

Kathryn Davis Projects for Peace: Colorado, USA
Adventures in Interfaith Understanding
Proposal by Lindsey Pointer '13 and Sam Seiniger '14, Colorado College

Introduction and Rationale

Religious bigotry throughout history has led to much violence, and continues to do so today. Religious misunderstanding has created fear in the U.S. populace and government, which has led to military action abroad, compromising global peace as a whole. In order to promote peace through religious understanding, we need to counter religious prejudice in our own backyard, questioning Americans' treatment of other religions and promoting compassion between faiths, specifically between the three Abrahamic traditions.

Our town, Colorado Springs, is known for religious extremism and a lack of religious tolerance between faiths. Long-time local peace activist Steve Handen identified relations between Muslims, Christians and Jews as the most severe interfaith prejudice in Colorado Springs. Local Rabbi Mel Glazer says that religious minorities find it hard to be heard and "are afraid of the possible outcomes of the general negative impression of their religion." Indeed, much of the Jewish community no longer participates in the few interfaith dialogue opportunities that are available in Colorado Springs due to biases of the groups that run them. The local Muslim mosque has been vandalized multiple times, and Muslims choose to refer to it as a "center" when they are in public due to the prejudice towards them by many members of our community. Arshad Yousufi, from the Islamic Society of Colorado Springs, says, "The problem lies with the attitude of religious middle-class Americans who pass on their prejudices to their children, which becomes evident in their behavior in high school and college. I speak to high school classes occasionally, and in some high schools in the affluent suburbs of Colorado Springs, the prejudice is palpable." He also mentioned that most Muslim kids are routinely call "terrorists" at school. This is the type of behavior that leads to fear of other cultures and ultimately promotes violence in our global actions. There is a great need for interfaith dialogue and activities to counter this prejudice. We would like to be part of initiating this crucial change in our community.

The Project

For our peace project we will be taking a group of twelve young people (17+) from Temple Shalom, the Islamic Society, First Congregational Church, New Life Church and the Catholic community in Colorado Springs to Crestone, a nearby town known for religious diversity, for one week and then on a one-week backpacking trip. We will distribute an application to these communities that is designed to help us select participants who have had little previous exposure to interfaith dialogue and who may hold some religiously-based prejudices, but who seem willing to participate in and learn from this type of experience. We will interview participants who could most benefit from the experience and who have the greatest capacity to positively influence their communities after they return home, and select an equal number from each of the three Abrahamic traditions.

According to Eboo Patel, the founder of Interfaith Youth Core, interfaith understanding is best achieved through meaningful and positive interaction between people of different faiths, the acquisition of knowledge about another faith, and common activities. Our project has been designed to fit this model by providing opportunities for learning and extensive and meaningful interaction.

We will begin our journey in Colorado Springs, meeting for a few hours a day during the days leading up to our departure. We will participate in a discussion with the Pikes Peak Inter-Religious Clergy Alliance about the history and dynamics of interfaith relations in Colorado Springs. We will also speak with professors at Colorado College for an introduction to each of the three Abrahamic traditions. This will give the group the opportunity to connect with prominent faith leaders from the community and to begin brainstorming possible ideas for the service project we will complete at the end of the trip. In late July or early August, we will travel as a group to Crestone, Colorado, where the community has expressed tremendous interest in and support of our project. The Crestone Spiritual Alliance will connect us with religious communities to visit in order to learn about different traditions. During our time in Crestone, we will also engage in interfaith dialogue led by Fr. Dave Denny and Tessa Bielecki of the Desert Foundation, who have years of expertise facilitating conversations and building relationships between people of different faiths. We will stay together at the Colorado College Baca campus.

After a week in Crestone, we will depart for a one-week backpacking trip in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. We will provide all necessary camping equipment so that the trip won't be inaccessible to anyone for financial reasons. During that week, the group will participate in outdoor activities that build trust and promote the building of cross-faith friendships. We will also engage in intentional interfaith dialogue reflecting on our time in Crestone, the role of nature in each of the three Abrahamic traditions, common misconceptions about each tradition, the role of compassion in all religions, and ideas of how greater understanding could be achieved on local and global levels. Although we all come from different religious traditions, we all have the common ground of the earth we live on. In this way, being in nature will be an equalizer.

We designed the progression of the project to gradually move participants out of their comfort zone in Colorado Springs and to put them in the position of reliance on one another for support in the backcountry. Thus the group will necessarily form meaningful relationships and begin to challenge their own prejudices. We hope that the trip will create compassion among all the participants towards other faiths that they will foster into adulthood.

Short- and Long-Term Outcomes

During the backcountry trip, the group will plan an interfaith service project that we will help them carry out approximately two weeks after we return to Colorado Springs. Each participant will bring people from their faith community to participate in a project that will spread interfaith compassion to the larger community of Colorado Springs. Projects could be anything from a community-wide day of service to a public installation that spreads the message of inter-religious peace.

In order to extend our impact, we will reserve funding to continue to do similar projects with the group throughout the following school year. We will also aim to spread the message of compassion on a national level by creating an interfaith dialogue website.

The youth that participate in this trip are the future leaders of our country. After this experience they will have a tremendous ability to progress our country in the direction of peace, and to take their expanded understanding of religious differences with them in whatever they may do.

Prospects for Sustainability

When we spoke to Colorado College leadership, they expressed interest in funding similar efforts in the future if this pilot project is successful, enabling us to continue our work in coming years. To our knowledge, this would be the first interfaith project in Colorado Springs directed at youth, and we believe that we could create long-lasting change in the area.

Additionally, we believe that this trip and its design could be used as a national model across the country. In the fall of 2012 we will compile a description of the trip and its results and distribute it to chaplains' offices at colleges around the country in hopes that they will join in our effort to promote understanding and compassion on a local effort in an attempt to promote global peace.

The Team

Lindsey Pointer is a junior Religion major and Nonviolence Minor at CC. She co-leads a women's spirituality circle at CC and also participates in the College's interfaith council. Last year she attended Coming Together, an interfaith conference at Princeton University. She has received additional conflict resolution training through her job as a residential advisor and her role as a mentor in Aspire, CC's leadership development program.

Sam Seiniger is a sophomore at Colorado College currently working on designing his own major combining neuroscience and religion. He holds a leadership position in the Colorado College Outdoor Recreation Club, which has allowed him to lead a wide variety of outdoor trips with fellow CC students. During the summers, he works as an outdoor guide, and has the necessary training and knowledge to lead the outdoor portion of the trip. He is Wilderness First Responder and advanced CPR certified.

Both Lindsey and Sam participate in Shove Council, a dialogue group that promotes understanding and acceptance of religious diversity on the CC campus, and have experience working with youth in Colorado Springs in many different settings. They also both participated in a pilgrimage trip to Ireland with a group of students from different faith backgrounds last summer.

Budget for Adventures in Interfaith Understanding

15-person van rented from Colorado College	\$350
Fuel (\$3.5 per gallon, 12 mpg, approx. 700 miles of driving)	\$200
Lodging at Colorado College's Baca campus (7 nights)	\$250
Quoted cost of food at Desert Sage restaurant in Crestone	\$2,184
Backpacking gear provided by Colorado College	\$0
Gear Colorado College does not own	\$100
Food for seven days of backpacking	\$955
Liability insurance for the backpacking trip	\$500
Donations and gifts for religious communities visited (\$250 for each of six communities)	\$1,500
Stipend for the Desert Foundation	\$1,500
Budget for final service project	\$1,500
Budget for ongoing projects and community events	\$961
Total:	\$10,000