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Project to unite Bangladeshi kids

by Julie Masis

Two students from Boston returned to their native Bangladesh this summer to bring together young people from different social and educational backgrounds.

Ejaj Ahmad, who just graduated from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and Shammi Quddus, a biology student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, won a \$10,000 Davis Projects for Peace prize in April and a \$2,500 grant from the MIT Public Service Center to start the Chittagong-based pilot program.

Called "Building Bridges Through Leadership Training," the summer program will bring together 30 Bangladeshi high school students of different educational backgrounds — English, Bengali and Islamic seminary — for a leadership workshop.

In her project proposal, Quddus — who grew up in Bangladesh, but learned to speak English from watching American cartoons on television — explains that in Bangladesh there are three distinct schooling systems: the state system — called Bengali — where courses are taught in Bengali; the English system, that follows the British curriculum and caters to the upper middle class; and the madrassa that focuses on Islamic theology.

"Having attended high school in Bangladesh, I understand the lack of communication that exists between these groups," Quddus writes. "Bengali medium students consider their English medium counterparts as snobs whereas the English medium students find it inconceivable to find common ground with their Bengali medium peers. ... The Madrassa students are even more alienated due to their strong religious convictions and priorities."

The summer project will require Bangladeshi students to work in teams of six and come up with their own project ideas. One exercise will be to go to the city with cameras and come back with ideas which will be presented to the whole class, Quddus suggests in the proposal. In the end, each team's project will receive funding and team-members whose project is judged best by a committee will be interviewed by a leading Bangladeshi daily newspaper.

"By working towards a common goal, participants will bridge gaps and develop tolerance towards differing beliefs and values," Quddus writes in the proposal. Ahmad and Quddus are partnering with the Bangladeshi Ministry of Youth and Sports, the New Age daily newspaper and the "Youth Power in Social Action" non-governmental organization on the project.

Quddus and Ahmad hope that the "Building Bridges Through Leadership Training" program will become a pilot program for the more long-term Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center, which they would like to model after the City Year program in the

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United States. They will collect and analyze data after the completion of the summer program, to understand how much social impact the program is having, Ahmad wrote in an email. They plan to run another Youth Leadership program in Bangladesh in December, according to Ahmad.

The "Building Bridges Through Leadership Training" began July 15 and runs through August 15 in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

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