

# Peace Camp aims to 'heal the world'

By Cinnamon Burnim  
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Perhaps you've seen the T-shirts with the picture of a 9mm semi-automatic gun, the District's criminal weapon of choice. Or maybe you've seen the T-shirts picturing a gun and the words "Sorry we missed you. Please come back to D.C." Or maybe you've heard the widely known joke that D.C. stands for Dodge City. A joke is supposed to cause laughter but the violence and murder rate in the nation's capital is no laughing matter.

Ten years ago Mary Joan and her husband, Jerry, founded Little Friends for Peace, adventures into peacemaking skills for children ages 4-12. It was while they lived in Minnesota and after the 1983 U.S. bishops' peace pastoral that Little Friends for Peace was founded.

"Little Friends for Peace was my own personal response to the bishops' letter. There were so many people talking about what's wrong with our world and what a horrible place the world is for children but they weren't doing anything about it. I decided to do something," said Mary Joan.

**MARY JOAN** said the St. Paul diocese embraced and promoted the program which helped it get going. Since its development Mary Joan has written four books that complement the teachings of the Little Friends camps and retreats.

"The books are practical tools on how to teach peace education. I was asked by Pax Christi Metro D.C. to write a book on peacemaking in the family so I did and I also wrote books on creating a peace experience and peacemaking for little friends," said Mary Joan. The fourth book is a notebook that goes with the family peacemaking guidebook.

Mary Joan and Jerry, trained as a teacher and a family educator/counselor respectively, and their six children are active members of St. Aloysius Parish, in Northwest Washington. It was at St. Aloysius that Washington was introduced to Little Friends for Peace.

There are four themes that Mary Joan teaches at the nine weeklong peace camps. Each camp has its own slogan. The four themes are 1) What is Peace? Mary Joan said that this part is very important in helping to disarm people and in removing blocks to peace. 2) Who are Peacemakers? In this theme the children are taught about historical peacemakers like Martin Luther King and Gandhi, as well as the fact that everybody, including children, can be a peacemaker. 3) How to be a Peacemaker, incorporates exercises dealing with peaceful problem-solving. 4) How to go out and be a peacemaker is the last theme.

**THE CAMP** slogans vary, depending on the camp location, from "Hands Around the World," "Heal the

World," "We are a Rainbow People," "Neighborhood At Peace" to "Kids Saving the Earth".

"All of our themes deal with peace in the neighborhood, earth, school and country. We explore what's wrong, why it's wrong and what to do about it," said Mary Joan.

About 50 kids from all backgrounds and religions attend peace camp each week. They are broken up into groups and each group creates their own flags.

The kids receive general teaching, sing, have drama and art class and at the end of every day each group reports on what they did and learned. The purpose of the reports is to help build self-esteem, according to Mary Joan.

"The big thing at peace camp is spirit. We teach the kids that peace is okay," said Mary Joan. "Kids want peace just like all of us. I feel very called to raise awareness, very called to get on a personal level and do something," she added.

**SEVERAL AREA** churches and schools have invited Mary Joan and Jerry to conduct camps and retreats or day-programs. "I'd like for every school to have a peace track, like math and science. Or even a peace club like there are computer clubs," she said.

"These kids feel so empowered at camp. The last camp was held at about the same time as the pool shooting and the children



Participants at the Little Friends for Peace Camp show off their flags, artwork, face painting and other creative endeavors during the weeklong camp that focuses on peace, peacemakers, and peaceful problem solving as an alternative to violence.



were so articulate about their fears," said Mary Joan.

Many of the children, she added, told her that they were trying to be peacemakers and not peacebreakers, added Mary Joan.

Although the camp is for children it is imperative that parents get involved, said Mary Joan. "The teaching

must continue at home," said Mary Joan. "As a parent of six children I know that it's a constant effort."

"We really correlate the family message from the Gospel with our teachings," said Mary Joan. "We teach that Jesus had the best method of problem-solving and peacemaking."