Q&A with Kids for Peace Founder Danielle Gram

by Jane Shin Park November 22, 2010

Think someone your age can't really make a positive impact on our planet? Think again. Meet 21-year-old Danielle Gram, a Harvard senior who is helping promote non-violence and respect for others through her global nonprofit Kids for Peace. With 75 chapters around the world, this organization is setting the stage for a safer, more peaceful future--and Danielle started it when she was only 16! Her passion is truly inspirational, and here, she talks to Teen Vogue about why she launched Kids for Peace, her thoughts on school bullying, and how she balances nonprofit work and school.

What prompted you to start the nonprofit Kids for Peace?
I started Kids for Peace because I looked around at the violence I saw in the world and wanted to do something about it. I lived outside of Washington D.C. during which many violent events happened: 9/11, a sniper who was shooting people at random, and the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There were many lives lost in ways that I did not understand or want to accept. Kids for Peace was founded to address violence by educating children in a way that encourages them to value all living things. The children in Kids for Peace learn that it's important to develop peace for themselves, for others, and the environment.

Since starting Kids for Peace when I was 16, I've experienced violence firsthand. My only brother was senselessly murdered while on vacation. I understand the pain of violence intimately, and I want to devote my life to preventing others from having to experience it.

What is the main mission of the organization?
Our mission is to cultivate every child's ability to foster peace by learning about other cultures as well as doing service, arts, and environmental projects. We provide a curriculum with activities that help kids lead the way to making the world a peaceful and harmonious place.

When promoting peace, are you talking about both large-scale scenarios (for example, kids who live in areas of conflict) as well as local ones (such as bullying in schools)?
Absolutely. I think of peace in the broadest sense because in small and large ways, everyone experiences violence in their lives. For some, it can be bullying or the use of unkind language, and for others, it can be war or genocide. There really is a large spectrum, and I believe it is important to address the small as well as the large-scale scenarios of violence.

There's been lots of news coverage lately about the bullying problem in many schools. What are some steps that a teen can take if she is currently experiencing or witnessing bully behavior?
The recent news about teens taking their own lives because of bullying is heartbreaking. It shows how small acts of cruelty can deeply impact a person's self-image. For this reason, it is extremely important that people stand up for what's right and speak out against bullying. Many students have begun organizing awareness campaigns and student groups to address bullying concerns. I think this is a great idea. The more awareness is drawn to the issue, the more people will feel the responsibility to speak up when they witness an act of bullying. If someone feels uncomfortable personally confronting a bullier, it is important to tell a teacher or administrator so that the behavior can be stopped before the problem escalates.

What's your major at Harvard and what do you hope to do after graduation?
I am a Joint Concentrator (double major) in Religion and Sociology, and I focus my studies on cases of mass violence.

After I graduate, I hope to use the academic skills I've cultivated to advance the cause of non-violence in a more elevated and meaningful way.

How do you balance grueling university life with Kids for Peace? What motivates you to keep going when you feel totally swamped?
Harvard is certainly challenging academically, but I strive to do well in school and balance that with Kids for Peace because in the long run, I know how important my education will be to my ability to make a difference. When I feel overwhelmed by the amount of work I have, I remind myself how fortunate I am to have the opportunity to go to school, because many others don't have that privilege. I sometimes look at a picture I have of my brother and me, and I'm motivated to keep working for peace until every child can grow up in a world that is nurturing and safe.

What has been the most rewarding moment for you thus far in working with Kids for Peace?
The most rewarding experience was when I brought the program to a women's and children's abuse center in Bolivia. It was amazing to see how much joy and healing Kids for Peace activities brought to the children who had been abused. I'll never forget the huge smiles on the faces of those kids, and the amount of good they were able to do in their community.

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