



**2011 Topic Question:** As a Youth Ambassador choose one issue/problem you would focus on for improving the lives of youth in the current country you live in (the U.S. can apply too). What would your focus issue be and how would you convince others that this is an important issue to tackle and prioritize, given there are so many problems/issues that need attention?

### **High School Category**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Place: A Tibetan Youth Ambassador Comes to America by Chungdhak Lhamo Sherpa**

I am a little shy about saying that I am a Youth Ambassador. No one elected me and no one selected me. But maybe life has already taught me some things that I can share with my new country, America.

I am from Tibet and I had a long and difficult journey to arrive here. In Tibetan, there is a proverb, "Without climbing the cliff of adversity, one cannot arrive at the meadow of happiness." I guess you can say it is our version of "No pain, no gain." In many ways, I have struggled to climb to this "meadow of happiness" which is America.

In my American school I have met many kind and brilliant students (and of course teachers!) but I have also been surprised at the problems I have seen. There are many young people who are kind of lost chasing things like drugs, and sex, and various popular consumer items. I also see many students who do not realize how lucky they are to live in a free country and have the chance to study and learn. I do not mean to sound like am better than them, but some do seem a little lazy and undisciplined, and often very superficial. What seems so important to them, just really isn't very important when we think about all of the problems in the world and all of the suffering.

So that is the problem I want to talk about. How can we help American students be more happy by helping them to realize what is really important and by helping them to be part of a community of friends and family, and part also of a community of service. I have been given a great opportunity to study in this country, and I want to return that gift by sharing some things I have learned in my short life.

Let me start with my background. I lived in a little village herding yak and sheep and goat until I until I was ten years old. It was a very hard and poor life and it was not paradise. But we had something important: we had each other. We didn't have depression, loneliness, and insecurity. We had to work too hard to survive to have those things. I will not tell you why I had to leave, and how difficult it was for me to leave. But at a young age, I was forced to leave my country and fled to India for exile.

During my time in India, I mostly lived in a community of Tibetan exiles. I would say that discipline at school was very strict. I don't know if that is good or bad. But the most important part of the discipline was that our whole family and our whole community was responsible if we made a bad reputation. You might say, "who cares what other people think." But we really had a community and knew each other very well. And so we did care what other people thought because we cared about them and they cared about us. That leads me to my first suggestion for American students. Get to know your neighbors, and get to know what you can do to help them. So my first suggestion is to have a "National Student Neighbor Day." On this day, every student must visit every one of their neighbors and find out something they can do to help them. The motto of my school in India by the way was, "Others Before Self." Sometimes the motto here seems to be "Self Before Others!"

I think the second thing we had was meaning. I don't want to say that everyone should become religious. I really like the idea of religious freedom and I also agree there are a lot of fake religious people! But what I mean is that we understood in our bones that actions have consequences. This actually made us feel connected to everything. So my second idea would be for a "National Student Day of Meaning." On this day, everyone has to turn off their cell

phone, and no one can watch television or surf the Internet or play computer games. Maybe there should be a community dinner with only local food and for most of the day, talk should also be limited. The idea is that every student uses this day to find something in their life that gives them meaning, or purpose.

Finally, I don't think we can make anyone suffer on purpose, but if we don't do the things we don't want to do, we become weak. And if we never meet the beggar's eyes, we will never understand suffering. What this means is that I think we need a "National Student Day of Changing Places." I grew up in a place where everyone was poor and someone with money was rare. In this county, there is a lot of wealth, but also I was surprised at how many people are suffering. So I think we need to remember that they are also human. On the "National Student Day of Changing Places" students would live one day in the life and family of a family that is struggling. I think this would be a good way to show us that we are all human, and that if we are fortunate to have a wealthy life, we should be compassionate for those who don't.

I am a peer counselor at my American school now. I do not think the problems I see of drugs, depression, insecurity, consumerism, etc., can be solved by lecturing. But I do think they can be greatly helped, by connecting with each other. Friends, family, neighbors, communities, meaning, compassion can't just be empty words we don't have time for. We must find the time for these essentials of a happy life.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Diplomacy – Education for Now, Jobs for the Future by Castilleja Kuzis**

What did you dream of being as a child? Maybe a doctor, lawyer, or representative in the Foreign Service, either way as a child you had the opportunity to pursue that dream, an opportunity that many children in Sri Lanka lack. Due to the problems in the education system of Sri Lanka, many children never get the opportunity to fulfill their dreams. This, in conjunction with the labor industry, leaves many children limited to careers as housecleaners

or unskilled factory workers. I have had the privilege to attend good schools in America and pursue my dreams, and I feel all children deserve that. If I had the role of Youth Ambassador, I would work to improve the lives of Sri Lanka's young people and show the importance of good schooling for the future labor force.

It is important to understand that Sri Lanka's labor force is largely, unskilled male workers. In addition, Sri Lanka's largest source of income is from remittances that are sent home by the estimated 1.7 million migrant workers who leave Sri Lanka to work as housemaids and laborers in other countries. To find work within Sri Lanka, many unskilled youth turn to the garment industry. Unlike the majority of South Asia, Sri Lanka's wages are low, yet fair, and child labor is heavily restricted. So for the 41% of Sri Lankans employed in this area they have little to no labor complaints. Yet outside of this, the biggest problem arises. To gain entry into the sector of skilled labor you must have a certain degree of English competency and a minimum of eight years of schooling. Children that do not finish school, or are not exposed to the English language join the over 61% of people employed informally with no governmental wage support, no restrictions on child labor, and no high aspirations for advancement.

When looking to address the situation, improvements need to be made now. These changes can be made in the most basic ways to broaden the possibilities of children. The 2011 US Commercial Guide to Business in Sri Lanka states, "Many investors have faced problems in finding sufficient employees with the requisite skills." These skills can be as basic as construction training, fluency in English, and skills in technology. To address this, the government does little. Colleges are overcrowded and foreign colleges are not allowed to train people in Sri Lanka. Improvements as little as more funding to improve English classes in schools or opening vocational training courses could greatly help my generation have more opportunities as they enter the working world.

Since I have moved to Sri Lanka this has become a very personal issue. Weekly, I volunteer teaching English in a girl's orphanage and on one of my very first days; I talked to the

girls about their futures. They all aim to go to college and become doctors, teachers, or businesswomen, but after talking to the head mistress of the school she explained many girls will never have the opportunity to attend college because they cannot afford it or gain entry. Many of the girls are orphans because their mother left to find work in other countries. I was told it is likely the girls will have to do the same. It outrages me that these bright-motivated girls will never have the opportunities they deserve because of both the education system and the labor industries. Even if they were to get into college, women make up the largest unemployed group in Sri Lanka. It can easily be seen that this is a pertinent issue that affects the whole of my generation in this country.

As youth ambassador, addressing this issue I would convince others this is pertinent issue by speaking on the impact of unemployment on youth and women. Along with this, I would also young girls willing to speak, that have had the opportunities to learn English and gain skills. They would hopefully speak on how because of this they were able to improve their lives, their families' lives, and their community. Many women involved with non-governmental organizations are perfect examples. After raising awareness through speeches, I would work to expand embassy-teaching programs and find partners willing to fund or organize classes. As the programs expand and larger numbers of the youth become involved it would show they are wanted and needed. With an increased number of reading programs and small vocational classes, it would be easy to gain support from children, adults, and other non-governmental organizations to assist in planning and funding.

In the larger national scale, I understand these measures would not draw the necessary reforms in the education system and the labor industry, yet the important thing is that these measures would prepare more children to face these issues and then take it into their own hand to better the working sector. Even a small decrease in unemployment as my generation becomes more skilled workers, would improve Sri Lanka's whole quality of life. The results would speak for themselves. As Youth Ambassador, I believe this is a long-term issue and its

importance can easily be seen. My generation is one for change and this cause has the potential to improve things for the better and help Sri Lanka's youth to have a brighter future.

### **Sources**

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Doing Business in Sri Lanka: 2011 Commercial Guide for U.S. Companies

### **Middle School Category**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Place: American Culture in Saint-Petersburg by Andriy Etcheverry**

My first impression upon arriving at post in Saint Petersburg was, "Wow, this place seems ancient!" and my second thought was, "And it's different... very different." I loved the town from the first moment. It's the first time I've ever lived downtown in a big city. My family and I have spent the last year and a half discovering its wonders and digging down through the layers of its history. One Saturday afternoon we might check out a 300-year-old palace, follow that up with a trip to the bowling lanes, and then finish off the day with a boat ride along the Neva River to enjoy the White Nights.

It didn't take long for the fact that we were no longer in Virginia to settle in, especially when the temperature dropped way down to -22F the week we arrived. Almost daily, something about the Russian culture and language amazes me, yet I have to admit that there is something I notice about popular culture among Russians my age that I find a little disturbing and even sad. So many young Russians have decided that to be cool, they have to act like Westerners, copying clothing, language, hairstyles, and even the movies they want to watch, while dismissing their own history and customs.

This culture replacement is everywhere. For example, Russians love to eat бизнес ланч's (Business Lunch), shop at Секонд Хенд (Second Hand) stores, and wear clothes with

“Стайл” (Style). And, unfortunately, they use American slang and foul language more often than I care to hear at times, too.

Often times, Russians will pay unbelievable prices for trendy clothes that came from the U.S. or somewhere else in the West; these prices might be two or three times the price we pay back home and generally the quality is not as good as what we are accustomed to. On the other hand, the clothes made here are more suited to the local weather, and Russian styles are uniquely attractive. I have seen people dressed like a character in a biker or a cowboy movie, and my reaction was always the same--why? It's good that young people here are interested in other cultures and customs, but I am sorry that so many of them think that their own history and culture are old-fashioned. Some kids are like this because they think that their parents' world is out of style, especially because so much has changed since their parents were teens—back in the Soviet days. The tragedy is that they are willing to let some of the best features of their culture slip away—music, dance, literature, arts, and language—because they want to be what they call modern, and what I would call just average.

Whenever I get the chance I try to share my culture with people I meet, but I also ask them to share theirs with me. I make a point of stressing how interesting and unique they are, hoping to encourage them to preserve their heritage and strive to be unique. When Peter the Great built Saint Petersburg in the early eighteenth century, his goal was to open a window to the West, to open Russia to the world, but he and all of the great leaders after him made enormous efforts to preserve their national identity along the way. I am saddened when I run across examples here of attempts to turn this country into East America, especially since there is so much to be proud of just the way things are.

Russia has played a major role in world history. They kicked out invaders from the south, started a new church (Russian Orthodox), defended against fascists, made historic advances in the arts sciences, and so much more. As we get further away in time from some of the more recent great accomplishments of the Russian people, like the huge sacrifice they made in World War II and sending the first man to space, I think young people here become

less connected to their heritage and more confused about who they actually are. This may happen all over the world, but as long as I am here, I will continue to remind them just how impressive their past is and how important it will be to their future for them to remember it.

### **Joint 2<sup>nd</sup> Place: “Mushroom Orphans” by Anna Bailey**

*You are nine years old when your mom decides to move to Ireland. She says there are better work opportunities there. You are left to live with your grandma. Your mom sends a check every month and she visits for Christmas, but other than that, you don't see her or hear from her. She insists that it is because she is working to provide a better life for you. When you were younger, you believed her, but now that you are a teenager, you just don't know. You think that she may not love you anymore....*

More and more children and teenagers in Latvia are faced with this problem as parents immigrate to countries such as Ireland to make more money. Latvian kids in this situation are sometimes referred to as “mushroom orphans” because originally when parents migrated to Ireland or other countries it was to pick mushrooms. Although nowadays most Latvian immigrants are not working in mushroom fields, the problem is still the same; jobs in Latvia are limited, and the people who have jobs are not paid enough to support themselves and their families. They feel the need to move somewhere where job opportunities are better.

The average annual salary in Latvia is around \$5,500. When compared to the average annual salary in the United States, \$36,000, it is obvious that many Latvian people are living in poverty. This poverty pushes many parents to migrate and try to make a better life for themselves and their children.

When parents are deciding whether or not to move away from Latvia, they often focus on their financial duties, and they underestimate the emotional cost to their children. After their parents leave, many mushroom orphans become sullen and withdrawn. These children

often fall behind on their schoolwork. They miss their parents and because their grandparents are old, they often do not get the same care or attention they would get with their parents.

When the mushroom children become teenagers, they can feel neglected and unloved. Latvian teenagers that feel this way often turn to alcohol. This can have an even greater effect on their education and can put them in dangerous situations. Although the legal drinking age in Latvia is 18, it is not strictly enforced, so anyone can easily obtain alcohol. Because teenagers are still growing and developing, putting alcohol into the body is dangerous. It can cause problems with the nervous system and it can damage a young person's developing brain.

Alcohol is not the only problem facing these mushroom orphans. Most of them end up with grandparents who may be too old to take an active role in their lives. Perhaps the hardest challenge the mushroom orphans face is simply not having "mommy and daddy" at home to teach them and guide them. They are left to face the world alone.

So far, the Latvian government has not been able to solve this problem. It has begun to discuss some possible solutions, such as government support for families who stay in Latvia, increasing educational opportunities, and stimulating the economy. But so far, none of these measures have convinced parents to come back. It is important that they do something about this issue because if they do not it will keep happening. Children will grow up, have children, and then leave. With all the able-bodied workers leaving, the economy will not be able to grow. With no economic growth, Latvia will not be able to progress and life will not get better for the Latvian citizens.

This is not an easy problem to solve. I am not a parent so I cannot begin to understand what these Latvian parents feel when they decide to leave their home and search for a better job. They probably are thinking of their kids. They probably want to provide their kids with the newest shoes and a nice phone. This is understandable. Parents always want the best for their children. But children need and want more than just "stuff." If I were a "mushroom orphan," I would prefer to be surrounded by a family that loved me. I would rather be poor and with my

parents than have money and be alone. If Latvian parents start coming back, families will be put back together. Slowly but surely, Latvian society and the economy will begin to heal.

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**Joint 2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Making My Community a Better Place by Providing Food and Housing for All  
by Olivia Mozdierz**

If I had the freedom and power to make a positive change in the world, I could and would want to do many things. To me, having food and housing are two of the most important necessities for having a decent life. But thousands of people here in Bolivia and around La Paz don't even have these basics. Below I will explain why we need to work together toward reaching this goal and how we can do it.

There is enough food for everyone. But still tens of thousands of people in Bolivia don't have enough to eat and many children are suffering from hunger every day. So we need to do a better job of distributing the food so that everyone gets their share. Right now, rich people here use up too much and throw out too much. At the same time, poor people in my city go hungry.

What can we do to end hunger? First, we need to eat more conscientiously. We should make an effort to eat nutritious meals and avoid junk food and fast food.

Second, we need to eat leftovers or make smaller meals so that we don't throw out food. We need to check the refrigerator every day to see if there is food that needs to be eaten right away so that it doesn't go bad. When we do that, we not only use up less food, we also save money. When we have too much food that needs to be eaten before it goes bad, you can package it up and take it to the market where there are always poor people asking for food.

We all could also buy a little bit of non-perishable food for poor people, such as pasta, rice or powdered milk, every time we go shopping and put it in a special box for them in our pantries. When the box is full, we can take it to needy people who otherwise would go hungry. Many companies and organizations, such as the American and British International Association (ABIA), UNICEF or SAVE THE CHILDREN, can give us the addresses of people to whom we can deliver the food in La Paz. Each of us students can also do our share. For example, we could buy a small package of powdered milk a month from our allowances to make our personal contributions to end hunger in our own neighborhood and help our peers in La Paz who are not as fortunate as we are.

Housing is another basic need of all people. Everyone should have a warm, dry and safe place to live in. People who have money can take care of their own housing needs, but poor people need help. They need help from their government, from their community and from people who are well-off and can afford to help them out. About two months ago, there were huge landslides here in La Paz, which left more than 8,000 people homeless. They lost everything – their homes and all their belongings. Habitat for Humanity gets volunteers to help build homes for the poor, such as the victims of landslides. When a poor family gets a home, they not only get a place to live but they also get a chance for a better life for themselves and their children. I have worked on several Habitat building projects, carrying bricks for hours and filing in cement between the individual bricks so that they stick together and sometimes even carrying buckets of cement to where it's needed. It is hard work, but it is worth it. Volunteers don't do it for themselves; they do it because they want less fortunate people to have a decent home, too. The more people there are working for Habitat, the more houses can be built for the poor and the victims of the landslides. Now that there are thousands of people around La

Paz living in tents, it is even more important that people sign up to help build houses for the people in our area who lost their homes.

If people are not able to work on a construction site, they can contribute to Habitat for Humanity in many other ways. For example, I have also organized a fashion show fundraiser for Habitat. I involved the girls of Girl Scout Troop to be the models and invited all their parents to the show. For this event, I sold entrance tickets to the parents and organized a small food and beverages stand. This way I was able to raise \$5, which I donated to a Habitat family towards the plumbing in their house.

In addition to having a roof over your head, it is also important that the homes are safe and cozy places to live so when you come home you can relax and be happy. Many people don't have that. In Bolivia, there are a lot of young girls who have suffered abuse in their own families. Therefore, they now live in a girls' shelter. Here in La Paz, these places do not have much money and so they are not very cozy. So I joined a U.S. Embassy team of mostly adults and we painted the inside walls of a shelter for girls age 14-17. It was great to help these girls make their home fresh, bright and welcoming. While painting together with them, I also got to chat with them about their school, their age and their interests. All of this together showed them that there are people that care about them.

So, when we all chip in and do a little, we can make a difference and help less fortunate people in and around La Paz to have a better life!

