



## SUCCESS STORY

# Sustainable Steps in Self-realization

### Democracy Camps turn Kyrgyzstani students into community activists



Photo: IFES

*Zarina (left) and Dinara (right), project creators.*



Photo: IFES

*Zarina (front left) at a Theatre Camp Festival.*

***“When your project is a bolt of lightning in somebody’s life, you want to do more and more,” says Zarina, manager of the project.***

USAID and the implementing partner International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) have been raising the hopes of young people in Kyrgyzstan through Democracy Camps for over a decade. Democracy Camps are 10-day programs for 9-10th grade students that teach leadership skills, teamwork, democratic values and project management. Students leave with a sense of self-reliance, knowledge of their role as citizens and democratic principles, and a desire to improve their communities. Since 2000, participants have conducted hundreds of different follow-on projects, ranging from school elections and debates, to trainings for school administrators, to charitable service projects. The alumni belong to a National Network of Democracy Camp Alumni that reinforces the values and lessons learned at camp.

In December 2010, members of the alumni network succeeded in implementing their own Theater Camp project after getting financial support from the Open Society Institute. The project aimed to increase youth involvement in problem-solving through village dramas. The project brought youth together to discuss and identify problems from their communities and turn them into a play. The play was presented to multiple audiences who address the play’s topic through discussion. The project was implemented in 10 schools in Bishkek, with plays created and presented by students together with three alumni trainers and three actors from the Russian Drama Theatre. Support from the Minister of Youth and the 10 participating schools also contributed to the project’s success. After a village drama was completed in the 10 schools, a festival was organized for each school to share its play.

The “Theater Camp” participants shared their 10 plays with over 200 students at the festival. Along with presenting a new way to address social issues, the festival provided the opportunity for a repeat performance, allowing participants to become more confident on stage and gain a better understanding of performing theater. One mark of the Democracy Camps’ success is in their sustainability and adaptability into other creative outlets, such as Theater Camps, which showcase the creativity, leadership and commitment to excellence of dedicated young persons.

Zarina Urmanbetova, manager of the project and member of the National Network of Democracy Camp Alumni, attributes her success to her participation in a Democracy Camp in 2006: “The skills that I received from Camp I use in my life, and they are working!”