## Peace Education Beyond the Classroom

by Linda Lantieri

When I was a child and walked the six blocks to my elementary school by myself each day, I was hardly alone. I was greeted by neighbors who knew me by my first name and watched out for me until I reached the next adult sitting on another porch.

Today some children open the doors of their homes and witness drug deals in the hallway on the way to the elevator. Going to school they pass people on the street who frighten them. One of our mediators in New York City describes it this way: "It's real bad. Sometimes when I come outside, I'm scared because there are crack people in my building, on the same floor where I live. They sell their drugs right in front of me. And sometimes I'm scared that they'll hurt me."

One of my fondest memories is the way my family celebrated birthdays when I was a child. In the morning, we chose exactly what we wanted for dinner and put on a special outfit to wear to school that day. I would come home to the love and warmth of my family, a stack of gifts, and my favorite meal on the table.

Today we live in a world that robs some children of even these happy and safe moments. Interviewed for the video documentary The Last Hit, Micah, who lives in a Detroit housing project, spoke about his ninth birthday:

*On the night of my birthday, December 31, New Year's Eve, we were coming up from the basement to eat some ice cream and cake. So what happened was my mother was about to put out the ice cream and I was behind her talking to my friends, and I heard about five shots-pow, pow, pow. As soon as I got shot I saw our cabinet door open, and the other last thing I saw was the clock, and I looked dead at it and I looked everywhere, but I didn't see anybody. I saw my mother in the dining room and she said, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" I went into the bathroom—there was light there. So I said, "I'm shot, I'm shot. Help me." My auntie came and wiped my hand and said, "You'll be all right." My father didn't know I said I was shot. He said, "You're not shot, you're not shot." But about the time we got to the hospital, that's when he finally figured out that I was shot .*

Every child in this country has a right to safety, especially in their own home. Not one single child growing up in America should be robbed of his or her childhood because we as adults cannot protect them.

Clearly we have made the case for the important role of schools in addressing the issues of our wider society. And yet schools working alone cannot make a big enough dent in the crisis we face. Even if we could put into place a comprehensive, multi-year commitment to the teaching of emotional and social competency and conflict resolution skills in every school in America—rural, suburban, or inner-city—we would still be unable to turn the tide. As we wage peace in our schools, children are getting strong, frequent, and extreme messages from the society at large and from their own communities. They have ready access to real and simulated violence. Some live in homes and neighborhoods where violence is often the accepted norm. An eight-year old boy from Hartford, Connecticut, said, "I like school, but I have to worry about getting home alive."

There is no single, simple remedy to this problem. Our response to these complicated issues has to be a wide-ranging and public one. When we think about solutions, our focus needs to be not on any one program or project, but beyond that—to joining a local and national movement that involves the private sector, national and local governments, neighborhood organizations, religious communities, law enforcement, researchers, businesses. We must all mobilize. .

We are finally realizing that something must drastically change. As our collective psychic numbness fades away we start to feel the effects of our indifference and not one of us is left untouched. Several years ago I had the opportunity to work in Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying, in Calcutta. I learned an important lesson that gives me hope. A visitor can't miss the purpose of this place: "Home for the Dying" is written in large letters above the building in both Hindi and English. Yet a strange phenomenon consistently occurs—fifty percent of the people who are brought to this place get well and are able to leave. I'm convinced that when the severity of a problem is acknowledged, we have the best chance of healing to occur. It seems that this is where many of us

are now in our society—beginning to acknowledge that the home for the dying is right here on the streets of our country and that our concerted effort can heal the situation. As Monica, a mediator in a South Bronx high school, put it, "I'm not going to be a statistic. I'm going to walk out of here alive!"

Several years ago, I experienced a remarkable example of community in Southern India, where I was helping in a health clinic. One day, after a long and difficult delivery, a very young mother gave birth to a child without arms. Just moments after the birth, several village women arrived. Helping the mother come to terms with what she was seeing, the women eased into picking the little girl up, figuring out how best to hold her. During the first week of this child's life, a different woman from the village would visit the family each day with yet another beautiful piece of clothing she had sewn in a way that adapted to the child's disability. By the end of the week, young Satinder had an entire wardrobe of clothing that demonstrated the collective, loving acceptance of her as the newest member of the village.

The way most of us live today seems to create more and more distance between ourselves and our neighbors, and so many of us yearn for that sense of community. We need the kind of heart-to-heart resuscitation that will transform neighborhoods into functional villages again.

There is a two-way street here that gives us hope: while the education of the heart requires changes in society in order for its most revolutionary ideals to be realized, emotionally literate people are exactly the kind of people most likely to bring about that change.

Although the curriculum we advocate is skill-based, the development and promotion of social responsibility is an expected outcome. In our work, we are hoping to inspire everyone to play an activist role in shaping our society's future. We want both young people and adults to feel as though they can change the world by their individual actions. The peaceable classrooms and schools we work to create are more than refuges from harm, they are interdependent and interconnected models for the larger community.

Since young people from peaceable schools and classrooms have experienced the power of constructive action, they are usu-

ally more hopeful about tackling problems and effecting social change. Instead of feeling they can do very little to change the world, they are armed with the experience of having done so. The skills that we teach and the values and attitudes we nurture help young people see themselves as active citizens participating in a democratic process.

In peaceable schools, young people experience a community where empathy, equality, and respect are the norm. They have a taste of what their larger world could be like. To give young people a greater opportunity to integrate these skills and attitudes, we encourage an active engagement with the wider community while they are still in school.

For schools and communities to reach out to one another, a porous boundary needs to be created between the two. Teachers, administrators, and kids need to become part of community life and schools need to let communities in.

I was walking down a street in my New York City neighborhood one day and came upon three girls, all about ten or eleven years old. One of the girls had her arm around another's shoulder, comforting her as she cried uncontrollably. The third girl seemed quite troubled, possibly guilty for having caused the situation. I decided to intervene. "I'm wondering if you need any help. I'm a teacher," I said, hoping that telling them I was a teacher would elicit their trust in a stranger's help. They began to share. The one girl had in fact said something derogatory to the girl who was upset, something unthinking about her parents not caring because she was adopted. It turns out this girl was adopted and the comments hit a sensitive nerve. I engaged them in a discussion that ended with tears of forgiveness and hugs among all three girls. As I started to say good-bye and compliment them for working it out so beautifully, one of the girls looked back at me and said, "I just have to say one thing to you. I don't think you're really a teacher because a teacher wouldn't have taken all this time with us when we're not even in school." I didn't quite know what to say. I was reminded that this is how some kids view adults in their lives—in separate corners, with clear and low expectations about who we will help and when.

**Practical Ways Schools and Communities Can Work Together**

There are numerous ways schools and communities create these "porous boundaries" we speak of. Here are a few ideas for what schools can do:

Get students and teachers actively involved in neighborhood efforts, from cleanup campaigns to adults volunteering for community patrol.

Lobby for students to serve on community planning committees, so the voices of youth can help shape the community's future.

Support local mediation centers as a way of dealing with neighborhood disputes, with peer mediators and school mediation coaches volunteering their expertise.

Cooperate with local TV, radio, and print media by helping them to report on positive events happening in schools and co-producing public service announcements with nonviolent messages.

Support community efforts in the martial arts and other self-defense skills by introducing young people to them during school hours.

Invite local policy makers, police, and judges to participate in school celebrations as well as in conflict resolution trainings.

Consider using the school's facilities as a community center, collaborating with nonprofit organizations to provide safe and stimulating opportunities for youth after school.

Support the idea of school-based health clinics, which can help reinforce violence prevention programming.

Work along with community artists to create murals and billboards in the community with positive-pro-social peace messages.

Co-sponsor forums where all sectors of the community-staff, parents, students, law enforcement officials, etc.-can share ideas, expertise and points of view.

Support mentoring efforts linking up adults in the community with youth who would benefit from ongoing one-to-one contact with a caring person.

Sponsor discussion groups that invite neighbors in the community, using such materials as the Study Circles Resource

Center's guide *Confronting Violence in Our Communities: A Guide for Involving Citizens in Public Dialogue and Problem Solving*. Youth can be included in the study circle as well.

Our challenge in this next decade, in a country that now spends more on prisons than on education, is to let our next act today bring this reality closer for a child we know and love so that his or her tomorrow will be better. We believe many of us across the country are already living our lives this way. Each day people perform isolated, unseen, loving conscious acts of peace in our homes, schools, and neighborhoods. In the words of Robert Kennedy,

*Each time one stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of the rest, or strikes out against injustice, one sends forth a ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change.*

We envision the younger generation, the ones who will build the future, telling their kids how they learned to de-escalate violence and turn conflict into opportunity, how they learned to value each unique individual, and how they were part of building a future full of hope and gentleness. This vision continues to unfold in thousands of schools across the country, and we are grateful to be playing our part.

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