



http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/high_school_artists_orphanages
U.S. High School Artists Create Lifelong Gifts for Children at Orphanages Abroad

About the Author:

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Imagine growing up as an orphan with no photos of your youth: no family albums, no favorite places to remember, not even a picture of yourself. This was the situation an orphaned aid worker related to student volunteer Ben Schumaker when they looked after Guatemalan children together one summer.



“He encouraged us to help the kids collect special belongings that would honor their personal heritage and identity,” Ben recalled. “He went on to explain that he did not have any items from his youth . . . and no parents to help him look back on his own development.”

Ben, who liked creating portraits himself, came up with the idea of asking talented art students in the United States to paint portraits of children who were living in difficult circumstances, so that the orphans would have a memento of their early years. Building on the concept of his Guatemalan colleague, Ben contacted orphanages overseas and art teachers in the United States and thus began the Memory Project in 2004. Today, the Memory Project, along with another project called Books of Hope, is part of My Class Cares, a non-profit (501(c)3), which Ben and his wife run as partners to inspire caring friendship and a positive self-image.

The Memory Project has been featured on national television several times, most notably when Katie Couric concluded her first broadcast of the CBS Evening News with a story about the project's success at an orphanage in Nicaragua. A CBS follow-up to that story aired Monday, August 2, 2010, and featured student artists from Nashua, New Hampshire visiting reproductions of their portraits on display in the State Department's Exhibit Hall, in an exhibition sponsored by the U.S. Diplomacy Center. Talking before the news camera about the portraits they created of orphans in Pattaya, Thailand, the young artists express in their own words why the connection with a child across the world means so much to them, and how they used tubes of paint, brushes and canvas to learn what it means to be a citizen-diplomat.

Ben notes that the art experience “provides an opportunity for young Americans to literally come face-to-face with kids living in orphanages around the world and hopefully to develop care for their well-being.” He is always looking for new ways to create contacts between orphanages and artists, and told staff at the U.S. Diplomacy Center that he would welcome working with embassies and consulates to expand his outreach. To date, he has provided 25,000 portraits for orphans, but hopes to expand that number -- many times over. ■ *More information at www.memoryproject.org.*