

WFWP Oregon, USA's 8th Annual Peace Conference - Bridges to Peace

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There is a divide between the world of peace we long for and the world we live in. To make progress toward the world of peace we must all work together. That is why WFWP Oregon joined together with Mount Hood Community College, West Columbia Gorge Rotary Club, International Sufi School for Peace and Service to host the 8th Annual Peace Conference under the theme: Bridges to Peace: Crossing the Divide on May 12, 2022 via the Zoom platform.

The event started with the recognition of the Native Americans of Oregon by Dr. Linda Nishikawa, followed by an Ojibwe prayer water song by Tina Bennett.

Claudia Al-Amin, WFWP Oregon co-chair was the emcee for the event. She introduced Lora Helmer, a Rotary club member and Ambassador for ShelterBox. Lora's topic was "Responding to Conflict" and she explained through her presentation the many ways ShelterBox has been helping those in dire need throughout the world. Kits of tents, blankets, personal hygiene, tarps, building tools, mosquito netting, and water filtration items are delivered to people in need, due to natural disaster, war, homelessness or other types of displacement.

The primary aim of the organization is to keep families together during times of disruptive upheaval, working in conjunction with other aid organizations. Their forté is quick action and surveying the communities in which they work to find out how they can help where the need is greatest. Well trained volunteers (who have passed tests and completed a year of training) make local connections in order to personally distribute the needed supplies.

Next Christine Edwards presented WFWP's Bridge of Peace ceremony with a short video on its history and an explanation of the four pillars upon which it is built - taking responsibility, having respect for others, repentance and a personal "cease fire" regarding hot topics and a commitment to change going forward.

Traci Simmons, the Mt. Hood Community College Associate Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Justice then presented on the need for liberation in order to arrive both individually and as a society at the place where we are able to create the bridges necessary to get to peace. Harmful ideas, the historical legacy, and inaction all hinder us. The idea of limited and finite amounts of resources creates an atmosphere of scarcity. Hierarchies of human value create strife in society and create generational problems. She shared The Cycle of Liberation by Bobbie Harro to illustrate a process for creating positive change. Replacing historical hierarchies of value with acknowledgement of the value of every human being and adopting an abundance mindset rather than the scarcity thinking heads us in the right direction. Commitment to continual learning, and personal awareness is part of the process. We need to work together and not pit ourselves against each other.

Doyle Banks followed, giving a presentation on Nonviolent Communication (for the fourth year in a row) as a Tool for Racial Justice and Harmony. Based on the work of Marshall B. Rosenberg, Phd., the practice of Nonviolent communication is rooted in active listening, and reflection. From there the steps of making observations, identifying feelings, understanding needs and making requests follow sequentially to arrive at more beneficial interactions between people.

There was a half hour break for lunch during which Claudia, representing the International Sufi School of Peace and Service (founded by Shekh Abmadou Bamba of Senegal), presented the organization's slide show on Nobel Peace Laureates, including Mother Teresa, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Dalai Lama.

Following the lunch break Emeline Nguyen, club president for the West Columbia Gorge Rotary, gave a

presentation on their Peace Pole project. The peace pole project is just one of their initiatives. The languages on the poles represent the communities in which they are placed. There are currently over 200,000 peace poles around the world in over 190 countries. An interactive map is now available online showing the locations of peace poles around the world at: www.peacepoleproject.org. It was also gratifying to hear that talks were proceeding with Mount Hood Community College to place a peace pole on their campus; an idea that had been brought up at our previous conference.

Lisa George, the Multicultural Student Success Coordinator, and next to speak, presented "Building Community in Online Communities" suggesting a variety of different internet tools that could help in developing rapport, cultivating a sense of belonging and/or content online. She highly recommended the book "On Conflict and Consensus" by Lawrence Butler. The acronym W.A.I.T. (Why am/aren't I talking?) was offered as an assist with mindfulness and intentionality.

A special guest speaker, Marianne Williamson: New York Times best-selling author, activist and spiritual thought leader continued the conversation.

She encouraged us all to develop that peace within ourselves first before attempting to bring it into the world. If people on the cutting edge of consciousness stay away from politics, then politics becomes more toxic. As we are not born to bring light to the light, but to bring light to the darkness, the assignment given to us all is to address the suffering of the world and seek to heal it. To the extent that we address our own character defects, we have greater capacity and potential for influence in the world.

For Americans, we must know that in this country, although born of a yearning to express a better polity, (though it was never fully embodied), it is the task of every generation to seek to create that more perfect union. In order for us to channel the energies of repair, and bring forth a course correction in this country and the world we must first address the defects within ourselves. To the extent that we address our own character defects, we have greater capacity and potential for influence in the world.

Four statistical factors have proven to decrease the incidence of violence in any system, and increase the incidents of peace:

1. The expansion of economic opportunity in the lives of women
2. The expansion of economic opportunity in the lives of children
3. The reduction of violence against women
4. The amelioration of unnecessary human suffering.

We must proactively work for peace. We can't just get rid of war. An angry peacenik will not bring peace to the world. Positive peace can only be built on the basis of brotherhood and justice. "Today", she said, "our hope lies in a religious or spiritual perspective, whether contextualized in that way or not." Marianne ended by saying that such conferences as these help us have more enlightened conversations, where better ideas can be incubated and we can consider what we can best do. It is not just what happens in the conference that is important but what happens after we leave. It's like a time release capsule and hopefully all of us will have left emboldened, and empowered, not only to be the change we want to see, but to make the change.

Following Marianne's presentation there was a dynamic question and answer period and in the end she encouraged everyone to realize that no matter how difficult things are, we should consider that "We were born for such a time as this."

The final portion of the program was a panel discussion addressing the questions: "What actions can we collectively take to implement peace and justice within a community?" and "If you could design a program that addresses the key features for community bridge building, what would it look like?" The panelists were Traci Simmons, Lisa George, and Ernesto Vasquez, (MHCC staff), plus Doyle Banks (Nonviolent Communication), and Kacie Kennett, (a special needs elementary school teacher).

Traci: Education is key, be aware of what's currently happening in the community and let others know. Civic engagement is critical. We have the resources, but we need to get those resources to the people in need.

Lisa: Taking care of ourselves and each other is critical to having a sense of peace and quite frankly the government is not going to provide that for us. If we provide that for each other, together as a community, we are one step closer to peace.

Kacie: Listening is key. We let the children know they matter and their ideas matter. Developing a positive self image is important. Self-care is important and included as part of their education.

Doyle: Educating people, particularly youth, how to effectively communicate and how to listen to each other. A program that is a wonderful example is Bridge Meadows - a multi-generational intentional community. There are elders and foster children who need help. The elders help the kids with homework and kids help the elders with tasks around the house or yard or just keep them company.

Ernesto: (Manager of the Multicultural and Diversity Resource Center at MHCC) Building an authentic community with people both on an individual as well as on the community level is essential.

Lisa: A key thing to remember is that, even though the stakes might be high, by bringing the tone down by using nonviolent communication skills, being friendly rather than aggressive, or by using Traci's lenses for understanding justice and impact, we are helping create peaceful change.

At the end of the program we played a beautiful rendition of "Let there be Peace on Earth" which has become our theme song over the years, sung by the Boy's Choir of Harlem.

We all need to continue to have nonviolent conversations around peace and to educate ourselves on the issues surrounding us. The first step is learning to care for ourselves and our community and expanding that to the broader world.

A good way to continue the education process is by reading a book suggested by the presenters:

Book Recommendations:

Traci Simmons: Radical Self-Love for Everybody and Every Body by Sonya Renee Taylor

Doyle Banks: Nonviolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg

Claudia Al-Amin: Piecing me Together by Renée Watson

Kacie Kennett: Bubblegum Brain by Julia Cook, I Am Enough by Grace Byers, The Crayons' Book of Feelings by Drew Daywalt, Kindness is My Superpower by Alicia Ortego, Self care: Self-Compassion by Kristen Neff.