

Editors Column



Kaylyn Yu

Grade 12
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Albania's Streets: What One Mission Left Behind

In the scorching heat of the mid-day sun, a father of numerous children relentlessly sorts out trash within Tirana's streets, hoping to find something profitable. Meanwhile, on the other side of the city, the mother and her children sit and beg for money from the passerbys. This captures the daily life of a Romani family in Albania.

Considered a minority group in the country, those of Romani descent tend to have darker skin color in comparison to other Albanian people. With a difficult historical past, the Roma people are socially excluded, face high rates of poverty, and lack education structure. These people no longer feel hope for the future, according to the missionaries hosting the short-term mission I was a part of.

When I heard about the unfortunate conditions these people faced, my heart broke. I expected that the children my team would serve would be downcast due to their family circumstances. However, I was proven wrong as soon as we met the children. Joy sparked in their eyes as they



My mission team from Korean Central Presbyterian Church was glad to serve the Albanian missionaries by hosting VBS, painting houses, and leading praise.
[Source: Author, Kaylyn Yu]

welcomed us. My worries about their spirit washed away as they exhibited competency in understanding our intentions to share Jesus with Vacation Bible School (VBS), even through a language barrier.

On the last day of VBS, as I was cleaning up the church, I found a silver cup that we had created for a craft project. I re-

alized that it belonged to one of the young Roma girls I had made friends with, recognizing the flower I had helped place in her cup. When I asked one of the church members if she could return it to her at church service, they shook their head. She explained that the Roma children usually do not come to services, only VBS, and the church mostly consisted of other Albanian peo-

ple. The news was despondent, but there was nothing I could do. I decided to treasure the cup so I would remember the girl even after I reached home.

Our team had imagined we had seen the last of the Roma kids that day, but the team was in for a surprise when we were greeted by several of them at the church service. The missionaries seemed astounded as well—why would they visit for service when they had never done so before? I saw the answer in their gaze—we had changed their vision. I had never expected to view the fruits of our work so soon, but I realized we had turned this small building around. All the preparation and hardship we overcame as a team seemed completely worth it.

As I left Albania, I felt both pride and gratitude that God had used our team to glorify his kingdom, and hoped our influence would last for a long time. Every now and then, I will notice the shiny cup at the edge of my bookshelf and smile, reminiscing about what I had witnessed in Albania's streets this summer.

Student Reporter

Where Debate Meets American History



Jordyn Bak

Grade 11
Mira Costa High School

Pennsylvania, the second-oldest state in the United States, is rooted in United States history. Within this state, the historical city of Philadelphia and other areas such as Valley Forge have a deep connection to the American Revolution. Fortunately, I received the opportunity to participate in Founding Forward's Debate & Leadership Institute (DLI), a program that focuses on combining elements of American history into debate and leadership.

This was only my third time visiting the East Coast and my first time in Pennsylvania. This program also connected students from all over the country; I met others from Utah, Wisconsin, Maryland, Tennessee, New York, New Jersey, Maine, Ohio, Arkansas, Michigan, Massachusetts, Florida, etc. Meeting students from different states gave me new perspectives, especially on state cultures.

DLI was based in Valley Forge, the region where the first president, George Washington, trained his troops in the winter during the American Revolution. In addition to learning about the historical area of Valley Forge, one day was dedicated to the city of Philadelphia. In Philadel-



The bustling city of Philadelphia near the Union League of Philadelphia held not only history and entertainment, but also taught students much during the DLI program.
[Source: Author, Jordyn Bak]

phia, students toured historical sites such as the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, Benjamin Franklin's Carpenter's Hall, and Second National Bank.

While learning about American history, the program focused on American laws for the debate topic: Should Congress be required to authorize

the deployment of national security forces into states? DLI formatted the debate by having partners advocate for either the negation or the affirmation. The debate was held at the Union League of Philadelphia, historically a club to support Abraham Lincoln's efforts during the Civil War that now focuses on educating younger generations

through civic engagement.

When asked how debating at founding forward for the first time was, Emmeline Masie, a junior from Detroit, said: "They laid out the program very well to introduce new debaters to debating." Indeed, the DLI program welcomed both beginner and experienced debaters to participate. Through the group sessions, students were able to enhance and learn while preparing for the debate with small mock versions. For example, silly topics like whether to desert a meal or not were warm-up mini debates to further expand our skills.

In addition to group sessions, DLI held Socrates Cafes, which are sessions that initiate a casual discussion among a group. Similar to a Socratic seminar, questions are asked, and participants are free to discuss the topic like a casual conversation.

Despite having experience in debate, I found that there was still much for me to learn. Learning about American history, how to debate both sides, and diversified perspectives overall make DLI a worthy experience.

Student Reporter

My SYMF Music Competition Experience



Grace Song

Grade 9
Cypress High School

Does mindset really change the outcome of an event? Before this year, I probably would have said no. Especially when it came to music competitions, what mattered to me was one thing: how much I practiced. If I spent enough hours playing, fixing my mistakes, and memorizing the notes, I would then believe I would perform well. But after competing in the Southwestern Youth Music Festival (SYMF), I realized that while preparation matters, mindset can be just as important.

I've always loved playing the flute. From a young age, its bird-like sound captivated me. When I'm practicing by myself or performing for a small group of people, I don't think much about whether I'm "good enough." I simply enjoy making and playing music. Competitions, however, have always been different. The moment I know someone is judging me, I focus not on expressing the music, but avoiding mistakes and being perfect. Somewhere between all these worries, I forget the enjoyment of practicing and rather dread any sort of performance instead.



Changing my mindset from perfection to enjoying my music allowed me to overcome my fear of competitions.
[Source: Author, Grace Song]

So when my flute teacher encouraged me to participate in the SYMF competition this year, I was very hesitant. I knew from my previous competitions that I would end up feeling stressed and worried. Still, I agreed, hoping

that this experience would be different. I told myself that this time I would practice more, and that this practice would be what mattered the most.

For the next few months, I spent countless hours preparing my solo. However, the more I practiced, the more I found myself dreading my performance. I focused on everything that could go wrong, all the notes I might miss and the rhythms I might mess up. Instead of looking forward to sharing my music and enjoying it, I constantly imagined the worst-case scenario.

The night before the competition, seeing my worry and stress, my mom and my flute teacher reminded me of something simple: I wasn't playing for the judges; I was playing for myself. And those words stuck with me during the

competition day and during my performance. That night, I set my mind to not chasing perfection but simply enjoying the music.

That small change in mindset made a much bigger difference than I expected. On the competition day, I still felt nervous, but it wasn't the same overwhelming fear I had felt days before. When it was my turn to perform, I wasn't constantly thinking about each note or wondering what the judges were writing down. Instead, I focused on the story of the piece, of the back and forth of the flute and piano.

When I finished, I walked off feeling something I had never experienced after a competition before: satisfaction. Regardless of the results, I was so proud of myself because I had performed with joy and happiness. I ended up receiving 1st place and was delighted, yet when I think back on this experience, what sticks with me the most is that I finally understood that music wasn't about playing every note perfectly: it was about expressing yourself, sharing your music, and enjoying every moment of it.

Student Reporter

Young Voices: Advocating for Human Rights in Washington



Jenny (Sion) Kim
Grade 10
Orange County School of the Arts

A group of young students stands under the bright sun, sweat trickling down their faces. Even through the hot weather, their faces stay stern, hands tightly holding onto big signs that read ‘Be the Voice to the Voiceless’. By standing up for the people who have been denied the freedom that every individual deserves, we joined our efforts and took our first steps toward meaningful advocacy.

This summer, I have spent the most special three days away from home and surrounded by students united with a shared purpose. I had the opportunity to participate in the Korean Church Coalition (KCC) Internship, which is a mission-driven trip that educates students about the ongoing North Korean human rights crisis through firsthand experiences. As most of the students were not entirely familiar with the reality of the crisis in North Korea, the first night of KCC included a guest speaker session. The speaker, an actual escapee from North Korea, shared the experience of his brutal childhood under the oppressive dictatorship, while all of the students sat and listened.



The KCC Students stand with pickets, advocating for the rights of North Koreans.

[Source: Hyemi Kim]

The next day was very hot, and a group of pedestrians was gathered around our group and a stage that was set up for students to speak out individually. One of the internship’s highlighted events took place at a park near the White House, where each student carefully delivered their speeches to raise awareness of North Korean human rights. Although most of the participants, including myself, have admitted that they were unsure whether the efforts made would eventually lead to a real impact, our voices were full of confidence. Beyond the speech presentations, the congressional officers

in legislation departments related to North Korean human rights paid us a special visit during that time, and the students were introduced to the importance of informed and respectful civic participation.

While waiting for her turn to give her speech on stage, I asked my friend Ellie Choi about how she was feeling. “I was so nervous to speak in front of a large crowd, but as I saw many of our students proclaiming their thoughts about the freedom that should be given to all people, I gained courage to speak out with my own voice to the world,” she shared.

The internship lasted only three days, but its impact will last far beyond our time in Washington, D.C. Through firsthand experiences with public engagement and advocacy, all students left with a deeper understanding of how even young individuals, like themselves, can play a significant role in bringing attention to the unfortunate reality of North Korea, both within their community and far beyond. Although the trip has come to an end, the conversations that sparked and the responsibility that we felt marked the beginning of a lasting commitment to raise awareness for the voices that remain unheard.

Student Reporter

Ryman Arts: Where Artistry Meets Opportunity



Joy Shin
Grade 11
New Covenant Academy

There are many student artists out there who enjoy creating art and want to pursue that dream for their future, but haven’t yet been in a professional setting. To help these students achieve their dreams and provide an accessible class to improve their skills, Ryman Arts was established.

Ryman Arts stands out in the crowd of programs due to its generous and giving nature. It provides free studio art education and plenty of free materials to use. The only thing the students have to do is submit two art pieces and answer short essay questions to apply for the program. There are three semesters to complete in total, and job opportunities are even provided after graduation.

I have only attended one of the three semesters so far, which was the Foundational Drawing class held over the summer, and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there. The classes went over the fundamentals of art, like shape and drawing. Teachers taught students how to use graphite, colored pencils, and charcoal, as well as focused on the ability to



Ryman Arts goes over the basics of art, such as figure drawing. [Source: Grace Jeronimo]

draw from real-life objects.

In the summer, class is from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and assigned homework. It is encouraged to work hard on your homework because they intend for it to become the portfolio pieces that you can use for college applications. Every class period consists

of a critique of everyone’s homework, which gives an insight into college-level art classes. Additionally, towards the end of the program, the teacher offers one-on-one counseling, where they go over all the pieces made and also allows for students to ask questions, like about future art careers. It’s helpful because the

teachers have worked as artists and can give realistic advice. The last day of the program consists of an exhibition that includes one piece by every student, where their families are invited to come to view all of the students’ work.

I really enjoyed my time in Ryman Arts for many reasons. First, the whole program’s free, and they also provide all the art materials, which are very accessible. It was also a place where many passionate young artists who all share the same interests gathered. Looking at everyone’s pieces really motivated me because I was able to see their passions and how hard they worked on their pieces. I also made very good friends at the program, and it was a great space to get to know more people. It also pushed me to draw more in my free time, since I usually am too lazy to actually draw if I don’t have a deadline. The teacher also showed us famous art pieces every class, so I was able to broaden my knowledge of art and find more pieces that I like. Overall, the program was such a joy to be in, and I would recommend it to any student who enjoys making art!

Student Reporter

Memories and Ministry: Youth Mission Trip to Ensenada, Mexico



Kaylyn Wee
Grade 11
Ayala High School

For a week in July, I was blessed with the opportunity to go to Ensenada, Mexico for Inland Church’s youth mission trip. The group planned to host a Vacation Bible Study program, known as VBS, for the children at two churches and an orphanage we were going to visit. Our days were going to be packed with activities, early mornings, and late bedtimes, meaning we had to be prepared. Not only did we have to keep up with the physical schedule, but we also had to maintain a proper, humble mindset and a willingness to serve. This mission trip was a very memorable experience, as it taught me discipline and gratitude, while providing an opportunity to make new friends.

Before the mission trip, much preparation was needed. During the two months leading up to it, participating students, staff, and pastors had to plan dances, a skit, and activities for VBS. Every Sunday, we would meet from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. and would begin with a short Spanish lesson. It was important that we would be able to somewhat communicate with the children and adults we would meet so that we could have the best time possible. We then



The missionary team spent a day at the beach, which is where many meaningful memories were made. [Source: Author, Kaylyn Wee]

learned simple body worship dances, which are for the kids to follow along during VBS. Afterward, students separated into two groups: skit team and dance team, and we would practice our performances. Lastly, our high school youth pastor would lead us into a short message and worship time, in order for us to be reminded of the message of the mission trip. Although all of this preparation was tiring, it proved worthwhile once we experienced VBS with the kids.

As mentioned earlier, we held

VBS for children at two churches in Mexico, and an orphanage for children with disabilities or experiences with abuse. We would start by welcoming the children into the room: cheering, saying hello, and sitting alongside them. This transitioned into body worship time, where the students would go on stage, and the children would have to follow our motions to the music playing. After three songs, the dance team would perform, followed by the skit team. With excitement in the atmosphere, our junior high pastor would then preach his short

message to the kids about the gospel. While doing this, students separated into their assigned activity groups, ranging from crafts, balloon art, and face paint. Our energy was upbeat, and everyone on our team expressed how meaningful each moment was.

Although each day was tiring, it allowed everyone to bond and create memories together. One of our “free-time” activities was going to the beach. We swam in the water, ate delicious food, and played in the sand for hours. Even the little moments, such as playing name games during downtime or talking during meals and late nights, brought our small team closer together. Alongside serving others, these friendships were another important reason why the trip felt successful.

Through prayer and volunteer work, this mission trip to Mexico was a blessing and enlightening. We learned how to have gratitude and how to humble ourselves to help other people and children. This experience was one of the most rewarding, exhilarating, yet exhausting events of my life, and I will never take this time for granted.