

Little Friends for Peace

Q. What's better than the morning television line-up on a humid Tuesday June morning in D.C.?

A. Watching a pageant starring famous peacemakers such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

(Hint: Key actors were actually children in disguise from the Little Friends for Peace Camp.)

At a recent talk Senator Jesse Jackson expressed concern for the military presence in our schools (March 1991 issue of the Peace Letter). He said, "With soldiers going into our classrooms, and teaching them how to hate, ... a generation of children is learning how to spot a target, another set of human beings, spot, dot, press, explode. Bloodless. That will create a generation of killers without conscience."

Senator Jackson would have been proud at what we saw recently at the Little Friends for Peace Camp being held at St. Aloysius Church on North Capitol and I St. in Northwest D.C. From June 24th through the 28th, thirty campers, including twenty-three young people from the local neighborhood had a chance to participate in activities designed to stimulate peacemaking rather than emphasizing war as the solution of choice for resolving conflicts. The local outreach for the Peace Camp brought in children of the parishioners as well as children recruited from the neighborhood center by the hard working Deborah "Aunt Deb" Little. This year was the fourth year for this project a testament to the long-term vision of the organizers and the continuing

enjoyment of the children, many of whom were previous participants in earlier camps.

The short 'peacemakers' pageant on Tuesday was the culmination of several hours of activities focusing on the morning's theme, "Who are the Peacemakers." The activities were based on fundamental themes which were geared to a children's context: What is peace; How to be a peacemaker; and How to pass the peace on to others in the world. Methods of teaching included storytelling, co-operative game playing, music making, acting, drawing, discussing in groups and conflict resolution training.

"We are..."

On Tuesday the campers concentrated on finding the answer to the question: Who are the peacemakers? The answer, one girl shouted out in the last group, was "We are." The peace camp activities — writing in a "Me Journal" and engaging in 'peace & justice' arts & crafts exemplified the creative use of cultural efforts as an integral part of the day's problem solving activities.

Peace Rhythm and Blues...

The morning's agenda also included a dose of music. A visitor, Bill Jenkins, guided the young peace campers in a musical extravaganza that featured drumming and gourd playing. The Camp Director, Mary Joan Park said "music seems to do a lot ... towards getting them [the campers] to focus and express themselves." Learning to

focus, the Camp Director Mary Joan Park said, is essential in conflict resolution because the children need to learn to stop and focus on the reason for their anger before they can attempt to elaborate a strategy to resolve the problem at hand.

The "need for inner peace and concentration" is particularly obvious at the St. Aloysius camp, according to park. Ms. Park and her husband, Jerry, direct four separate week-long sessions of the Peace Camp at four different sites in the D.C. area. Park described the previous week at the Oneness family school as a "different world." The children from the St. Aloysius neighborhood often arrived in the morning hungry with a couple dollars to buy lunch from the street vendor and as such are less focussed on making decisions because they are not prepared to concentrate and center their thoughts. Consequently, the Parks have reorientated their methods to a more action oriented approach rather than centering their approach to peace education solely on discussion-oriented techniques. The net result of this flexibility has been the successful incorporation of peace maker thinking in the campers. From year-to-year "certain concepts are being adopted and enriched," said Park.

The most "exciting" development of the Peace Camp, according to Park, was a new program for teenage counselors. The ten teenage "Counselors in Training" (CIT)—young women ranging in ages from thirteen to fifteen—were also recruited from the neighborhood center. The trainees were paid a small stipend while they participated in a brief orientation session, and they were then assigned to multi-purpose jobs such as escorting the children and helping children with

arts and crafts projects. Park described the counselor program as "a way of exposing [the counselors] to hear some of these ideas and be intrigued by them." About half of the counselors were former Peace campers, Park said. Although many of the young women are "dealing with internal struggles," Park has noticed an improvement in their "problem-solving" and in their abilities to actively "give the little kids encouragement." The camp has also provided the girls with a socially useful endeavor under less than ideal circumstances. The most common sentiment expressed on the campers applications was that they wanted the CIT positions for two reasons: "to spend time working with the children" and "to be able to get off the streets."

And the organizers are...

Mary Joan Park, with the help of her husband Jerry, has been directing children's peace camps for ten years — the first seven years in Minnesota and the least three years in the D.C. area. After a summer of directing peace camps, Mary Joan and Jerry Park direct peace workshops and retreats throughout area schools. They have co-authored three books on peace education and children. Jerry Park also works part-time for Quest for Peace and writes for the news publication of the Franciscan World Order. The Parks make a small amount of money from the other summer camps; however, with the help of some donations from the parish and other groups and individuals, the Parks cover the costs of the St. Aloysius Camp.

—Anne Zorc