



Interview: Jane Bird, Street Kids International

by *Apathy is Boring* Volunteer Stephen — April 22, 2008

Biography

Jane Bird grew up in Montreal while attending College Marie France and received her DEC from Marianopolis College in Health Sciences. She eventually moved on to University of King's College (associated with Dalhousie) where she graduated with an Honours B.A. in International Development studies. Jane's honours thesis focused on North American street youth and issues of social development and engagement. At university, Jane became involved with the King's Social Justice Society and was also the co-president and treasurer of the Dalhousie International Development Education and Awareness Society. Despite this heavy workload, Jane still found the time to live and travel in France, Spain, Australia, India, Chile, Italy, Sweden, England, Scotland, and Ireland.

Through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Jane became an intern with Street Kids International (SKI). Her past experiences prepared her for her current position as the Innovative Youth Programming Officer with SKI in la Paz, Bolivia.

Interview

What do you do?

I am working with Street Kids International's partner CDEA (Centro de Desarrollo para la Educacion Alternativa/ Centre for the Development of Alternative Education) as part of a project called "Creating Life Pathways for Youth" funded by CIDA. We run workshops for youth based on SKI's course manuals (Street Business Toolkit and Street Banking Toolkit), which involve teaching youth who work and / or live on the streets how to start and maintain small businesses. We use a participatory method, which means that through games and other forms of interactive teaching, we help youth discover answers on their own that address how to run a business. We also give them the opportunity to start developing a business plan. The end goal is to encourage street youth to use business as a means to accomplish broader life goals. We also concentrate heavily on having their institution (especially the youth workers) and their parents or guardians to accompany and support the youth throughout the whole process.

I run these workshops in addition to helping develop new materials on facilitation and entrepreneurship.

How did you get involved?

In my last semester of university I began looking for summer internships with Canadian organizations. I had known about Street Kids International from my university research on street kids and organizations that support them. I was interested in them primarily because the research and focus of my degree had been on street youth and alternative methods of development.

CIDA recommended me for an overseas internship position. There were 4 options to choose from and I told them I was most interested in Bolivia because of the country's strong history in alternative and arts development techniques; plus, I wanted the opportunity to work in a Spanish speaking country. After many months of interviews and letters of recommendation from professors, bosses, and others, I received the invitation to come work here for a year.

What motivated you to seek out your current position? Why take an interest in the international community when it is easier to ignore?

I have been interested in international affairs and international development since high school and for that reason I decided to pursue my undergraduate degree in the field. I have also always been an avid traveler and am captivated by learning about new cultures and countries. Furthermore, I am dedicated to working and educating myself in international studies and I know that to work in development you need to have international experience. In this way I was able to do something I wanted to do that would also help advance my career.

I personally believe that there is much good that can be done through international cooperation. I know that volunteering and working in the development sector internationally can potentially have many adverse effects, so I made sure to choose an organization and a project that I believe does not try to "develop" people in the traditional sense but instead helps explore development with them.

Finally, I think that international experience is priceless when it comes to learning about fieldwork and gaining perspective on how other societies function and how Canada, as a developed country, can affect the progress and development of developing countries.

Why do you feel its important for youth to get involved in volunteering, democracy, and voting?

I think that youth are the future of each country's culture, politics and general development. For this reason I have chosen to work with youth. As a youth myself, I also think it is important to participate, when I can, in the social and political movements of my country and of the international community.

It's a matter of taking ones future into ones hands. For youth in Bolivia, for instance, this sense of urgency is very apparent because they see the need to change things if they want a better present and future than their parents had. In Canada we're lucky to not have to deal with the hard truth of where our futures are going on the same scale, but this doesn't mean that we should refuse to be active participants in the decisions our government makes for our future or for the livelihood of our communities.

Democracy and voting are privileges, and we should take full advantage of them not only because we can, but also because what our country and communities do affects more than just us personally, but also the international community and the future.

For you, is there a connection between art, music, and democracy? What is it?

I have been interested for some time in the use of alternative development, particularly art and how it can be used for community development. I chose to focus my thesis on the use of practical theatre to help street youth in North America transition from street life to general society because I believe art can play an important role in development and also because I have a strong background in performance art and wanted to integrate my hobbies with my work.

My background and relevant experience with theatre has really helped integrate into the international community. It has helped train me to be a better communicator, leader, facilitator and creative thinker.

Arts in general, including fine arts and music as well as performing arts, are languages that can be understood internationally and across different social groups and levels of education. I have seen many interesting projects that use drawing or music to help people express themselves, their needs, and their dreams for the future.

I think art and music have both inspired me to get involved and work with others on projects that I otherwise would not have participated in. At SKI, we use theatre and theatrical games, as well as art and music, to get youth involved and interested in ideas and projects. Art is fun and it makes conferences and workshops more youth friendly and also helps youth break down their social barriers.

Links:

[Street Kids International](#)

[CIDA](#)

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