one person's life a little better, we are that much closer to the universal love and acceptance we all long for.