

Peace on earth, peace in our schools

By Josephine Bridges
The Asian Reporter

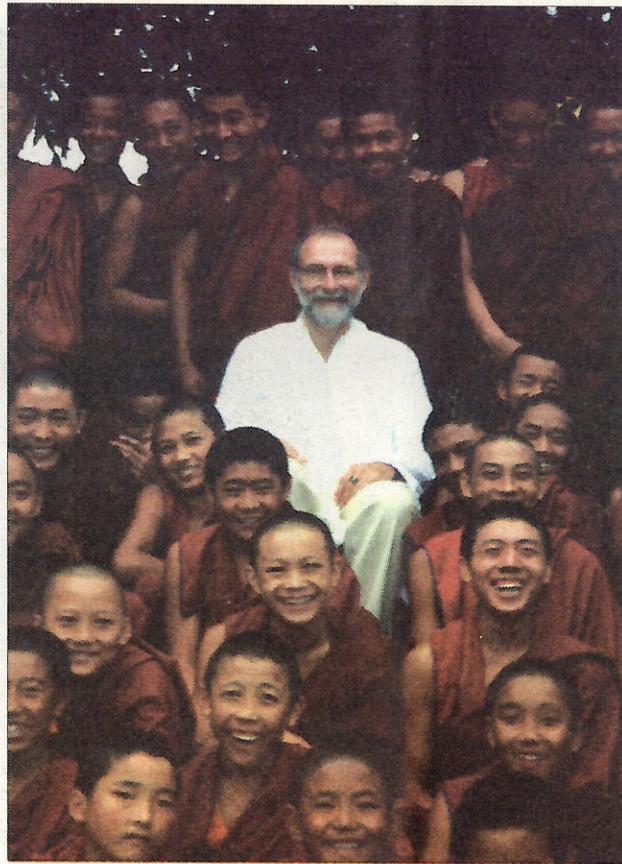
Yearning for peace during the winter holidays is a time-honored tradition that seems to cross political and religious boundaries. The Wholistic Peace Institute, a local organization dedicated to a world without violence, is working to transform this yearning for peace into action, not only in faraway dangerous places such as the Korean peninsula, but also among local young people whose schools are too often microcosms of a world in which violence has become commonplace.

Brandon Wolf, a junior at Canby High School who was selected as Ackerman Middle School's first Student Peace Leader in 2001, believes that "especially now, peace in the schools is crucial. Even your dearest friends can do things to hurt you. Peace is not just physical, it's mental and emotional. Peace starts when one person stops thinking hurtful thoughts and doing hurtful actions, and this person can influence a whole circle of friends. If we can each individually change how we think about conflicts, we can also do so as a group."

The Wholistic Peace Institute was founded in 1999 by a group of religious leaders planning for the Dalai Lama's visit to Portland. Members of the planning group decided to invite other Nobel Peace Laureates as well, and in May of 2001, six attended a conference on world peace hosted by the Dalai Lama. Jigme Topgyal, owner of the Tibet Kitchen restaurant and initiator of the Dalai Lama's visit to Portland, was determined to include young people in the historic event, and thus the Dalai Lama's Youth Summit came into being.

On May 14, 2001, 8,000 students representing practically every high school in Oregon heard the Dalai Lama speak on "The Virtue of Nonviolence." Explaining that fight and flight are not the only possible responses to conflict, the Dalai Lama encouraged attendees to begin a dialogue when confronted with conflict. This was apparently exactly what the young people needed to hear. According to Gary Spanovich, Executive Director of the Wholistic Peace Institute, "The students adored him. They hung on their seats."

Peace is clearly a matter of ongoing concern to youth, and in 2002 the Institute sponsored a Student Peace Summit at Reed College. Spanovich reached out to middle



PEACE ON EARTH. Young monks of Sera Jhe Monastery in southern India gather around Gary Alan Spanovich, Executive Director of the Wholistic Peace Institute. (Photo courtesy of the Wholistic Peace Institute)

school as well as high school students for this event, at which 32 schools were represented. Local peace leaders, teachers, and 500 students worked together in small groups to develop school peace plans.

In 2003, the Institute brought 1985 Nobel Peace Laureate Dr. Robert K. Musil, Executive Director of Physicians for Social Responsibility, to Portland State University for the 2003 Student Peace Summit. Dr. Musil encouraged the teachers and 500 students in attendance to start Student Peace Societies, modeled after the National Honor Society, and to select student Peace Leaders. "I know someone in this room is going to win a Nobel Peace Prize," said the Laureate.

The Wholistic Peace Institute has developed a two-week

Peace Curriculum, including videotapes of Nobel Laureates discussing peace. Susan Castillo, State Superintendent of Education, and her chief of staff Ed Dennis have been very supportive of the group's efforts on behalf of young people. "Anything we can do to reduce school violence," said Dennis, "we're there." Early next year, Gary Spanovich will meet with Dennis, a curriculum developer, and teachers to begin work on the details of integrating a Peace Curriculum into schools.

"In the biggest picture possible," explains Spanovich, "we're trying to put into place a system of communication about how to bring about peace in the schools and in the world, as well as training for the people who will use this system." Spanovich would like to see a Student Peace Society in every school in Oregon, and he hopes to export the idea of a National Student Peace Society to every state in the union. He also dreams of another Youth Summit on "The Value of Service in Living a Good Life," and wants Jimmy Carter to host this event. The Former President has turned him down three times, but Spanovich plans to keep trying to entice him and welcomes any suggestions or help from readers.

Meanwhile, the Wholistic Peace Institute will continue to plan events for youth, and carry on the fundraising that makes them accessible. "We've got to find a way, when we bring a luminary here, to involve kids," he says. "And if it involves kids, it has to be free."

Johnell Bell, a student at Portland State who organized the 2002 Student Peace Summit at Reed College and went on to serve as Student Representative on the Portland School Board, says, "Schools aren't safe anymore, and we need to work to bring peace back to the schools." Fortunately, thanks to the Wholistic Peace Institute, "students are learning the ideals of peace from Nobel Laureates, and then they can actually represent these ideals in their schools."

For more information on the Wholistic Peace Institute, call (503) 266-8996, visit <www.wholisticpeaceinstitute.com>, or consider attending a World Peace Luncheon, held on the third Friday of each month at Tibet Kitchen, 103 N.W. 21st Ave. in Portland, from noon to 1:15pm. The Institute will also be hosting a Summer Nobel Peace Institute with Amnesty International's 1977 Nobel Laureate Dr. William Schulz and six others, June 20 through 24, 2005 at Marylhurst University.