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Interview with Design for Change's Sanjli Gidwaney and Claire Mongeau



Our partners at Design for Change held their annual “Be The Change” conference in September 2013. This year’s winning team for the Design for Change School Challenge hails from South Dakota, USA. We sat down with Sanjli Gidwaney and Claire Mongeau from Design for Change USA to discuss this year’s conference and the team from South Dakota.

So you just returned from the Design for Change conference and brought the American winners of the contest on a remarkable journey; can you tell us about these students and the project that brought them to India?

Sanjli: Our students live in a Native American community, it’s called Pine Ridge Reservation, and their school is called the Crazy Horse School. They experience several different challenges in their community in terms of dropout rates, in terms of alcohol and drugs, and one of the most horrifying stats is that half of the students don’t make it to graduation. So they’ll have a class of 25 and end up with 12. They felt that the dropout rates was a major issue they wanted to address. As they worked through the “feel, imagine, do, share” Design for Change framework, they learned, in peeling back the layers, that students drop out because they are resorting to drugs and alcohol. Well, why are they resorting to drugs and alcohol? Because there’s a lot of boredom on the reservation, there isn’t anything to do; there aren’t a lot of healthy activities for students. So their whole project was to address that underlying issue. They went really deep into the issue and recognized that they need to address the boredom. So what they did was a whole day of very healthy activities like sports, crafts, and quilt work. They organized this whole great event to bring the community together; it was actually on a parent’s night. They also brought the opportunity to express their concerns about the dropout rates and why it’s important that they start to talk about it. We were just really blown away by their project and their thoughtfulness and the passion that the teacher displayed in supporting them.

Claire: This group was of high school students, juniors and seniors I believe, from the school. The students that we had the chance to bring to the conference were two of the students who just recently graduated and one young woman who is entering into her senior year.

How many students were involved in the project?

Sanjli: There's several students I think, 12 in total. As for the students who came on the trip, there were two who really loved the project, and another student who came on the trip who was not directly involved with the project before but is continuing the project. Now that they're back on the reservation she has enough opportunity to continue the momentum that the seniors had created. It was important for her to be on this trip as well so she can experience what Design for Change is really all about and feel a part of the movement.

Who are these students and what are they like? What kind of interests do they have?

Sanjli: Amber is the youngest and she is still at Crazy Horse School, she hasn't graduated yet. She is wonderful, thoughtful. She processes a lot, she analyzes a lot, there's really a lot going on in her head, the wheels are constantly churning. We've spent a lot of time with her.

Claire: She's a cowgirl actually! She competes in bull riding, she is definitely one of those quiet leader types, and the teachers who came out of the conference with us said that she is going to be an amazing influence on her classmates, so she goes back and continues the projects she is very motivational to other people around her. She is thoughtful and also has a very good attitude.

Sanjli: There's one story that really stood out from the conference, one of the teams had a young boy from India, and he was sharing his project about collecting stories from elders so that their stories don't ever die. There are so many values and lessons that can be taught from those stories. And she (Amber) nudged Hara who was one of the teachers on the trip and said "our elders have so many stories, this is something we need to be doing." She is constantly thinking about what more could be done.

Claire: The thing about why it was so important for Amber to come on this trip and for her to be one of the students to share the story of the project was that she was actually a dropout. She dropped out of school and then came back and made it into the proper grade she should be in. She worked really hard.

Sanjli: She's a perfect role model.

Claire: Exactly

Sanjli: (Another student) Brandy just loves life. She is an eternal optimist, she is just happy and always just seeing the brighter side of things.

Claire: She is just one of those people who has a lot of joy in her heart, loves learning and meeting new people. She actually dances the shawl dance which is one of the Lakota traditions. One of her stories is that she had seen this shawl dance but she never actually participated. Then one day at a pow-wow she decided to give it a try and she actually got second in the competition. So since then she just really loved participating in that part of her culture and she got a chance to perform at the conference in front of people from all over the world. She said that it meant so much to her and she just imagined her family around her, and then she got to share that. She's hilarious, a lot of fun, has a lot of zest.

Sanjli: Wakan, he is 19 years old, and is just a dynamite. He is very articulate and has a very spiritual side of him. He has had an extremely tough life in terms of the circumstances that he's had. He's lost a brother to drinking and driving and in that same accident was his sister who's now paralyzed. He has spent a lot of time raising his own siblings. He is a father and a very responsible one at that; he's really trying to do right by his child. He has a great presence. Wakan is incredibly talented - he has a great lyrical talent, he writes rap and music. He wrote a song for the conference and there's just a really great story about him during the conference. Wakan was asked to perform at the conference because we knew he had written a rap, but twenty minutes before he said "I can't do it. I'm scared, I don't know if I'll do a good job." But he didn't want to disappoint any of us. So we just told him "Go out there, do a good job, do your best. This is a great opportunity for you to shine and share your talent." But we left it up to him, and sure enough he did perform and became an instant celebrity at the conference. Everybody was in love with him and it really became the conference anthem because it was all about "we can be the change." His rap was all about being the change and doing right by your people and your community, so he just kept with that momentum throughout the conference. In fact, during the conference there was this time where Riverside School (who hosts this conference) shuts down a street and holds an event called "Street Smart". There are crafts, there are stalls, and there are activities for kids. There were 2,000 people there and there was a stage where there were various performers. Wakan got on stage with one of the Riverside students and with a couple of students from Denmark, and they did a collective performance. It was the most incredible thing in the world; it was like a concert with over a thousand people watching. They did it without music and it was very impromptu, they must have only decided a couple of hours before to put it together. These are the kinds of moments I think will live on with them and with all of us for a very long time. They just have the guts to put themselves out there.

Claire: It was really amazing to see how they grew over the course of the conference too. Wakan told me "I always wanted to be a rapper, I always wanted to be famous but I didn't think I'd have the opportunity." After he found the courage in himself to perform the first night, he performed two other times during the conference. That first night he performed in front of people from so many different counties. That was the third time he had been on stage ever.

Sanjli: He said that nobody ever comes out and watches him when he performs on the reservation and this is among the first times that he's had to experience what it is like to be in front of a crowd and people appreciating him.

Claire: The fact that all of them were so open and willing to share. As Brandy said, they come from very hard circumstances such that it's amazing that they even got themselves through school to graduate, and now they're trying to help other people like that. Brandy said it's not about looking to the past, it's about looking towards the future, doing right by our community. The fact that it was incredible to have them being the ones representing the United States for the first time and that they are able to tell stories that most people around the world don't even hear about or know exist. They are such an amazing example of what it is to be Native American and to be advocates. It was just incredible.

Sanjli: They hadn't been on a plane, they hadn't been out of the state, they had never been in a hotel, they didn't have a state IDs and we had to get them state IDs because they weren't being recognized as

American citizens. We got them state IDs, passports, visas. They hadn't experienced what it was like to have a big fancy meal in a hotel or what it meant to be on a plane.

Claire: They didn't have air-conditioning, they didn't have phones. So they were just great, it was just amazing.

Sanjli: (At the same time) I think they never lost sight of who they were, and I mean that in the most beautiful way. They never lost sight of their culture, their heritage, and their people. They knew why they were there. They were representing their community. Although they enjoyed being in a hotel - at one point Wakan was spinning around his room saying "I feel like a king!" - it was all for a reason. Any of it wasn't in vain.

Claire: Every single day, and pretty much every conversation you had with them you felt a deep sense of gratitude that they had towards everyone who helped them. They would say "I never thought I would have a passport, and now I can go anywhere in the world. I can do so much." And it wasn't so much of them saying "This is the way it should be, I deserve this." I feel like they were given positive feedback to be more themselves, and so they can take that back to the reservation.

What kinds of things did the students do at the conference - were there workshops for instance?

Sanjli: When we landed, before the conference even started, we took them to Ahmedabad for a little bit and they got to buy Indian clothes and try Indian food. The first stage of the conference was kind of a meet and greet with everyone who was there from all the different countries. During that time was when we performed so Wakan got to do his rap, they did Bollywood performances, they really got to immerse themselves and meet all the students from all the different countries so that was more of a fun night than anything else.

During the actual conference they got to hear the stories from the students all over the world, there were 19 countries represented at the conference. Each group told their story and got to present their project of change. Throughout the conference there were different workshops, there were really great opportunities for them to interact with the other students. There were activities, there was drumming, there was food - they just had a lot of fun while at the same time learning so much. So that happened over the course of two days. Claire then took the team to Agra to see the Taj Mahal.

Claire: That was a nice opportunity for them to learn more about India and get to experience learning a new culture. To see a sight that people only dream about seeing, and to see the history and the culture of India. They loved learning about the history and the architecture.

Have you checked in with the students and the teachers since they've come back?

Sanjli: Their teacher said that "part of giving back is coming back." It's fine if you create change, but there's a lot of escapism and an attitude of leaving the community and never coming back. The real giving and the real change happens when you come back to those hard situations and you create a change in the community. The point is that, this conference has generated a lot of momentum in the students and they are continuing that moving forward.

Claire: It's really great for the students to have realized that they have gone to the conference in India and to gain all this momentum, and now they can take things that may have been disappointing but use that to see that teachers and students like them can make changes in their community.

What do you hope will be the long-term impact on students, their teachers, the community, of this whole experience?

Sanjli: One thing that we are already seeing is that Design for Change sets precedence and a foundation by which students can start creating social change. It's really the mission of Design for Change - breaking that idea of creating change into four easy steps (feel, imagine, do, share) and I think without that framework, it becomes very abstract. With this framework now, there is opportunity within a community and for others to get involved with the change that's already started. It starts with one teacher and it influences students. It's already created a huge buzz in the community with people wanting to get involved now. So there are a lot of opportunities and experiences through Design for Change, and it's not even just about designing the change. It's about having students recognize their own potential and having the power to realize that potential within themselves. Design for Change is just a platform and a vehicle for them to see that about themselves.

Claire: That's one of the amazing things. Design for Change isn't a one-year-long project and then you're done. It's teaching students the process and the steps through which they can make change in their community and how they can become advocates for themselves. So you're not just impacting them for the year; you're seeing the impact for their lives. That extends throughout the community and more and more people get involved and become part of the community change we're already seeing.

Of course we're great fans of Design for Change and the things you do, how has Good Work and The Good Project helped you over the years?

Sanjli: Good Work's worked with Design for Change and with Kiran (Sethi, Founder of Design for Change) helping us understand the impact. It's one thing for us to be able to say the story - that has a lot of power in itself - but to actually see the numbers behind it and how it's transforming the attitudes and motivation and beliefs students have about themselves is really powerful and something that is really important. You can have good intentions and you can think you have a great program, but the proof is really in the pudding. Without that measurement we wouldn't really know, and wouldn't get that unbiased feedback from students and the teachers that are involved in Good Work's program. So Good Work has been instrumental in helping us think through that process and see what does feedback mean and how do you obtain it.

Also, they have been incredible personal mentors for us as we move through this process. They've experienced much of this before, what it means to do fundraising, what it means to interact with partners. Sometimes I just go into meet with The Good Project, at "hi, hello", I just start talking about everything and ask what am I supposed to do! Sometimes it has nothing to do with anything involving our partnership and it's more of a friendship having guidance, mentorship, and helping somebody listen to you and believes in the work that you're doing. Design for Change is absolutely nothing without its partners.

What can we do to help you in the future?

Sanjli: I think as Design for Change is really growing in the USA. We're developing a business model; we're trying to become more sustainable. Continuing to have that sort of mentorship and being able to connect with the Good Work network is really going to be important because we are huge believers in collaboration. I think that there's a great exchange of knowledge and mentorship, guidance in this relationship that can happen between Good Work and Design for Change. We hope that we just continue to work together in the future because we can already see the benefits of this partnership.

Claire: Even in my short time here, I know and see that our partners in education are incredibly important to our continued success and hope that they continue to deepen. It's been really great that Sanjli's set all of these up already. I love getting to work with her and getting to know great people.

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Sanjli: As Design for Change is a way of life, the feel, imagine, do, share process has a very personal meaning to me. In any situation, how to be able to break it down into those steps apply all throughout your life and in any situation and being able to give students, youth, teachers, anyone in general to have the ability, the framework to be able to break down these challenges that we all face in our lives is a very powerful thing. It'll continue; we hope that we can do justice to this framework and this philosophy by introducing it to more and more youth around the world because they will be the leaders of the future in their lives and trying to empower them with this tool. We just hope that we can continue doing good work!