

WFWP USA: Our Bridge of Peace Ceremony created for racial healing in America

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The Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) is unique in its ability to cross the divides that have historically separated us. I feel that women, as the feminine expression of the Divine, have a special role to play in reconciliation and WFWP offers an important conduit for this work.

In 1994, I was invited to serve as the Northeast USA Regional Chair of WFWP. In the years that followed we held many Sisterhood Ceremonies for Japanese and American women, inviting them to cross the Bridge of Peace and meet each other in the middle to heal the wounds of WWII.

The women had profound experiences, prompting the American women to ask, "Why aren't we holding Bridges of Peace to bring about reconciliation between African American and Caucasian women?" This question, and a diverse multi-ethnic, multi-faith team of passionate women, led to the development of Beyond the Dream - Building Bridges of Peace, Unity, Justice and Equality. The inaugural ceremony was held on April 21, 1996, in Boston, Massachusetts.

This was no easy program to develop! The reality is we harbor prejudices learned in childhood, live with structural racism, and hold painful memories, bad experiences, and ancestral resentments. Our hearts are blocked. As we prepared for this formative event to bring African American and Caucasian women together, we had to examine our inner selves with compassion and offer repentance for past and present wrongs. We all recognized God wanted to do something here.

And God did do something! The profound impact of the Bridge of Peace ceremony to overcome past and current hurts and promote racial reconciliation was exemplified in a very brave African American woman who showed us what it means to have courage.

She reminded me of the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us." Emerson believed in the divine sufficiency of each person. That's a beautiful concept, divine sufficiency, he encouraged people to trust themselves - to know the divinity within is sufficient to deal with the challenges life brings. He believed in people's ability to discover their capacity for greatness.

As this African American sister waited backstage with me for her turn to cross the Bridge of Peace to

meet a Caucasian sister, she hesitated and blurted out, "I can't do this! It's like asking me to swallow razor blades." I was completely taken aback. It was such a strong statement and conveyed the depth of her pain and hurt in a very visceral way. She had joined the event with the intention of putting the historical and personal wounds of the past behind her, but honestly speaking, that is not an easy thing to do. And so, here these two women stood on either side of the bridge looking at each other. The air was thick with tension.

And then, digging into her own divine sufficiency, this beautiful African American woman straightened her back and took the first step. They did embrace on the Bridge of Peace. Later she told me that in that moment of embrace she felt as if the flood gates had opened, and she experienced letting go of some of the pain and resentments of the past. We, who watched, witnessed her greatness. She was unencumbered by the past and unafraid of the future.

The need for, and importance of Beyond the Dream was revealed by many such stories, in addition to the support of First Lady, Hilary Rodham Clinton, Governor William Weld of Massachusetts, and other notable individuals.

When I shared with international singer, Mavis Staples, prior to the event, she looked me in the eye and in her deep, distinctive voice said, "I feel a song coming!" Mavis Staples sang her original song, "Beyond the Dream" at the event. The refrain goes:

"Will you meet me at the bridge and cross on over?
Will you sit beside me at the family feast?
I'm tied to you and you to me
By the roots of our family tree."

Twenty-five years later, my Co-Chair and African American sister, Dr. Diane Van der Meer, and I are still in touch with each other. We have watched our children grow up, we have prayed for each other in difficult times and celebrated our successes along the way. We are forever tied together by the roots of our family tree.

Today, we see now more than ever, the important work that needs to be done to promote diversity, equity and inclusion as a foundation for creating peace. Who better to lead this work than the women of the world!

Note: The article was originally written for WFWP's 30th Anniversary Commemorative Book and shared in the newsletter to highlight this important milestone. This beautiful book is full of stories, history, and photos spanning 30 years of WFWP's impact and work across the world. Click [here](#) to preorder the book.

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