Dear Reader,

I could describe Project LINC in many ways: a fulfilling and enjoyable summer project; a way to help those who are less fortunate than I am; a life-changing adventure. And it’s true, Project LINC was all of those things. But it was also a learning experience, in ways that I never imagined. Being a part of this project helped me improve so much more than just my Kannada speaking skills. Looking back at the last four months, I realize that I’ve gained some valuable life skills from this crazy, incredible experience.

Working in a team with four other girls of varying ages meant that we were bound to have arguments. Disagreements were rarely clear cut, and we were usually dealing with five drastically different opinions. For example, we had to decide very early in the project which students to donate solar lights to. We had four different schools to choose from. Not only that, but we also had to decide which grades to donate to. On the one hand, high school students would have more homework so a light would benefit them more. However, they would graduate soon and go to college or start working somewhere, so maybe it was better to donate to middle school students. The teachers from one school had assured us that 10th graders would benefit from lights the most, but the teachers from another school hadn’t said anything. To complicate the matter more, we only had 197 lights so we couldn’t give one to every single child in each school. We had to narrow down the choices somehow...should we favor the girls? We’d heard that gender didn’t play a very large role in education in Agara, so girls and boys were treated fairly equally. Opinions and ideas were flying around everywhere. Our group chat was blowing up. And we still didn’t have an answer. At that point we were getting nowhere, and the only way to find a solution was if everyone compromised. Several discussions, arguments, and phone calls later, we did compromise and everyone was somewhat happy with the decision. We decided to donate lights to every student at the two high schools (7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th grade) in the villages of Agara and Mamballi. We were short by about five lights, so we would only donate one light per household. We hoped there would be at least five pairs of siblings across both schools (Eventually we didn’t have to worry about that, since there weren’t as many students in each school as we had expected). This solution was the result of several hours of meeting, talking, and persuading each other. We all knew each other as friends or cousins until then, but from that day on we began to regard each other as coworkers. We realized that we had to maintain a level of professionalism throughout this project, regardless of how long we had known each other. This was an entirely different context than the many summers we had spent with each other before. This summer was different.

Possibly the biggest challenge we faced was communication. During the early stages of the project, we had to communicate often with Jen Greene, our project manager from One Million Lights. She was very helpful whenever we had questions, but we could only communicate with her via email or phone. We weren’t used to that - we have always been able to talk to our teachers or peers face to face. In addition, we didn’t always remember to include everyone on each email. Eventually, Shivani took on the unofficial role of communication
manager, which made everything easier. She would relay information back and forth between Jen and the rest of us. However, that wasn’t the end of our problems.

Soon after we started the fundraising process, Shreya and Shweta left for India. There, they talked to the teachers and principals of each school, and worked out the logistics for distribution day. Meanwhile, Purvi, Shivani, and I were left to organize the fundraising. Everything went smoothly as long as we were working on different things. Shreya and Shweta planned each detail of distribution day perfectly, and created surveys with questions in both English and Kannada so that we could collect data. Back in California, we planned and executed an extremely successful fundraiser, selling cookies, samosas, and jewelry in the park. Thanks to all of our parents, the two sections of Project LINC achieved everything we needed to.

However, we did have to consult each other for some things. Shreya and Shweta talked to the teachers, but we all had to decide how the distribution process was going to work. And we planned the details of the fundraiser, but we all had to periodically check in on our fundraising goal and how far we were from reaching it. Project LINC had become an international team separated by an ocean, and we had to learn how to communicate with each other. We had to deal with time zones, jet lag, cell coverage, shaky internet connection, and many other issues. Any time Purvi, Shivani, and I discussed an issue, we’d have to wait until that night or the next morning to call Shreya and Shweta. We would make a decision and then forget that we never told them about it. They would video call us, but it would cut off due to poor connection. We finally figured out which times of day we could talk to each other, and that lasted fairly well until Purvi, Shivani, and I could join Shreya and Shweta in India.

Finally, the most glaringly obvious communication issue: the language barrier. I’m fluent in Kannada, as are Shreya and Purvi. Shweta speaks a little bit, and understands it well. And Shivani does not speak Kannada (She understands a lot of it now after Project LINC!). I was slightly nervous for our presentation to the students, since my speech from when I did this project four years ago hadn’t gone very smoothly. However, my Kannada had definitely improved since then, so I wasn’t too worried. In the car on the way to Agara, we created an outline for our presentation and distributed the roles. For the most part, the presentations in both schools went as planned. The students were engaged and focused, and the teachers helped translate any parts that were difficult to understand. Overall, I shouldn’t have worried about the language barrier causing a hindrance to the project.

The most interesting interactions came after we were done distributing the lights. Every single child was so enthralled by us, and they were constantly asking us questions. How do you go to school? Do you have temples and churches and mosques? What do you eat for dinner? We were so foreign to them that they were amazed that we ate the same food as they did! They asked questions about my mother (who was born in Agara), requested advice on how to become doctors or engineers, and laughed whenever we spoke to each other in fast English. We became instant celebrities and the kids were mobbing us to speak to us or take a picture with us. I found it amazing that they were as inspired by me as I was by them.
Distribution day was an overwhelmingly emotional day. I was on an adrenaline high all the way home, and I think I can speak for all five of us when I say that the project felt extremely successful. But we weren’t done yet. From this experience we collected more than just memories: we collected data. A lot of data. Each student filled out a survey written in Kannada. We took a picture of each of them and conducted a few video interviews. A student from the distribution four years ago gave us information on how those lights had held up. We had to sort through and analyze all this information, and to be honest, we’re still not done. The papers are still being translated. Subtitles are still being added to the videos. And of course, we are all still writing about our experiences. These data are important to the future study of Agara and for Project LINC’s future, but the memories are more important to me. I know I can always go back to our study and check what percentage of kids in Agara did not have electricity in 2016. But unless I write it down, I will forget the immense happiness and exhilaration I felt when I was talking to the students. Sometimes I feel like words cannot do justice to the experience I had this summer. But I’m going to try my best because I want to share my experience and I don’t want to forget it.

Before I sign off, I’d like to thank every single person who helped make this project happen. My parents, Gireesha Mama and Danna, Jaya Aunty and Vishwanath Uncle, Ajji, Thatha, all the donors, everyone who shared and liked our Facebook page, Jen Greene, Anna Sidana, the teachers at the high schools in Agara and Mamballi, the students I met there, my fellow team members of Project LINC, and so many more. This project would not have happened without you. I am truly fortunate to have had such a life-changing summer. Thank you all for being there for me.

Sincerely,
Pallavi

P.S. Stay tuned for more pictures and videos to be posted soon!