

TESTIMONY OF DENNY JOHNSON

TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION HEARING

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Defending the Rights of Vulnerable Children and Youth through Education: A Focus on the Role of Self-teaching and Play

Kids Around the World exists to bring hope to children living in challenging circumstances. Our programs focus on leveraging Play, Nutrition and Teacher Training using faith based storytelling skills. To date we have built 650 playgrounds in 64 countries, 50 in the USA. Our organization has shipped 20,000,000 meals to kids and trained thousands of teachers.

Our playgrounds: Park Districts all over America are changing out their playgrounds for new ones. Old ones are destined for the land fill. They call us. We rescue them! Repair of the donated used playgrounds by park districts, takes place using volunteers, students struggling with life issues plus local prisoners and addicts in recovery.

PLAY: PLAYGROUNDS.....*THE EFFECT ON KIDS*

Play teaches children fundamental societal values and skills. Conflict resolution, fairness, trust, collaboration and forgiveness, building blocks for a civil society, are learned on monkey-bars and swing-sets.

I often hear my wife tell me that she feels so much better after a run in the morning. She gets the same rush of serotonin that kids get, when they play on the playground. This chemical in the brain is released in kids as they play and exert energy.

A feeling of belonging. When kids play together on a regular basis, they feel a sense of “belonging”. When accompanied by their parents, who may help push them on a swing or catch them on a slide, they feel loved and part of a family.

PLAY: PLAYGROUNDS..... *THE EFFECT ON MOMS, DADS AND CAREGIVERS.*

When the war in Sarajevo ended USAID asked us to build a playground for the children of this war-torn city. The site that they selected was where Christians, with a hill advantage, shot at Muslims where children ran through hand dug trenches to go to secure food and attend a makeshift school. We filled the trenches and built a beautiful playground complete with benches for moms and dads to watch their children play. The playground brought joy and fun to the kids but also helped to mend the hurts of war, as Christians and Muslims sat together socializing while watching their children play together, as if the war had not even happened.

Many Dads are missing from the family today....in the USA and around the world. A play area gives Dads an easy way to do something with their child.... bonding.... enjoying time together, regardless of income or wealth. It's also true about moms and caregivers. Time together.

PLAY: PLAYGROUNDS.... *THE EFFECT ON COMMUNITIES.*

When we build a playground, we look for local volunteers to help, giving them a feeling of ownership. This was true in Brovary a suburb of Kiev. The local mayor loved the thought of receiving a playground. Since the first playgrounds were built, local entrepreneurs and the city has continued to build more parks. Years later, the town had been transformed into a model city. According to the mayor, the playgrounds were the catalyst - creating a community with healthy values oriented toward children - resulting in many young people choosing Brovary as the place to live and raise their families.

PLAY: PLAYGROUNDS.... *THE EFFECT ON NATIONS.*

We work with many partners....in Haiti, after the earthquake, we built 50 playgrounds at Compassion International's orphanages, including one for Greta Van Susteren at her "Greta's Home and Academy".

10 projects were developed in Northern Iraq (Kurdistan), in collaboration with Samaritans Purse. These "Child Friendly Spaces" became safe play environments where Iraqi, Kurdish and Yazidi children impacted by the threat of ISIS, could play, interact and learn to laugh again.

In Lebanon, we developed 3 separate play sites, tucked inside of communities that are co-located with Syrian refugee camps and settlements. Our partners there are reporting success stories from effectively leveraging the play activities toward playgrounds with therapeutic outcomes, as families come together for joint counseling and interaction on the playgrounds. Children drop their guards and are able to open up in new ways, and parents are able to focus on their children's needs in ways that have been difficult to achieve in a flight environment. 3 more projects are scheduled for development in Lebanon later this year.

We receive routine reports from partners of how children that had suffered from PTSD-induced anxiety attacks and anger outbursts, begin to relax, trust and return to child-appropriate behavior, as a result of play.

Finally, our work in Jordan began last year with two playground builds with partners serving the Syrian refugee communities there. Each site hosts children's programs and one is a dedicated school (K-9) for children that would otherwise not be afforded the opportunity to public education. 4 more projects are scheduled for 2017 in Jordan, with one of them being inside of Atari Camp, the fifth largest camp in Jordan, with a population of 80,000 Syrian refugees (60% of these are under the age of 16).

Organizations like Compassion, Samaritan's Purse, World Vision, USAID, **UNICEF, Rotary, Kiwanis, Foundations, Churches, NGOs and private donations help fund the playgrounds including local communities donating sand, land and labor.

PLAY: A FINAL THOUGHT

Over the past 22 years, It has been an honor and blessing to help children and their families in great need around the world through the simple gift of play. Partnering with our US stakeholders – these include businesses, churches, schools and individuals. Kids Around the World finds that our model of harvesting and repurposing American manufactured playgrounds - due to their quality, safety and durability - provides the very best overall value to the recipients, which are the children and their communities.

I like to think of these big, beautiful, multi-colored playgrounds as ambassadors from our country to theirs. Ambassadors for peace*. Inherent within each are the principles that shaped our great nation – the universal, God given and unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness which includes “Play”.

Dennis Johnson, Founder & Chairman of Kids Around the World

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*Kids Around the World has built 11 playgrounds at orphanages in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

**UNICEF helped us in Cuba, enabling us to build 3 playgrounds on the island.

125 playgrounds are scheduled to be built this year with over 500 volunteers.