

Educator starts a place where children can give peace a chance

By CLAUDE SCHAEFFER-DUFFY

Special to the National Catholic Reporter
Washington

Mary Jane Park wanted to more than give peace a chance. She wanted to give it a curriculum, a working base, a room of its own. And Park, an energetic Catholic mother of six, trained in education, has done just that.

Founder and director of the organization Little Friends for Peace, Park, with husband Jerry, has taught peacemaking skills to children, youth and families for the past 20 years, dutifully setting up her camps and workshops in parish halls, classrooms and community centers.

Today, Park's peace training is not quite so ad hoc because she has the Peace Room — a one-window, 15 x 22 foot rented space, tucked away on the second-floor of the Perry School Community Center here.

Like most peace projects, this one operates on a shoestring. According to Jerry, the \$330 a month rent and Park's salary are subsidized by grants, individual donations and fees from workshops and day camps offered by Little Friends for Peace.

Tiny in size but with an enormous mandate, the Peace Room is a place where children and the skills of peacemaking are taken seriously. Among its multiple uses, the room and its curriculum are part of an afterschool program offered to inner-city children from Sursum Corda, a housing project adjacent to the Perry Center.

Although the setting is secular, Park said her work is very "gospel centered," inspired by Catholic social teaching and its invitation to be concrete in bringing the "peace of Christ" to others. "Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers' and in the Mass, we say, 'Peace be with you.' But what does that mean? ... Jesus asked us to do something with the treasure of peace."

Park describes the Peace Room as "a laboratory of peacemaking." And like any good laboratory, there are lesson plans and resources to guide the experiment. The room's purpose, she said, is four-fold: To give children an experience of peace, to introduce them to peacemakers, to teach them problem-solving skills, and to engage them in peacemaking at home and in their neighborhood.

The split-level room has comfortable wall-to-wall carpeting where children sit, stretch out and even dance. A round "peace table" dominates the upper level. Here, anyone needing to leave the group can come to settle a quarrel or simply draw. Beside the table, a folding screen displays contemporary icons of peacemakers — among them, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and, in a central position, the Black Madonna. A quote from Gandhi and a watercolor of the four churchwomen martyred in El Salvador adorn one wall.

Beside the door, an I Care poster lists the rules of caring. The last one reads: "We are responsible for what we say and do."

A session in the Peace Room might fol-

low a course in computers or an art class. In keeping with the Perry Center schedule, Park offers one-hour lessons four days a week, hosting small groups of four to 10 children at a time. The children, organized by grade, range from age 6 to 14.

Every Thursday night, the room is a meeting place for the Peace Club — an informal gathering of teen peacemakers.

Recently, the Parks initiated a monthly Family Night so parents, most often mothers, can experience some of the concepts taught to the children.

During school hours, the room is used to provide in-service training for college and high school students interested in peace education.

In the Peace Room, the lives of the privileged and the poor intersect. Among Park's volunteers are high school students from suburban Catholic high schools, a medical student from Georgetown University and the Bonhomme family who made a year's commitment last Christmas to volunteer in the Peace Room as "their birthday gift for Jesus." This influx delights Park, who wants her lab to be a setting where "people of all ages" can "experience themselves as peacemakers."

Singing, cooperative games and role-play are a part of every session in the Peace Room. As is the Peace Train — Park's flow chart for conflict resolution — and the Peace Circle. In this class, children are taught that conflict is an inherent part of making peace rather than a topic to be avoided. They are also taught to listen to themselves and to each other. "What is bringing you peace? What is taking your peace?" each person in the room is asked.

For some, the troubles are small. But for others, the Peace Circle unveils huge trials like the death of a mother who was infected with AIDS. Park said these check-ins have helped the children become more tolerant toward a child who is being disruptive. "Kids can show more compassion and love if they know what is bothering the

other person."

She would like to see Peace Circles instituted in all communal settings, even churches, believing they provide a practical antidote to violence born out of alienation.

The Peace Room is Park's response to passions both political and personal — peace education and the children of Sursum Corda. Her initial contact with the children began in '89 when her organization, Little Friends for Peace, started an annual, two-week-long summer peace camp in the neighborhood. The children told Park stories that made her want to do more.

"A lot of what they were sharing with me is that their peace was being broken by guns, violence, drugs and fear. I wanted to give them hope, to give them the idea that they could be peacemakers in their own neighborhood. I didn't want to be just a blip on their computer screen."

Two years ago, Park, who was then director of religious education at St. Aloysius Church, talked to staff about her "Lenten dream" of setting up a Peace Room within the church building. Located near Sursum Corda, St. Aloysius includes the housing project in its ministry to the poor. Reluctant to host such a place, the pastor, Fr. Bruce Bavinger, encouraged Park to investigate the soon-to-be-opened Perry School Community Center. It took three appearances before Perry's board of directors, but by July of '99, the Peace Room was open.

Park admits that she "confronts skepticism from Catholics" when talking about peace education. Nonetheless, she thinks "the peace track" should be included with the more typical religious education material. "I feel very strongly that we, as Catholics, need to be out on the forefront advocating that tools for peacemaking be part of our education and ministry because people are starved for finding peace in their life, understanding what peacemaking is, and who the peacemakers are — the best one being Jesus." □