

*This report was written by Kaytan Shah, one of the PB leaders from the Los Angeles group.*

This was my first year as a group leader with the Project Bridge program and one of the best experiences of my life. The whole notion of bringing together a group of high school students from New York and Los Angeles to bridge, bond and grow as a group is a program that should be extensively promoted around the world.

Being a high school counselor myself, I cherished watching our wide-eyed students question, comment and discuss cultural differences not only amongst themselves, but about the human condition as well. The Los Angeles group started off strong and bonded quickly. We met twice a month for about eight months, prior to the Study Tour in Korea. We initially met at the Korean American Museum where we watched an excellent documentary called Sai-gu. Here our students watched first hand videos and interviews during the Los Angeles riots that occurred in 1992. Most of our students were being born at the time, but were intensely engaged in the mayhem that they watched in their “backyard.” This set the backdrop for what our students signed up for with long, detailed discussions as to why human conflict occurs and possible ways to avoid major clashes between different sets of people.

All the while, my excellent co-group leader Robin Kim and I were pushing and preparing them to be well-rounded ambassadors to promote goodwill and understanding. All those meetings and workshops paid off immensely as we got ready for the Study Tour in Korea. We hit the ground running with our students spending their first night in Korea with the students from Banpo High School. The 10 day tour was packed with us meeting financial leaders, top dignitaries, leading corporations, cultural and religious events, the DMZ, just to name a few. Our students were assigned different topics related to what we were going to experience prior to the Study Tour. This was done to familiarize themselves with the subject as well as to ask pertinent questions to our gracious hosts. In my opinion, the best part of the whole trip was when our students sang “Arirang,” a traditional Korean song, at the conclusion of each meeting with our wonderful hosts. The look in the hosts’ eyes said it all!

Every night we would reflect about the day and journal about all that we were experiencing. The group bonded real closely and many emotions poured out with everyone supporting each other. When it was time to go home, the New York and Los Angeles group had a tough time parting with each other, but the memories that were created on this trip would last a lifetime. The Project Bridge program was everything I have read about and more. Behind most human conflict seems to be a misunderstanding of sorts through assumed stereotypes and lack of patience and tolerance to try to sort out their differences. That is why this program works as effectively as it does. It has the resources to actually bring what we read about into existence. But it would be foolish of me not to give credit to the group of students and group leaders we had on this trip. These students were highly motivated, intelligent and quite funny in their own regard which created an excellent dynamic the minute we met in Seoul. I have no doubt that they will be great role models, professionals, community leaders in the very near future. Thanks for the experience Project Bridge!

*Jane Vu , a Youth Ambassador from the 2008-2009 program, reflects upon some lessons learned from her experiences in Project Bridge.*

During one of my trips to Vietnam, I witnessed discrimination. A Nigerian man had visited Vietnam for a vacation trip and he was walking to the nearest town market. I learned of his story by striking up a conversation with him. It was not every day that you saw a Nigerian man in Vietnam. This statement was held true when some ladies who saw me talking to him started asking questions and making racist comments. They were wondering if I was scared to talk to him. They assumed he was dirty and a criminal due to his appearance. I explained to the ladies his story and they gave me a blank and skeptical stare.

Ever since then, I have vowed to break barriers and to educate everyone of tolerance. Project Bridge, to me, is a continuous fight and struggle to help end discrimination and to promote interactions between cultures.

But I have learned so much more about myself and what is expected of me. One needs to accept oneself first before one can accept others. Humanity is worldwide. And once you have a better understanding of yourself, you are able to understand others better. Project Bridge has allowed me to meet different people from Korea and from all over the world. And through these people that I have made connections with, I am a better person.

Project Bridge brings about the responsibility I have to others and myself to stand up for what is right. If no one will stand up for what is true and just, then what will become of this world? All of us have struggles with ourselves and with others, but we should never give up hope and faith. Nothing is impossible. If we lived with a negative mindset, then we wouldn't have progress.

Going back to the word 'strive', we must never give up on our hopes and dreams because it is the vision of a better world and life. Project Bridge has also reinforced my way of looking at life. I live life to the fullest and will try anything once. The question of "Who am I?" has popped up during the trip. I believe that each moment of life defines me. During the trip, each minute I was constantly learning and self-improving. I chose not to stick to a stereotype by answering the question "Who am I?" but to self-improve through each experience. We go through many challenges in life. And the best thing I've learned to do is to embrace life and breathe in every moment. Project Bridge seeks to break barriers and redefine connections between cultures. It is an experience that will contribute to the progress and improvement of the world and to society.

*"Be the change you want to see in the world" – Ghandi*