Our Conversation with Lynn Zhang

Lynn Zhang, a senior with passions for intercultural communication and music, is studying International Comparative Studies with a minor in French. Her social venture, Harmonies for Health, combines music and student service to bring child and elderly patients at the Ronald McDonald House and Durham Nursing and Rehabilitation Center joy from music and human connection. Lynn was a child patient herself and turned to music for support, pursuing piano and harp. While not actively pursuing a career in health, Lynn is a yoga instructor on campus with the passionate belief that everyone should have an interest in health- either their own, their family’s or their community’s.

**Duke I&E:** Explain the beginnings of Harmonies for Health.

**LZ:** In my sophomore year, I took an Arts and Social Entrepreneurship class with Professor Katie Wyatt, who is also the co-founder and CEO of KidzNotes. Kidznotes is a social venture that offers quality after-school music programs to underprivileged students in Durham and is expanding in the Triangle. With the Kidnotes model as an inspiration, my co-founder Sam and I collaborated over the idea of introducing music to seriously ill children. We recognized the power of music, especially in times of helplessness and hopelessness.

**Duke I&E:** So you came out of this class with a business plan, how do follow through on this business plan following this course?

**LZ:** We applied for funding to start the project with a set of instruments to store at Ronald McDonald House for both the children and student volunteers. However, we initially had a hard time getting funding. I also had a crazy summer break taking classes in Australia, working in Shanghai, completing yoga instructor training in Bali. We took a brief pause to figure out if we wanted to continue pursuing this or not. However, during that summer I kept talking to people and eventually connected with someone who was willing to fund the $2000 needed for instruments. Because of a serendipitous private donation, we hit the ground running the following fall semester.

**Duke I&E:** Now the program is up and running at two locations, the Ronald McDonald House and the Durham Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, and you mentioned the program has greatly improved the lives of the patients and helped students cultivate empathy. How does empathy play a role in future projects for Harmonies for Health?

**LZ:** Harmonies for Health is participating in the Clinton Global Initiative University (CGIU) with a new project to develop a college level empathy curriculum. We want to create a pilot program at Duke and are seeking approval from the pre-medical department to offer a required or elective curriculum. The curriculum would encourage students to attend empathy-related conferences, workshops, or talks in conjunction with a service program on campus defined as empathy-fostering.
**Duke I&E:** You’re attending CGIU, however you are senior and will be leaving Duke before you can implement this new program. How have you encouraged sustainability within Harmonies for Health to expand and implement new programs after you leave?

**LZ:** Our Harmonies for Health executive team is much more like a family rather than bureaucratic executive board. Our exec members can take a semester off for various reasons, however they always return. Little things like bringing them to my room for tea and conversation after exec meetings has helped us stay bonded and self-motivated. This is so unique, and our organization culture has exceeded the basic culture for a student group, becoming more like a family or startup in which everyone feels invested.

**Duke I&E:** Do you have any advice for other undergraduate students who want to pursue their own social ventures?

**LZ:** Pursuing a project through is the most difficult aspect for students. We all have great ideas on how to change the world, but just doing it can be difficult. If you want to start something, start it now. Now is the time when you have energy, people around you to click with and abundant resources. Don’t be concerned about sacrificing a little academic time to pursue a project because it will really enrich your Duke experience. Harmonies for Health has most helped me see who I am and feel centered in this community.