25 Stories for Peace
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United Network of Young Peacebuilders

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Dear reader, welcome to our birthday party!

In 2014, the United Network of Young Peacebuilders turns 25 years old. Since being founded in 1989 UNOY Peacebuilders has gone through many changes. From being a loose network of young people around the world working on diverse development-related issues, to becoming an organisation focused solely on peacebuilding and a structured network of youth organisations. Our youth network is growing up, we now have 60 member organisations in 35 countries worldwide. You can read all about this in the UNOY story, the first story in this book.

The book you are holding in your hands is the culmination of a year of celebrating youth in peacebuilding. The 25th anniversary celebrations started with a workshop on storytelling for youth peacebuilding in the beginning of the year, laying the groundwork for this book, and culminated with the first Young Peacebuilders Forum bringing together young peacebuilders from Europe and across the world in The Hague.

Young people work for peace in many different way. With this publication, we want to honor the work of young peacebuilders around the globe, by giving them a space to tell their story.

Take Claire and Dunia: Claire from Northern Ireland has worked with violent gangs in the United States, the Philippines and Brazil, but currently works in Belfast, Northern Ireland, addressing violence between youth from the Catholic and Protestant communities. Dunia from the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo is a former rebel, who has turned to helping other young ex-combatants reintegrate into civilian life and empowering them as agents for peace rather than agents for war. Claire and Dunia may come from very different backgrounds, but what binds them together is a desire to work for peace.

In gathering these stories, editing them and compiling into a book, the editorial team has been amazed by the extraordinary things that young people are doing right across the world, making this planet of ours a little bit better one step at a time. We hope you enjoy the stories too, and maybe even get a little bit inspired.

Here’s to the next 25 years of youth participation in peacebuilding!
UNOY Peacebuilders would like to thank all the storytellers and the artists for sharing their amazing work. We also thank the editors, Alejandra San Quirico Burillo, Meghan Villanueva, Pawel Bryk, Sean McCann. We thank Antonietta Trapani, Emily Miller and Matilda Flemming for proofreading the stories and Roderick Besseling and Sölvi Karlsson for their coordination of the work. We thank Warner van Haaren for designing the layout and the book cover, and we thank Mobincube for enabling us to create a mobile phone application containing the stories. Last but not least, we thank the Council of Europe’s European Youth Foundation for funding this project. Their support is invaluable to networks such as ours.
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The United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) is a global network of youth organisations committed to establishing peaceful societies. Young people constitute half of the world’s population and we believe in their importance in society. This is why we aim to provide youth with the necessary means to contribute to peace. Since its inception, 25 years ago, UNOY has developed a multi-dimensional expertise in its main areas of action; advocacy and capacity building. Our additional core activities include networking, sharing information, research, and fundraising. The activities we provide combine methodologies such as non-formal education in youth work, peace education, community development and intercultural learning.

United Nations of Youth
UNOY – initially known as the United Nations of Youth – was created in 1989, based on an initiative of a Russian UN diplomat who acted on a dream he had on his 50th birthday. Nikolai Firjubin dreamt about a general assembly hall filled with young people discussing the major challenges facing humanity. Travels led him to meet people that advised and supported him in his effort to give meaning to this dream. The Universal Education Foundation assisted organizing an International Working Group in the Netherlands for the creation of UNOY. 34 enthusiastic young people from a total of 13 countries and 4 continents took part to discuss the vision of the new organization and resulting in the founding of UNOY. Soon afterwards, various country branches were set up. UNOY was legally founded on 15 September 1989.

In the first years, numerous working group meetings, international executive council meetings, conferences and youth assemblies were held in a number of countries, including India, Belarus, Belgium and the Netherlands. The first major event was the International Youth Assembly, which took place in the foothills of the Himalayas of India a year after UNOY was founded. 60 participants from five continents took part and a flair of idealism surrounded the meeting.

The first assembly was followed by a number of meetings in which global challenges as well as organizational matters were considered. Leadership, structure and focus of the organization were re-visited and the preliminary charter was revised. In order to discuss more than technical issues, UNOY added a capacity building element to its events and conferences.

The ambitious mandate, many promises, little budget, high expectations of the members and costly international communication made sustaining and developing the organization very difficult. In the first years, the office was run from a private home and running expenses were minimum and largely covered by private resources of the office bearers.
UNOY had been involved in issues ranging from street children to environmental issues in the first years; but realized that, as an action-based organization, it had to specialize and find its niche and added value. Based on the success of the international peace conference held in the Peace Palace in The Hague in 1993, UNOY became an action-based loose network of peace organizations. It saw a unique role for youth in contributing towards a more peaceful world through promoting a transition from a culture of war and violence towards a Culture of Peace, which vision acts also as a guide to ethical action and unites its young peacebuilders across the globe.

The old structure was dismantled and UNOY became a servicing organization, aiming to link up young peacebuilders and peacebuilding initiatives around the world into a global network. Its core business became local capacity building: training young peacebuilders in peacebuilding skills and organizational management. It also adopted a more regional structure.

Creating the United Network of Young Peacebuilders

Developing over the years into a global network of young peacebuilders, the organization changed its name to United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY Peacebuilders) in 2003. The statutes and mission statement were also reformulated to better reflect the nature, work and scope of UNOY. In 2005, UNOY moved its office to a larger office space in The Hague upon the invitation and with support of The Hague Municipality.

Leading up to its 15th Anniversary, UNOY had been steadily growing in reputation and number of activities and the organization underwent serious restructuring and professionalization. The development of the Global Network brought with it its own challenges related to questions about ownership, democracy, accountability, transparency, as well as identity and youth leadership. It became clear that the UNOY Peacebuilders’ loose organizational structure with over 300 contacts with individuals, organizations and other networks made it difficult to make an effective stance on issues or be able to work coordinated and with long-term effect in capacity building of youth-led peace organizations.

In 2006, the network was restructured. The new structure, consisting of 32 member organizations and a number of affiliates, allowed more adequate cooperation and possibilities of exchange among members of the network and the Secretariat, increased capacity to organize more activities around the world and increased the sense of ownership of the youth participating in the network. In the new structure, the members were represented in the International Steering Group according to region.

Up to this point, UNOY was mainly financed on project basis. In connection to the restructuring, multi-year funding was acquired from the European Union and from Oxfam-Novib. This improved UNOY’s capacity to plan ahead making multi-year plans possible and realizable, and reassuring that the organization could learn from its training activities and make manuals leading to sustainable and consistent capacity building.

UNOY continued to grow steadily in scope and implemented a number of projects, with increased attention to research, advocacy and capacity building projects both in the Netherlands and abroad. The trainings aimed to build the capacities of young peace activists and were increasingly organized in partnership
with other organizations, particularly members of the UNOY network. In order to match the growing budget and volume of the program that was implemented the organization was extensively reorganized regarding financial management, HR management and board structures. A new logo and graphic profile for UNOY was launched in 2011.

**Focus on Advocacy and Capacity Building**

While focusing on capacity building, UNOY realized that it was not enough just to train young peacebuilders to become active, but that policy makers worldwide should be made aware of the positive contributions young people could make to peacebuilding. UNOY Peacebuilders launched its first advocacy activity in October of 2005, when the first Youth Advocacy Team promoted the Decade for a Culture of Peace at the UN. This was followed up by a related campaign in 2006 in New York and two campaigns in 2007 at a national level by member organizations and at a European level by member organization and the secretariat. Another Youth Advocacy Team was created in 2012 and is still active to date. In order to build the capacity of UNOY members, and of the Youth Advocacy Team, several trainings on youth advocacy for peace has taken place, and training materials and manuals have been developed since 2004.

UNOY advocates for the role of youth in peacebuilding, and more specifically to promote the visibility and recognition of youth as active stakeholders in peacebuilding and promote the partnership between young peacebuilders and other stakeholders. In 2009, UNOY was granted UN ECOSOC Consultative Status. UNOY was elected a member of the Council of Europe Advisory Council on Youth for the period 2014-2015 and is a member of the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Sub-Working Group on Youth Participation in Peacebuilding.

Besides advocacy, capacity development is the other key focus of UNOY. Training courses focused on conflict analysis, project management, gender and peacebuilding are held annually. Regional African Training Courses bringing together UNOY members on a regional basis were held in 2009, 2012 and 2013. Toolkits and manuals on topics including working in networks, fundraising, and gender and peacebuilding have also been developed.

To strengthen the UNOY network, jobshadowing projects took place in 2011 and 2013 in which UNOY members from different regions were able to visit each other. UNOY works in a gender sensitive way, and several projects have focused on gender related issues.

The formal UNOY Network today consists of member organizations only. Members retain their membership by taking part in the Annual Impact Review. In its 25 years of existence, UNOY Peacebuilders has grown into an established network with members and partners all over the world. The organization now has 4 staff and 60 members in 35 countries. UNOY has kept its dynamism and commitment while continuously working for youth participation in peacebuilding and for the creation of a Culture of Peace. UNOY Peacebuilders has gone through different phases, narrowed its scope, evolved, learned and professionalized. But, despite the organizational changes and ever-evolving nature of the network, the mission is still the same: UNOY Peacebuilders is about giving a voice to young people and providing them with the space and capacity for constructive action.

Artist: **Marta Coll**
The story takes place in the three villages of Kramokrom, Camp and Nyame Bekyere, situated in the Central Region of Ghana.

The night sky, twinkling bright with the light of the moon, is a magnificent sight. Lying in the meadows, crickets chirp. Peaceful and calm, nothing is to be rushed. Rivers proceeding, forests ascending, the sun is rising. It is still so quiet, despite what is being sung, while birds go fetch some food for their young. The dancing of people makes music for the soul, it tells a story of sorrow and hope. The cry for help from their feet ignites the passion of togetherness, abandons distress suffered and recalls empty promises of independence.

These villages are lost in the centre of a rainforest, a paradise seemingly devoid of man’s destructive usage of nature. But a closer look at the lives of the people tells a story of faith lost and despair. As morning approaches, the sight of infants wearing tattered clothes, looking malnourished and pale, sums up the plight of children in these lost villages.

Their troubles point to the limitations of the conventional schooling system in providing underserved and deprived populations with basic education. Due to the peculiar demographic characteristics and the socioeconomic challenges that confront this area of the Central Region, conventional educational systems are unable to thrive and make an impact in remote areas. Many of the settlements and communities are sparsely populated and scattered, making distance a hindrance to school attendance. The costs associated are also a major barrier to access and participation. In poor deprived communities, whether or not children attend school usually depends on the costs for their families. Direct costs arises from schooling accessories such as uniforms, books and writing materials, whilst the indirect costs are largely in the form of income loss from the child’s potential employment or contribution to household revenue through labour.

Another issue faced by these communities is access to health care. In September 2004, I witnessed three pregnant women die due to complications that arose during their delivery, because there was no vehicle to convey them to the district hospital situated about 2 hours away. The cause of death was obvious, but no one cared because it was apparently normal for pregnant women to lose their lives in this manner at the villages.
On another occasion, as I walked through the forest, I came across a seven year old girl crying uncontrollably. Her parents were gone to the farm, leaving her very sick at home to take care of herself. I approached and touched the little girl’s forehead; I was moved with tears. She had a very high fever and also a big boil on one of her thighs. I did everything humanly possible to save her but she did not survive the journey on foot to a makeshift health post. Sara, as I later got to know, was a pupil in primary school. Full of life, she had always wanted to be a nurse. It was a long shot for a girl in an unknown village, but for children from these communities it is all right to dream. The death of Sara had a profound effect on me and galvanised me to help the settlements.

My stumble upon these communities was a mere coincidence. In 2008, as I was visiting Obuasi in the Ashanti region of Ghana, I came across an old friend. He invited me to go to a village where he was working to improve the situation. While traveling to the town through the rainforest, I instantly fell in love with the place, the green nature and the serene environment.

I stayed in these communities for 3 days, visiting community members trying to find out why they had so many challenges and were unable to work together to tackle their problems. As it turns out these villages could not unite around a common cause because of deep tribal and ethnic divisions, despite the many socio-economic problems they faced in their settlements. The only school in town was in a terrible state: no roof; no teachers, as no one wanted to be posted there; and on top of it all no children to teach. Their parent had better work for them to do as children are useful on farms. And wasting their time sitting idle in a wooden structure was not part of their concept of school.

Before I left, I had a chat with all the leaders of the community to discuss the challenges confronting them and how this situation could be overcome. They admitted something needed to be done about their children. They needed a clinic and an adequate educational system above all; but firstly the intertribal and communal strife in the settlements had to be dealt with.

I promised them I would be back in a month’s time if they were willing to overcome their differences to build something together. On my return trip, I visited Dunkwa-On-Offin, the district capital. With a few contacts I had within the local community, I managed to get an audience with the District Chief Executive – the government representative in the district – and the Director of Education of the Ghana Education Service. They both promised that if I could help deal with the continuous communal strife and get the communities to work together, they would address the infrastructure deficiency and get teachers posted to the village.

Conflict arises out of a desire to dominate each other, to tell ourselves that we are superior to the rest, and in the three villages, this was no exception. In order to get the communities working together I had to understand the root causes of their feud and to place myself in their situation. I helped set up an
alternative dispute resolution committee comprised of the three chiefs and a few elders. This was well received and it had members from all three communities.

For the next six months that ensued I worked hard to form a community unit committee which had members from all three communities. Their task was to find a place where we could put up a temporary structure acceptable to all and come up with solutions to accommodate teachers who would be posted to the new school. They were also responsible for helping resolve any issues between the communities and its inhabitants, as well as reduce their over reliance on the public courts, which usually created more conflicts and impoverishes them as they had to pay lawyers and other court clerks to get their cases heard, and the costs of transportation from the villages to the district capital were high.

It took over two years to get the communities working effectively together, and with the help of volunteers both national and international, we managed to put up a school building, a community health post and a training center for youth to acquire different skills.

Initially the building for the clinic was meant for a library but after its completion, the communities expressed their preference for a clinic. The community also wanted a skills training center for youth but there was no funding available. Community members then agreed that they would provide manpower and that the volunteers could then source funding for the structure. We decided that the building should be made of wood since we did not have to buy it. Within a month the center was ready, providing training in carpentry, dressmaking, beads making, wood carving and bread baking.

Now the unit committee, along with the tribal leaders, are successful in helping prevent potential conflicts and resolving struggles in the town through the alternative community dispute resolution mechanism, and each Monday morning since 2004, the 3 communities take turns in cleaning the school and helping provide food for the teachers that work in it. And just this year (2014) the hard work has paid off with 20 children from Kramokrom D/A primary school, graduating from high school with distinction.

I have learned many things through my work as a peace and community development officer. I am very proud of all the progress achieved, of the three communities for coming together, and of all the hard working people that have and are making it possible. My experience tells the story of resilience and passion; it shows that with effort, it is possible to transform the society we live in, and despite the many challenges that one may face, peace is possible.

Rashid Zuberu (29) has been involved with youth, peacebuilding initiatives and community development initiatives in Ghana for the past 10 years. He currently works as a coordinating secretary for Young Peace Brigades and a field researcher and consultant for the National Youth Authority at Obuasi Municipal of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. He is a member of the International Steering Group of UNOY.

Artist: Victoria Burillo – Adinkra symbol of unity. The siamese crocodiles share the same stomach. This popular symbol of traditional Ghanaian culture is a reminder that infighting and tribalism is harmful to all who engage in it. It is a call to oneness, irrespective of cultural differences.
My name is Sharna. I have been involved with the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) for 5 years. I co-founded the Young WILPF Network with three other young women and have been on a life-changing journey since then.

Like a lot of young women, I came to the feminist movement in a roundabout way. Though I remember being a passionate social justice advocate even as a young child, the world around me talked as if we had achieved gender equality, that I could do anything my brothers could do. I took this for granted. That part of the mission was done, and dusted.

It wasn’t until I had finished my Masters Degree in International Development, travelled throughout Asia, and tried to get a start on my career, that I learned some hard truths. I watched as my brothers’ rose quickly, while I hit one brick wall after another. I was smart, I was motivated, but I was young, I was a woman, and this meant I was a liability, not an investment.

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Like lots of other young women who are disengaged with feminism, it took time and many hard blows to learn that I had been sold a lie. Gender equality was an illusion, and one deeply connected to the wider social, political and economic structures I thought I knew so much about.

And so, rejected for job after job, I made my own way - and eventually I found myself in the women’s peace movement.

I was doing some research on gender and conflict for a short article I was writing for a youth publication. Trawling the Internet for resources, I came across WILPF, who I had seen before standing vigil every Sunday around the time of the anti-Iraq war protests. I decided to try and find them – and after some emails traversing the globe, I wound up around the corner from my house meeting with three other amazing young women who had just began to organize a Young WILPF network in Australia.

After joining with Young WILPF, I found an international network of women committed to disarmament, human rights and gender equality. To addressing the root causes of war and conflict, and placing the lives of women front and center. Women who did not treat my age as a liability, but welcomed me, and my contribution with open arms.
The Journey Of A Young Woman Making Peace

I dove straight in, and consumed as much experience as I could in the following years. I took part in the Australian civil society negotiations on the National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security. I interned at WILPF’s New York UN office, and learned just how hard women fight to get a foot in the door of these high level forums. I built relationships and collaborations with young women in the Pacific, and the Australian disarmament community.

Eventually, I ended up back in New York, this time as an Australian WILPF delegate for the Commission on the Status of Women. I was there to advocate for the inclusion of language on the arms trade, the right for women to participate in security decision-making and peace processes. While there, I was connected with a strong woman called Binalakshmi Nepram from the conflict affected Northeast of India who was there to advocate for these same objectives. Traveling alone on a small budget, I offered to help her set up a side event she had organised on the forthcoming Arms Trade Treaty. In a small room adjacent to the UN, this powerful woman had gathered a distinguished panel, including the incredibly down-to-earth Nobel Laureate Jodi Williams.

She talked about de facto military rule in her home state of Manipur, the flood of arms that intensified armed violence, and the strength of the women’s movement that stood with no more than a torch in the night, guarding the community from the wonton abuses of the notorious paramilitaries that occupy every corner of the state. Binalakshmi spoke with a calm intensity that left me desperate to learn more, and after a few months I was on a plane to New Delhi to lend my time to her organisation.

I spent several months working for her organisation, The Control Arms Foundation of India. While there I helped design the framework for livelihood projects that would assist women with training, and equipment like sewing machines and looms to help boost their incomes. Projects like these are common, and do great work, but as I would learn, there remained a massive gap in linking this good work with the market.

I didn’t realize the importance of these projects until I finally was able to travel to Manipur, and meet with the network of women there. I sat down to chat with one woman named Hebu (named changed for privacy reasons). She talked calmly and passionately about justice, and women’s rights, and I could see how the women gathered around her and listened to every word she spoke.

She’d lost her husband in a pointless encounter with an unnamed armed group, and been left with nothing - but she was far from resigned to her fate. The others talked of her running for political office, a suggestion she humbly nodded along with, but declined to elaborate.
Hebu was an obvious leader, and I asked her what inspired her. I don’t know what I expected her to say, but when she explained that it was gaining access to a small stipend income through her involvement with the organisation, I was taken aback. She weaved delicate traditional scarves, which sold poorly in the local market flooded with similar goods, but she received a stipend. This small income - simply being free from the burden of worrying there was food on the table - was all the support she needed to grow into the obvious leader she was.

This small income - simply being free from the burden of worrying there was food on the table - was all the support she needed to grow into the obvious leader she was.

Eventually my visa expired, and I wrapped up my work in New Delhi, and travelled back to Australia. In the following months, a Young WILPF colleague and a fellow activist from Delhi divined a new project. We would create a market solution for the livelihood projects I was working on - and take a whole new approach to peace activism.

And this is how the The Fabric Social was born. We are a social enterprise that provides intensive support for women weavers and tailors in conflict affected areas. Using a simple smart phone app as a business tool that links with an online store – we connect the women directly with international consumers. We take the time, and invest the resources needed to support and scale these small projects, and do the hard work to get their products out of the conflict depressed economies to western consumers willing to pay a decent price for ethically produced fashion.

I am now living in Assam, India were we are building our pilot project. It is early days, but we have an incredible amount of support an expertise on hand in Australia and here in India. We are in this for the long term, and in it so that good projects don’t fail for lack of a market solution, and more women like Hebu have the small boost they need to be game changers in their communities.

Sharna de Lacy is a 29 years old Australian peacebuilder. She has been involved in the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) for 5 years, and is the co-founder of The Fabric Social, a social enterprise based in India that provides intensive support for women in conflict affected areas.

Artist: Marta Coll – “Tierra de Mujeres”
This story is about the particular moment when I personally understood that peacebuilding may start with things as simple as helping one young boy that needs to be reassured that he is safe and no harm will come to him. More importantly – this story shows that everyone can find a moment like this, connect to it, and eventually - become a peacebuilder.

When I was 19, I was driven by deep curiosity and wanted to explore the planet. Having just volunteered and travelled throughout Asia, specifically through Nepal, India and China, I wanted to see what the other side of the globe was like. Accordingly, I decided to take a second year to travel and do some voluntary work in Colombia, South America. Little did I know that this year would contribute greatly to my desire in becoming a peacebuilder and eventually influence my choice to work in the field of Human Rights.

The memorable experience that I would like to tell you about occurred in Colombia, where I was volunteering for the local NGO, Manos Amigas, a Colombian organization based in Ibagues, a city in the mid-west of the country. At Manos Amigas we provided free meals and an afternoon programme of education and recreation for underprivileged children from the poorest areas of Ibagues. Most of these children have spent their lives on the street, surrounded by violence and instability, as there were no resources to provide them with any kind of structured existence. It was apparent that many of their parents were addicted to some local drug, and it put us in a difficult position when trying to ensure the emotional or educational needs of the children.

However, at Manos Amigas, a relaxed, inviting and calm atmosphere was kept in place by the efforts of the volunteers, employees, and the children themselves. The situation was so well handled that I found it easy to forget the home situation that the children came from - and were returning to every day. At Manos Amigas everyone was always smiling and happy. During lunch the children would queue up to receive home - made juice and a full meal often consisting of rice, vegetables and meat - necessities that were too often impossible to get in their households. In the afternoons, the children would learn English, Spanish, mathematics, or just play games that were guided by the volunteers.

I started to learn more about the actual lives these children were experiencing as time went on. During my initial work as a volunteer I was only able to see the idyllic time the children had at the Manos Amigas
Centre. But slowly a couple of eye-opening stories started to emerge. Though all of the children were loving and friendly, their circumstance had definitely affected their behaviors and perspectives, as well as their lives in general.

One of the most memorable situations happened during one of the usual afternoon session. The children had all settled down for an afternoon nap and were lying sprawled out across the downstairs room. An hour or so had passed and the children were starting to wake up. There was nothing unusual in this, of course, and I wasn’t even really paying attention, just thinking about my own stuff, and my time there. I barely even registered that someone seemed to be crying uncontrollably. Suddenly I realized that one of the kids - lets call him Jon - who was an outgoing, amusing and charming boy, was howling with sadness, lying on the floor, seemingly refusing to wake up whilst all of the other children were just standing around, not paying any noticeable attention and basically just slowly and drowsily waking up. I instinctively moved over to him and touched him on the shoulder, trying to figure out what was going on and trying to let him know that everything was ok. I quickly realized that this was not what Jon wanted, as he batted my arm away and carried on howling. I was at a loss. I could think of no explanation why this little kid was expressing such raw emotion and grief for no apparent reason. I looked round at the other volunteers and realized that they were patiently and empathetically letting the situation unfold. That was when I figured out that there was something more going than met the eye.

After Jon had left to go home, I asked Anne, one of the other volunteers who had been there longer, what on earth had just happened. Anne explained that in the community Jon was from, sexual education was practically absent. Apparently, Jon had been subjected to sexual activity by an older boy, and this quite probably was causing him psychological and emotional difficulty. His mother had found out about it and had notified the staff at Manos Amigas. I felt really sorry for Jon; especially when I found out that another of his friends had had the same problem. Again, this was a lovely boy, who would constantly make funny whistling bird noises and had really contributed to a good atmosphere in the classroom. Finally, I felt sorry for the older boy. Though he was the perpetrator, one could imagine a society in which, if better educated and supported, he could have found a constructive outlet for his human desires, rather than very damaging ones. By damaging others, he had contributed to a less stable world, one that he was nevertheless obliged to participate in.

I think that this event was one of the defining moments of my experience as a volunteer. It was a really eye-opening moment, as it blew away the façade of the comfort and shelter Manos Amigas was providing. It also cast a new perspective on my own life, as I was so grateful for being able to exit Jon’s world after my volunteer period was over. But I was also proud of myself for having exposed myself to tough realities and being inquisitive and brave enough to attempt to learn about them, challenge them, and try and change them for the better. A fuller range of human experience was open to me now, the joy that the NGOs could bring to the children, and the toughness of the situation they needed relief from.
How this moment brought me to peacebuilding?

First, the act of volunteering creates an empathy that creates conditions for peace. Being exposed to the situation of the street children, it was difficult to maintain a distance from the reality of the children. Once I was closely involved in it, I had no choice but to acknowledge it, and could not distance myself from it emotionally or intellectually. It became a part of my reality and motivated me to change the world through an understanding of what the world actually was for them, rather than just what I had experienced up to that point. Furthermore, it increased my knowledge and understanding of the world, equipping me with an additional experience and qualifying me to be comfortable and able to function in other environments. It also provided me with the sort of a quiet confidence that enables one to be more peaceful naturally. Through greater empathy, one understands others and is not so easily disturbed by actions; which means one is not emotionally reactive, and less likely to initiate behaviours that can be deemed “unpeaceful” or that would create potential violence. Furthermore, empathy means one is more easily moved by the condition of others, and more likely to be motivated to create better circumstances for them, or to take the role of a peacebuilder to ensure the improvement of their particular situation. Finally, one becomes aware of the specific situation of a certain group of people that one may not have known about before. This leads to a greater understanding of the world and its inhabitants, and of how the world functions and how it fits together. Greater knowledge means one is able to shape the world and its events, due to greater understanding, and one that has seen the suffering of others is more motivated to contribute to peacebuilding.

Second, that moment in Colombia was a peacebuilding effort taken especially for Jon. Through the existence of the NGO and the participation of volunteers, in that moment, he could be himself, without risking judgement or reprisal. No one needed to change anything in his moment of grief, and neither did Jon. He was surrounded by understanding and empathic individuals. His situation was understood and widely accepted. Jon did not need to be anything other than himself in that moment, even though his situation was difficult and potentially could result in a lifelong struggle. To me, that is a huge part of peace – to be in a situation where we can be ourselves unconditionally, no matter what we have experienced, surrounded by concerned individuals who allow us to be who we are and even try to improve our circumstances in a calm, considered and empathetic way.

In short, through my volunteer work I was able to create the conditions for peaceful environment by opening my eyes to the need for peacebuilding and improving the situations of others. At the same time, I was part of an organization that provided help for a group of people in a desperate need of peacebuilding, simply by providing them with a space to be themselves. This influenced me to work in the field of Human Rights, in which I am active today - and there is a big chance that it will not change.

Syd Boyd (27) is an intern for the Global Human Rights Defense. He was previously a volunteer in both Colombia and Nepal. His idea for life is to travel around the world and work with human rights in as many countries as possible.

Artist: Sylvia Frain
A few years ago, I was reading a news article from Bangladesh about a young girl and her mother who had been at a refugee camp at Vavuniya, Sri Lanka. While there, they had both been attacked and raped, resulting in both the mother and the daughter becoming pregnant. It made me so angry because I was sure that Sri Lankan forces committed the rapes. However, I was not sure about the details of the whole story. After some time, I went to Sri Lanka during my summer vacation and got a chance to visit the camp where the two rapes had taken place. I was so eager to meet the two women. I somehow found them with the help of an NGO that I was working with in Vavuniya that helped women who had been affected by the war.

When I eventually met with them I felt tears in my eyes. There, in front of me, was a small 12 year old girl with 2 children standing next to her. I was speechless and it took some time to regain my composure. She started to tell me the story of what had happened to her, though I didn’t ask her to tell to me the whole story. The reason why she wanted to tell her story was that she wanted the world to know her situation, and that of many women during the war. She also wanted to be a role model for rest of the girls; to stand up; to tell her story; and, to stop the violence against women during war-time. She then told me that she does not want to follow her mother’s path and she wanted to speak up. It was only then that I realized that her mother was not there and I asked about it. She said her mother had taken her life right after the baby had been born and now she had to take care of the two children. I start to think about how the military forces have been taking advantage of the young women during the war-time; how they took every opportunity to sexually harass women – from looking, to staring, to touching, to raping and beating and insulting. I can’t call these attitudes anything but animalistic.

The girl continued her story by saying that she moved from her birth-place to Vavuniya during the last period of the Sri Lankan civil war. She had stayed in the refugee camp with the hope that she would gain a good education in a new place after the war, and would also be able to take care of her mother, having lost her father during the civil war.

“All the hopes I had vanished away within 10 minutes because of them” she said. She began to cry and cry. And as she cried I felt overwhelmed by sadness and empathy for what this girl had gone through. At that point, I felt responsible, not for what had happened to
I strongly believe that we will make the world a peaceful place; a place without violence against women.

her, but for stopping it from happening to anyone else. I strongly believe that we will make the world a peaceful place; a place without violence against women. I believe by empowering grassroots women to speak up about each and every incident, like the small girl who I met, this can be achieved. At this point, it is pointless to believe in the government to make policies or take action against the violence because the government has had a part in creating violence against women and promoting the violence more and more. That’s why the work of NGO’s and grassroots organisations is so important. It is a way to enable women to speak about their experiences in a safe environment.

I began spreading the word of what had, and in many places still was happening to women in Sri Lanka. I also began teaching fundamental human rights to children in schools and to inform young people about their rights and how to use their rights. I now work as a project officer for Save The Children in Sri Lanka.

I have a dream which nurtures me and gives me a sense of myself: a dream to see a peaceful Sri Lanka where Tamil and Sinhalese can live peacefully. A country where a child is not woken from sleep, hearing the loud destructive voice of gun fire, and where they do not shiver at the nightmare of being burnt while they are asleep, but wake up hearing the chirping of birds, or dreams of flying above everything like a bird.

In my opinion, only when the state recognizes Tamil as a part/citizen of Sri Lanka can we have a peaceful country. I chase my dream every single day, even when people said I am not strong enough to fight the long battle of injustice because I was a girl born in a minority ethnic group in Sri Lanka. I am still chasing my dream.

Aberamy Sivalogananthan is 25 years old, and has been involved in peacebuilding in Sri Lanka for the past 5 years. Her work is focused on helping bring safety and equality to women and children who have been affected by the civil war. This work has included educating young people about fundamental human rights, as well as helping victims of the war seek justice. She currently works as a Project Officer for the New Beginnings Program funded by USAID and delivered and organised by Save the Children International. Through this role, she hopes to evoke change in government policy to address violence and discrimination in Sri Lanka.

Artist: Aya Chebbi
Did it ever cross your mind how small we are, but how every piece of everything has its own story worth telling?

I want to tell you a few short stories about the war and a period after that. They all happened in different times and in different places, yet they all send a strong message of tolerance, empathy, humanity, and love towards each other. I am telling you these stories because – as much as they are shocking – they show that the world is a beautiful place, full of beautiful people that are willing to help one another.

In Bavaria, southern Germany, there is one small place called Dachau. The medieval town of Dachau is important for history as it was the location of the first of the Nazi concentration camps. Today, if you go to Dachau you will find a church standing in the place where the concentration camp once was. For me, this church is situated there to tell a beautiful story – the story of two best friends. These two best friends are not just any kind of best friends; they are the kind that makes the sun rise and shine again, the kind that makes nights seem neither dark nor cold, they are the type of friends that teach us that love and forgiveness are possible. One of the friends is a priest who works in the Dachau church, yet his father was a Nazi and one of the main builders of the concentration camp of Dachau. The other friend is a Dutch Jew, whose father was imprisoned there in times of war. After the war ended he built the church on the place where the concentration camp once was.

It confuses me how everything is so contradictory – how we are so good, but at the same time how we are so evil, so hurtful, and so full of jealousy. When I heard the story of the two best friends, it inspired me and showed me that I am not the only crazy fool in this world that believes in the goodness of people. Because if they were able to build a friendship and leave their pasts behind, and that of their ancestors, then everyone is capable of spreading positive energy and love, while forgetting the negativity of stories that are actually not ours; we did not live them, we did not write them. It sends out a clear call important for all to remember – the past is something finished, unchangeable. We have to enjoy this beautiful, but indeed short life. Do not destroy it by constantly things that cannot be changed. What is important is what remains, not what is lost.

Another story is set in my childhood and involves those who taught me the meaning of love and humanity. The year was 1993, and the place Bosnia
and Herzegovina. The country was at war then. It felt like the whole world had forgotten us, like we would be killed one night and just disappear forever. There was no food, no water, no gas, no fire. Yet shootings were abundant and gun shots could be heard constantly, coming from all directions. People were scared; everyone seemed to be going crazy. I can still remember the terrible sounds you could hear - shots, screams; they are like a melody inside my head that is stuck on repeat, and goes on and over. However, sometimes during long, dark nights I recall a different melody accompanied with different images. I remember my parents’ voices on a similar, cold winter night. I was so afraid; I did not understand anything. All I knew was that something bad was happening outside, that we should all be scared, and that we should be prepared to run. The term ‘war’ was constantly used by the elders to explain the plight we had been experiencing. While we were terrified, waiting for new explosions, someone knocked on the door. We froze immediately. My mother went and opened door. There, standing feebly, were three persons asking for shelter. They had “belonged” to who knows which nation, and where running from who knows whom. Yet, my mother and father accepted them. In the midst of all our despair, my parents welcomed some unknown people into our home. They gave them a place to sleep and bread to eat, even though we did not have enough for ourselves. I thought they had gone crazy!

After all that mess and horror of the war, the opposing sides now live together again, and we love each other again.

I will forever remember those voices and faces. A few years after the war has ended, they came to visit us and show their gratitude for accepting them that night. After all that mess and horror of the war, the opposing sides now live together again, and we love each other again. Isn’t it ironic? Because not so long ago we were literally killing each other.

In school they teach you that you should be careful, because everywhere there are mines that have not yet exploded. They teach you that we live in peace now, that you are protected, and you should be happy. They teach you that we were divided, but that we are all same. It is interesting to recall all these thoughts that I never had thought of before. In this kind of situations you can learn only one out of two things - you will either learn how to hate, or how to love.

Thinking about this brought tears to my eyes and reminded me that there are beautiful people in the world who through their actions improve humanity. People like Tim. Tim was just a random guy who after finishing university in New York came to London with the intention of getting to know beautiful Europe. What made Tim different from the rest is that he was, and still is, an activist. He protested against the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though he wasn’t familiar with the history of that area, he knew that civilians were dying. And just because of his empathy towards the suffering of others, he decided to try to make a difference. He went to Bosnia and Herzegovina for three weeks. That doesn’t seem like a great accomplishment; however, today if you go to visit Sarajevo, you can visit Tim too. These days he is a great ecological activist, trying to save the beauties of my country, for which very few people care. Tim
and others are doing this by cleaning, protecting and promoting ecotourism. Tim also wrote many touristic books about Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a wish to show the world that we are not some kind of ”black hole”, but a beautiful country with amazing places to visit – and what is more important – amazing people, who despite everything that happened in the past, keep smiling and welcoming everyone who comes.

During one of the conversations with Tim, he told me that one of the things he regrets most in his life was leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina knowing that the war would continue there. After that he could not function properly anymore, he could not sleep nor eat, knowing that people were dying somewhere else in the world. Because it is easy to live a life of leisure, but it’s not so easy to go back to it after having lived in a place where waking up alive next day is something you need to constantly fight for. In an experience like that you realize that the numbers of casualties mentioned on news constantly are actually people, just like us, with the same values and defects. You see reality in those people, you see humanity.

It is in these stories where I find a meaning to being a peacebuilder. It is thinking about these situations, that ignites a flame inside me difficult to extinguish. Therefore I like to share and retell such stories about inspiring, brave people. To remind myself and others of who we are. People are not machines, but something way more beautiful and primordial. We are human beings and we should act and live in peace. That’s why I want to be peacebuilder.

Now I would like to ask you to think for one moment on these stories, and of you as an actor in them. Reflect on which character you would be, how you would behave, and it will lead you to discover who you actually are. Do you think you would be able to be the best friend of a person whose father had intended to kill yours? Would you provide a warm bed and share your own limited food with complete strangers in the midst of war? And could you leave your beautiful, peaceful environment and go to a place where poverty and despair reigns, to try to improve the situation in that foreign land?

I ask these questions to myself all the time; they are not questions you can give clear and definite answer to. The actors from stories mentioned may be considered crazy, insane people. But they have shown me that it can be easy to love others, that peace is possible, that humanity is beautiful, and that a world based around these values makes sense and should be what we strive for. Otherwise our lives do not have a meaning anymore. Do not forget to remember; to question reality and your role in it; to feel. Because you can always do something, you can be one of the actors in similar stories, you can be a peacebuilder.

Sabiha Kapetanovic (Bosnia and Herzegovina) is a 23 year old student of international relations in Ege University, Izmir. She is an intern in the Ege University Rectorate International Affairs and European Union Office; a member of AEGEE, working to promote social mobility, cultural exchange and diversity; and was member of the NGO Narko-NE in Sarajevo, an organization that strives to create social communities in which healthy and creative young people participate in the building of peaceful future.

Artist: Ivana Ristic
July 20th 2014

In 3 days I must sit in front of 24 Israeli and Palestinian youth and tell them that everything will be ok.

Today, 100 Palestinians and 13 Israeli soldiers were killed in Gaza, while thousands if not millions of people fear for their lives, run away, or hide in shelters.

My name is Sarah. I am Israeli. I work for an online peace movement called YaLa Young Leaders. This movement brings together over half a million young women and men from all over the Middle East and Northern Africa. I also volunteer for a Jerusalem based NGO that brings Christian, Muslim and Jewish teens together.

In 3 days, I will have to find the words to reassure them, to remind them that what they do is important, unique, and that there is hope.

But tonight I am scared and hopeless. Before I talk to them, I need to remind myself that there is still hope.

A couple of months ago I had the opportunity to travel to Kigali in Rwanda since the peace movement I work for, YaLa Young Leaders, had developed a sister movement in Africa. Our newly opened office in Kigali was about to launch a micro-gardening project. Our idea is that youth from the Middle East and Africa have a lot in common and a lot to learn from one another. Our networks have brought together amazing young women and men who believe they can make a change in their region and be actively involved in the development of their communities and countries. And while Israelis can teach about agriculture, we have a lot to learn about forgiveness and reconciliation. Rwandans are the perfect inspiration and role models for that.

20 years ago, almost a million people were slaughtered in 100 days in Rwanda. Neighbors killed neighbors, friends murdered friends, and colleagues chased colleagues. Men, women, and children lost their lives in the most violent way imaginable. The country was left in chaos. This was only 20 years ago. 20 years later, when I went out of the airport, all I could see was a bright blue sky, green hills and smiling faces. I was in Rwanda.

I landed in Kigali at 5pm. At 4am I was on my way
to the mountains, to realize my biggest dream: Seeing mountain gorillas. As soon as I sat down in the white jeep that was waiting for me outside the hotel I knew that my guide, who was driving, would become a friend. His name is Patrick. We started to speak in French. We are exactly the same age. We both love nature, and we are both the eldest of our family, with our brothers and sisters being of the same ages. But the commonalities stop here. When he was 12, during the genocide, his parents were brutally murdered because they were Tutsi. Patrick then became the adult of the family. He worked everywhere he could, and took care of his brother and sister – made sure they had food, went to school and behaved well. He never questioned his choice. He put himself aside and did what he had to do. 20 years later, both his brother and sister have gone to university and have lives of their own. Patrick did that. He never stopped smiling while he was telling me his story. He was neither sad nor embarrassed. He was strong and wise. More than a guide, it was a hero I met on this Sunday morning at 4am.

On my second day in Rwanda, I had the chance to meet the vice mayor of the city of Kigali. Her name is Hope. How poetic! We talked about the similarities between Rwanda and Israel. We talked a lot about the genocide and about resilience. She had this amazing way to look at what happened in her country. She was hopeful and was looking back at the history of her country with extraordinary wisdom and acceptance. I heard this kind of discourse from a few people during my stay in Rwanda, and I must admit that they left me speechless. The genocide is not a taboo, it is part of who they are, and they must not only overcome it, but also learn from it. According to Hope, one of the reasons for the genocide was that women had lost their leadership in society. She said that in a society where women are strong and respected, such things as the genocide would have stopped earlier, because mothers would have stopped their sons, because mothers would not see the difference between a Hutu and a Tutsi baby. I found so much strength and inspiration in her words.

On my last day in this amazing and complicated country, I met Innocent. Innocent works for the minister of youth as the ambassador of Rwandan youth. While we were talking about different ways to connect Rwandan youth to Israeli and Palestinian youth, he told me about a debate project he has developed in Rwanda. Young men and women from Rwanda are meeting and discussing the genocide. They discuss the reasons and causes of genocide, but also its consequences. Even though most of the participants were only children or infants 20 years ago it is part of their heritage and together, by facing it, they find the way to learn from it and try to make their society better by learning lessons from this dreadful event.

On the flight back to Tel Aviv I was left alone with my thoughts. So many people, so many stories, so many places and so many life lessons learned. I was a different person. I found in Rwanda something I did not know I was looking for: The power of forgiveness.

After the genocide, the country was left with over 120,000 people who had to be detained because they took part in the killing of close to 1 million people. To address this issue, the Rwandan government re-
established a traditional community court system called Gacaca. This system would not only help the national justice system to judge these people, but it would also develop a reconciliation and forgiveness process at the grassroots level of society. The Gacaca courts gave lower sentences when the person who was accused of taking part in the genocide showed repentance and willingness to ask for forgiveness to the community. Prisoners who confessed their crimes and would agree to face the surviving members of the families they destroyed would be allowed to go home with community service orders. People faced their victims and asked for forgiveness; people faced their torturers and forgave. Today they live side by side.

**Forgiving means that we are acknowledging that the other side is human, that their children and ours deserve to live safely and peacefully.**

Today I am back at home, sitting in front of my laptop, waiting for the siren that will announce the next rocket launched on Tel Aviv, thinking of my Palestinian friends who have nowhere to hide in Gaza, worrying for my friends who have been recruited by the Israeli army and praying for the youth, Israeli and Palestinian, I work with. Today I have my answer: I could forgive; I will forgive; I am forgiving. There is simply no other way. Forgiving means that we are acknowledging that the other side is human, that their children and ours deserve to live safely and peacefully. By forgiving I stand for the future of my region. I hope I will be forgiven too.

The people I met in Rwanda proved to me that forgiveness exists, and that it is possible. Rwanda gave me hope. In 3 days I will sit with Israeli and Palestinian youth, and I know what I will tell them.

**Forgiving means that we are acknowledging that the other side is human, that their children and ours deserve to live safely and peacefully.**

Sarah Perle Benazera (31) is an Israeli peacebuilder. She works for an online peace movement called YaLa Young Leaders. This movement brings together over half a million young women and men from all over the Middle East and Northern Africa and works to empower young people these regions and to foster cooperation through dialogue and education.

Artist: Galyna Uvarova
Could you begin by introducing yourself and telling us a bit about the work you do?

My name is Claire Harris and I am 26 years old. I’m originally from a place called Fermanagh in Northern Ireland, but I now live in the capital city of Belfast. I’ve been involved in peacebuilding for the past 10 years. Many of my experiences have been outside of the UK, for example I had my first peacebuilding experience at the age of 16 when I went to Uganda to work in the reintegration of child soldiers.

It was that experience that got me interested in peacebuilding and specifically the use of violence and its effects on societies. From there I went and worked in Brooklyn with gang members and then the Philippines and Brazil with gang members also. Simultaneously I was studying for my Social Anthropology degree at university and then a Master’s degree in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, so I was able to use my experiences working abroad for the purposes of my research.

I have been working with the Belfast Interface Project (B.I.P) for the last 2 years.

Is there a particular way that you work with groups or does it depend entirely on the group?

It depends on the group, but the core of my work is all about relationship building and listening to people. I approach my work from the view that everyone is human; the kind of humanising element of peacebuilding. At the core of it all are the multiple relationships, and the effort to build up a relationship between me and the group as a whole, and as individuals. In my experience, relationships are fundamental to peacebuilding.

Because I am a young woman, I will never really be part of the groups I work with. I look so different and there is a very clear distinction. However, at the very start of working with a group I spend a lot of time building relationships with them. Before we can start any real kind of work they have to invite me in and I have to earn the right to work with them.

When I was working in the Philippines I would sit at the side of the road with the street gangs and get them to teach me their language because I couldn’t speak it. To an extent this rebalanced a bit of the existing power dynamic: They were actually offering me something, I was their student. That made them more comfortable.
It wasn’t a case of me going in and telling them “we will do this” - there has to be more of a balanced relationship than that.

In terms of the Belfast Interface Project, what is your day to day role?

My title is Development Officer, so I am responsible for development of B.I.P and coordinating the projects they are doing. At the moment my focus is on youth projects and young people who are using violence or getting involved in violence along the borders of what are deemed Catholic and Protestant areas of Belfast.

Are there any particular experiences that stand out for you in the work you’ve done?

I am currently involved in a project with two youth groups in West and North Belfast, a group from the Shankill road area, and a group from the Falls. There has been a long history of violence between these groups. I’ve been working with them for the last six months along with local youth workers building up cross-community relationships. We have taken them away on relationship building residential. We have done a lot of storytelling work between the two groups to help them to get to know each other and that group has actually gelled quite well. They know each other from rioting, but we have started talking about violence and I was hearing from them that they thought violence was a flippant thing, that it didn’t really have any impact, that it was just something you did when you were bored. They riot with each other but don’t see it as a problem.

From this storytelling work we realised that we needed to try to widen participants’ understanding of violence. In order to do that we recently brought in a group of asylums seekers. They are all living in Belfast, but are mostly from Zimbabwe and their understanding of violence is very different. Violence has changed their whole lives and they have had to flee their countries as a result of it.

When I initially brought the concept to the groups from Belfast, they got really scared of meeting the asylum seekers in a way that I didn’t really understand. Eventually, after talking with the groups for a while about what they thought asylum seekers were, it emerged that they thought they were bad people who were sent here. This was because they had linked the word ‘asylum’ to mental institutions. They had had no opportunity to learn about this in the bubble that is their street and community. That really shocked me and also made me realise that the groups were not ready to meet each other yet, they needed a bit more time to understand each other before they came together.

At the moment we are touring some of the areas that the young people live in with the asylum seekers, to give the latter some idea of where the young people are coming from and the issues they face.

Alongside this we showed the young people from Belfast a documentary showing the history and situation in Zimbabwe to give them an idea the asylum seekers’ background. We have been filming their questions for
each other, which has been really enlightening. Things I wouldn’t really have thought about asking have come up, but they have taken that on and are getting to know each other.

Currently the plan is for them to meet in a few weeks’ time to go on a residential and go through the whole storytelling process: To start pulling out the ideas of violence and getting deeper beneath the surface level.

Did you find from that point that you had a better understanding, or a stronger connection with the group?

Completely! I think it’s really important to be real with the people that you are working with and to be able to freely acknowledge that I don’t have all the answers: I’m journeying as well as them. Every time I’m doing any piece of work I’m always learning and that humbles me in they eyes of the group. Sometimes they would look at you and think you do know it all, or think of you as a teacher, form a kind of hierarchy in their minds. It helps rebalance the inevitable power dynamic I mentioned earlier. These young people have been told their whole lives that in this culture that if there is ever another person, or a difference between you and someone else that the answer is violence. The way you deal with fear is violence, because that is the way their families may have taught them or their community teaches them, and every influence they have is teaching them that violence is a way to deal with your issues, differences and fears.

Do you think that attitude comes from a historical context, or is it upbringing, or are the roots perhaps socio-economic?

These guys are 16 to 19 years old so they haven’t really experienced a lot of ‘the troubles’ in Northern Ireland. They are part of the post-Good Friday agreement generation if you like, but there is still very much a legacy of the conflict in the areas that they come from. There is still a dangerous culture of that trickling down via family members or community influences, and they don’t have experience to counteract that.

With regards to socio-economic issues; all our interface communities are situated within the top 50 multiple deprivation indices, with high levels of unemployment and high levels of poverty. It limits their opportunities to engage in further education or in travel. They just don’t have the opportunities to be doing those things.

That’s why community projects like this are really important for them. It gives them a chance to get out of the pattern of their communities and actually transform them, and more importantly, their peers.

Claire Harris is 26 years old and lives and works in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She has travelled and done peacebuilding work in places such as Brazil, Uganda and the Philippines. She currently works for the Belfast Interface Project as a Development Officer, helping bridge divides between local young people from the Protestant and Catholic community, and also attempting to create a deeper understanding between these groups and asylum seekers.

Artist: Victoria Martos - www.victoriamartos.blogspot.nl
My story talks about how I became a peacebuilder and how it has affected my life and the lives of others around me. It is a story of finding your own way and of the art of making the right decisions when they are needed. It is a story of letting go, and a story of finding out what is really worth fighting for.

To understand this story of peace, you need to understand its background. I am from Nepal, where the Madhesi people - consisting around 50% of the entire population - live, mainly in the southern part of the country. Madhesi people are not included in society, nor recognized the same rights as others in Nepal. Especially, in the not so distant past, Madhesi people were not represented in the police or army and, most importantly, they had no place in the Parliament. There were still tensions between the Madhesi communities and other communities of Nepal. In Kathmandu the Madhesi people were called names just because of wearing the traditional robe called Dhoti.

In the past I was a politician in the political party Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum (Madhesi People’s Rights Forum), where I worked in the youth wing for six years. The party fought for equal rights of the Madhesi people. Nonetheless, with time I realized that for our leaders, youth was only a useful asset when it came to demonstrations. But once the purpose of the demonstration had been achieved, we were not included in the decision-making process and we were unable to shape the resulting policies. So, when an agreement between the government and the party came into life, we - the youth members - were just asked to leave.

I was very disappointed with the actions of the party that I had believed in and that had been a part of my life for so many years. My disappointment was even greater when I realized that, because of my image as a member of the party, I could not find a good job outside politics.

At the same time, many young people started to be involved in the armed conflict with the government. They were fighting for the right of self-determination of Madhesi communities. This came following the twelve points peace agreement between the government of Nepal and the Nepal Communist Party (Maoists) that ended a decade-long, violent conflict. It was then that the youth of the southern part of Nepal (Madhesi region) started to take part in a violent revenge with the Maoists by joining the armed groups. Later on, many of the unemployed youth that could not find a job, continued with these activities for money. Since they
had no other means to feed themselves, they engaged in the independence movement as rebels.

I was fully aware of the future of such armed movements. I felt that I knew what would happen. I had seen it before. Back in the days when I was a member of the political party, we had been covering such groups; we demonstrated against persecutions directed at them, and we obscured the truth about their actions. Many members of such groups were my friends at that time and it felt natural to do it, but in time they became more radical in their actions and started to kill people. One of my best friends had joined such group and he also tried to convince me to enlist in their ranks. At some point I was 90% in favor even of actually joining them, but never did in the end.

I was still looking for a new job when I got in contact with Search for Common Ground. They involved me in their youth leadership trainings and asked me to participate in their youth work. Thus, I became devoted to their activities, and took a different path from many other young people in my community.

Following the training received from Search for Common Ground, I started peacebuilding work in my own organization, the Maharani Youth Club. At the beginning we worked in our local community. I remember that when I started this work, I was still in contact with my friend from the armed group and he still tried to persuade me to join him there. At the same time, I tried to convince him about joining our efforts directed at peacebuilding. Sadly, my friend carried on with his engagement in the rebel group and was later shot dead by the police force during one of the many fire exchanges between his group and the authorities. I felt great sadness, but I knew that I had done my best to convince him to use all of his energy and resources for peacebuilding and the empowerment of the Madhesi youth, instead of the dangerous activities of rebel groups.

After two years of working with my organization in the local Madhesi community, we established a new organization called Youth Network for Peace and Development. By then, we had a lot of contacts within our community. We tried to get young people out of their engagement in violent rebel activities, and reintroduce them back to society with the hope that they would use their energy for creative and peaceful work, benefiting both themselves and the whole society in general. We had been in constant contact with the security forces and police, so that we could vouch for youth engaged in the armed groups and convince the police to not to persecute them.

Out of the ten people we worked with, we were able to pull out seven, from which we were able to convince two to join our organization and act as role models for further candidates. The remaining five either left the country or concentrated on their education. What is important is that all of them resigned from active participation in the armed rebel groups.

Because of the kind of activities that we undertook, the leaders of the armed groups were constantly
threatening us. They where obviously not contempt with us convincing their members to join our peacebuilding efforts. Nonetheless, I knew that those threats were empty - at that time they did not have the power to harm us. Also, the people that we were in contact with were mostly our friends and that made it easier to reach them through unofficial channels.

I later joined the SODARC Center for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Promotion. There were still many Maoists in the rural areas of Nepal – and that is where SODARC was working for reconciliation to happen. Because of my previous experience, I was appointed as a social mobilizer in the two Village Development Committees situated in the Southern part of Nepal. My task was to create local Peace Committees in both VDCs. Because of our peacebuilding efforts, we had a good relation with the government of Nepal so we were allowed to further continue with our work by creating Local Peace Committees in some other districts of Nepal. Soon, we were creating Local Peace Committees all around the country, and by doing so, we provided direct support to inhabitants of the various communities on the village level. The people in the villages welcomed us with open arms. They were of course happy to receive direct financial support, but they were also interested in the peacebuilding trainings that we provided.

Now, I am a member of Teach for Nepal (TFN). Teach for Nepal is a movement of outstanding university graduates working to end the education inequity in Nepal. I use my experience as a peacebuilder to teach youth in a village school located in the Lalitpur District, a very remote, mountain area of Nepal. I tell young people about their role in society and show them that they are responsible for both themselves and their communities. At the same time I teach them English.

I mostly teach students who have to travel 3 hours to their schools and usually come from families with a low income. To provide them with equal opportunities and show them different options in their lives, we are undertaking different activities that could interest them, so that they always have an option for development and are not forced to join violent movements. Even if I teach in a Pahaadi community, while I myself come from a Madhesi community - I know their language and I understand the cultural differences, and for my young students my heritage is neither an obstacle nor a problem.

Despite all efforts made, there are still some tensions between the Madhesi people and the rest of Nepalese society. But I feel that after all these years as a peacebuilder, I now know exactly what things are really worth demonstrating for, and that as long as there is oppression and inequality, people should not be afraid to do so. I am trying to pass this knowledge further on, so that younger generations can learn from the mistakes made in the past and are able to fight for the things worth fighting for.

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Ram Ashish Chaudhary (28) is a Nepali youth activist. He is working in Teach for Nepal fellowship, and at the same time he is a vice president of Youth Network for Peace and Development.

Artist: Agnieszka Wyrostek
I am a young person who believes that whatever my status and wherever my location, I should have a positive role in drafting the future I want; a role that must also be approved by humanity. This is the story of my struggles during the Liberian war and of how I came out to form the organisation SADAD.

The worst years of my life were from 2002 to 2003. The Second Liberian Civil War erupted in 1999 in the north of Liberia, in the Lofa and Gbapolu Counties bordering Guinea. That same year I moved with my parents to live in the interior. By 2002 the war had reached my home county, Grand Cape Mount. My family then had to move into a camp for the displaced in a suburb of Monrovia. We walked for three days to the Plumkor Displaced Camp. It was terrible on the road. Many did not make it. Once in the camp, life revolved around finding food and shelter. Clothes were secondary. Education could not be counted upon.

In June 2003, the rebels reached Monrovia. They captured my family and we walked back to Cape Mount. By July, I was already having problems with the rebels. I refused to join them, and they refused to give me peace. I was only 13 years old then but brave enough to stand up for my rights.

One day, I got into a fight with one of the child soldiers. My parents and his colleagues quickly separated us but I knew this battle was not over. Some days later, I was playing in the house with my younger brother when I heard noises from outside. The rebel boy was calling for me and he had brought a gun. My mother and others started crying. I put my brother in his room and locked the door. I was ready to give up my life.

I was in the hallway when he entered the house, propped on the wall. As he passed by me, I came from behind and jumped on the gun. It was terrifying. We tussled over the weapon. I managed to place the mouth up, and the over 10 bullets it carried were fired into the air. The commander intervened and the boy soldier was disarmed, but he still threatened to kill me. I knew I was no longer safe. My freedom was seized.

My security only improved when UN Peacekeepers were deployed to my area in September 2003. I became very close friends with the Namibian Contingent. My parents never had the funds to send me back to school, but I got money from some of my Namibian friends and opened a small business to get the funds to achieve my dreams.
By March 2005, I was back in Monrovia to start school. I went alone but I was having the best time in high school. I excelled in my classes. I also participated actively in student politics. Students, instructors and administrators respected my accomplishments, but I knew that it would be short-lived. Within three years I would be leaving high school and I needed to make a bigger impact in my society.

Bribery is a very big problem in the Liberian education sector, which translates to corruption in wider society. I was fully conscious of these happenings on campuses and school-organized events. An end had to be put to this situation.

In March 2008, I met some of my classmates and friends to tell them my vision. They supported my idea. I met the school principal and he was happy to support me as well. I organized the first meeting with the Vice Principal for Student Affairs being present, along with over 50 other participants. I worked with friends to put all the documents and policies together. We had an Agent of Positive Change in every class to report cases of malpractice involving instructors, students and administrators. We started to conduct a chapel service and visited academic activities to create awareness on violence and academic malpractice.

These activities made things difficult for me and my colleagues. Instructors began targeting me because I was against the status quo of academic malpractice. I could not risk making mistakes in any test or I would pay the price.

When I was in eleventh grade, I got a scholarship for my service to the school. That only made things worse as more threats kept coming my way. Friends started staying away from me, as they did not want to risk not being recognized. I was incredibly thankful to those who still worked with me. No one in this world will ever get ahead without the backing of many others.

That year, along with my team and by investing my scholarship money, we were able to start issuing press releases and holding meeting with stakeholders and government officials. We became more involved in national issues.

We launched Students Against Destructive Action and Decisions (SADAD) as a national organization two months before the national exams and graduation took place. After, it was announced by the school that every member of SADAD had failed the national exams. All we could see in our results was that there was no school grade for biology, geography and history.

The following months were especially challenging for SADAD, and me in particular. We managed to stand our ground and pushed forward. We waited for a year and retook the exams and all of us passed successfully. In 2012, SADAD became a key stakeholder in overseeing the exams that all of its members had previously failed. 78 of SADAD’s agents served as proctors and monitors. As an executive director I served as an external monitor for the exams throughout Liberia, and made recommendations to the Council on proper conduct.

Because of SADAD’s involvement, the exams became fraud and violent free, and Liberian students performed extremely well compared to the past 26 years. From 2012 onwards, SADAD has partnered with
the West African Examinations Council to administer the national exams.

Youth make up more than 60% of Liberia’s population. In a post war country, youth are faced with many challenges ranging from unemployment, illiteracy, inequality, lack of participation and rights to peace and security, among others. As the solution to many of these problems remains distant, creating tools of interaction to address them is a major challenge for youth, national governments and other actors.

Similarly, there is the question of who can represent young people. For many years, policy makers have attempted to solve young people’s problems with little or no participation from young people themselves. Young people have, for the most part, been viewed as beneficiaries rather than participants. This has worsened the problems in instances.

In order to respond to some of these challenges, SADAD developed a youth led media outlet called “My Space”. The program lasted for four months (July-October 2013) and was aired on one of Liberia’s biggest media outlets. The program brought youth to interact face-to-face with stakeholders and policy makers in order to discuss and find lasting solutions to problems affecting them. The program was broadcast on a weekly basis with young people from diverse backgrounds, tackling topics like gender equality, youth vulnerability and inequality; youth peace and security; youth employment and empowerment; youth education and development; youth sexuality, HIV/AIDS and STDs/STIs; youth participation in politics and governance; youth roles in society; and other national and international issues.

These discussions allowed youth to follow up with key stakeholders, and gave them an opportunity to be heard and taken seriously. The program also used examples of successful young people to inspire others with their stories. Furthermore, it provided sources of information and linked youth with opportunities such as scholarships, seminars or conferences for youth.

The program had a great impact on me as an individual. My role in society was defined, associated to the causes of young people. It linked me with other institutions working with and for youth. But the biggest impact the program had on me was that I was able to serve humanity and amplify the voices of youth.

Since its formation in 2008 and registration in 2011, SADAD has played and continues to play a meaningful role in the peace process of our country. Over the years, SADAD has become an important youth organisation in the areas of peacebuilding, youth development, civic engagement, community service, and gender mainstreaming, all while contributing to achieving higher standards in education.

I greatly enjoy my work as a peacebuilder. I have had to overcome many struggles, but the work is worth it to make sure future generations do not suffer the same as me.

Alfred Mohammed Abdullah Foboi (25) is a Liberian student of mass communication and sociology at the University of Liberia. He is also a youth leader involved with peace building, advocacy and social work. He is the founder of Students Against Destructive Action and Decisions (SADAD).

Artist: Rana Bachir
The name sounds French, but this musician and peace activist was raised in the northern corner of Belgium, in the province and city named Antwerp. His message of peace goes beyond borders. He remains a mysterious figure, someone who exudes peace and tolerance. In his presence you breathe inspiration.

Christophe, in our lives we have key moments, events that stay with us because they change our lives in some way. When was that change in you as a peacebuilder?

For me the change was clearly in 2005 when I was working in an orphanage in Congo, Kinshasa. I chose this internship during my studies in African languages and cultures. I remember my first impression of the colourful Congo very well: Chaotic. Poverty and young people who were expelled by police officers. I did not understand what I saw. It was my first impression, on my first trip outside my familiar environment. I wished to fly back home immediately, but instead I continued my mission. Otherwise I would not be sitting here talking with you.

My six weeks of internship passed by very quickly. I organised activities for the young people in the orphanage, and wrote my first lyrics and full song in French: “The world has to change”. Step by step I came into the rhythm of Congo. It was a wonderful experience. It shaped me into the person I am today.

After all those contradictions that you saw, after all the beautiful and interesting experiences you had, did you return home with the thought of returning to the Congo again?

Yes, of course. In 2006, a year later, I returned. Determined, I saved some money and got a scholarship to build up a new project. I organised an inter-orphanage football tournament. It was there that I met a person that showed me a completely different side of Kinshasa. He took me out to the townships, also known as urban areas. It is very rare to go there as a white man, especially as someone that is not from the area. He was respected in the streets and therefore could show me around. I felt privileged. A new world was opened up to me; I was ‘inside’ Kinshasa.

During these visits to these areas I got in touch with street musicians. It’s important for you to know that since I was a child I went to music school where I learnt to read music and to play the flute, the xylophone, the
piano and the saxophone. Music is a very important part of me. To cut a long story short, I was invited to go to their recital. Soon there was a bond between us. We jammed together and eventually formed a band.

So you were becoming stars in the making and in the heart of Kinshasa.

We wrote our own lyrics, we did some studio recordings and even had our own video clips. It did not take long before we were invited to our first festival. Critiquing the injustice of the system was our common thread. We had a large following among young people. With around 30,000 young people living on the streets, words and lyrics such as “Embaraque la systeme” moved them. We wanted to change the system into a just and social one. It was a battle between the system and us.

I remember our second festival. Just before we took to the stage, the organiser came to tell us that our music was very good, but that we had to change our lyrics. Of course we did not.

I find it hard to imagine the Christophe that I now have before me as such a rebel. It seems very daring to go preach inflammatory language in a country like the DRC, especially as a foreigner.

We had a purpose: to spread the idea of a just and social system where corruption does not exist. But it became more about the battle than about the message. It was not worded very positively and thus we attracted the wrong ‘vibrations’ to us. We were disliked by the government which made us uneasy. Our freedom of expression was restricted and there were a few people that slowed us down. The struggle became more and more an uphill struggle; I put much of my efforts into it and got little in return. It was also during that period of my life in which I had a spiritual attack.

Such pressure on the group and mental health issues seems like a hard combination. How did you deal with that?

Something had to change. It was no longer going smoothly with some of the band members. You know, I was a little naïve at the time. The driving force for achieving peace was anger and the cause was the system. In 2010 I got to know FERACO (Federation des rastas du Kongo). This was a second key moment in my peacebuilding story. Peacebuilding is a learning process. I do not regret my experiences with my former group, not at all. It was an adventure. But life moves on, and so do we.

What did you learn and how did you interweave it into the story of FERAKO?

It was a switch in my way of thinking. Before, my question was: “How can we blow up the system?” My answers were not constructive to society. Now my question is of a different nature: “What do I wish to create?” I want a peaceful and just world. So I have to contribute to that image in my medium. You have to first feel what you want before you can send it out to the world. This brings me to the law of attraction.

The law of attraction says that you attract what you radiate. We are ethereal beings and with every emotion that we create, we send out a vibration that according to the law of attraction will come back to us. For example, if you feel guilty, you will attract people and situations that give you guilt. Whoever rejects themselves will attract situations and people who reject him or her, and so on. It makes no sense to go to a project with
such a mind-set and search for the cause as well as the solutions to your problems in the outside world. Many will condemn external factors for disagreeable emotions, making them confirm these emotions and attract negative results. Everything becomes twice as hard. Instead, people who believe in themselves and are convinced that everything is always going to be okay will vibrate pleasant emotions. They will achieve a lot in life. Many do this subconsciously, but it is the law of attraction manifesting itself.

I want a peaceful and just world. So I have to contribute to that image in my medium. You have to first feel what you want before you can send it out to the world.

But how can this law contribute to the work of a young peacebuilder?

My examples show how attraction works. The universe is unconditional. Some peacebuilders believe that the world has never been as violent as today. This gives them emotions of anger, frustration and helplessness, and they will therefore act on these emotions in an attempt to change the world. Unpleasant emotions are the driving force of their peacebuilding. However, the law says negative emotions attract negative results and that the universe will return them unconditionally.

In other words, a violent world will continue to exist as long as we continue to confirm it. Want to change the world? Then start with yourself. Imagine what a just, peaceful and loving world with a healthy environment and a fair distribution of wealth would look like. Your body becomes calm and inside you can feel the roar of happiness. Keep this feeling with you and recall it regularly. You will vibrate pleasant emotions and the universe will offer you people and situations that confirm this positivity.

So your mindset totally changed. Now you create a sense of happiness and love to build peace and you see a big difference?

With my former fellow Congolese musicians, we were very combative in our music, convinced we could overthrow the unjust system. With the awareness that I have created now, the music and its message have changed. Music is a medium and a carrier of vibrations. The message we now propagate at FERAKO is what we wish to create. For example, the latest action we have taken is the production of a Congolese version of the song “Happy” by Pharell Williams. You can imagine why!

Christophe Lardinois (29) is at the same time musician and a peace activist. Christophe holds a master in African languages and cultures, he is an active member of the Representative Federation des Dastas du Kongo (FERAKO), Board of Pax christi Vlaanderen (PCV) and a volunteer at U move 4 Peace (UM4P). He is originally from Belgium, but his peacebuilding path has taken him all around the world.

Artist: Diana Sabogal H. – “Energias para la Paz”
In the early 70’s there were two main armed groups in the Philippines. Firstly the Communist movement that sought to overthrow the existing government. Secondly, there was the Bangsamoro struggle for separatism. In their struggle for independence, the Islamized indigenous people known as Moros took it upon themselves to liberate Mindanao (the Southernmost island region in the Philippines) from the rest of the country. Until now, both groups persist albeit in different forms: the Islamic separatist sentiment is now more moderate and the Moro call for ‘enhanced autonomy’ under the republic. For the communists, the original call for communism remains, but now they also engage in the parliament, although as a secondary tool to the armed struggle.

In 2005, the armed conflict in Mindanao in the southern Philippines, was already over 30 years old. Hawks and doves from both sides were seasoned experts, experienced in the daily grind of building peace or waging war in their communities. It was during that time in a Waging Peace Conference when peace advocates, government officials, diplomats, communities and other sectors, came together and made a recommendation that echoed what many had been saying all along: ‘Invest in youth; young people must learn about peace through the experiences of the Dumbledores in this room.’

Before Ramadan of the following year, the secretariat of that conference, the Gaston Z. Ortigas Peace Institute, had already brought together – through a series of peace and human rights workshops – a ragtag group of young leaders from different political colours, persuasions and fields of expertise. At the outset, the Peace Institutions Development Office of the government’s peace agency, as well as the UNDP, supported the initiative. The group was what we jokingly called a “loose network, with loose morals”. This core group agreed to work on three main things right away; 1) to organise activities and not be bogged down by organizational form and function constrictions; 2) to support the peace talks and nonviolent ways of transforming conflict; and 3) to occasionally meet and discuss the issue of the communist movement as well as the Bangsamoro right to self determination. This is how the Generation Peace Youth Network, or GenPeace, was conformed. And I was a part of it.

Birthing the youth peace network was difficult. At first, no one had set ideas of what we wanted to do, or how we wanted to do things. We just embarked on
LESSONS LEARNT FROM A YOUTH PEACE NETWORK

different activities as young idealist organizations tend to do. The youth peace network took advantage of the use of technology in creating dialogue, which later became an organization of its own called PeaceTech. We tried different things - street protests against the President, meetings with that same government’s peace agency, workshops, educational discussions, different types of contests, and street art, among others. It was only later on that we realized we were confused with what we wanted to do or how we wanted to do things.

But, apart from the disorientation, we had stayed committed because we knew why we wanted to act. As the core group came from different political persuasions, many of the discussions revolved around rules of engagement, purpose, strategies, and the like. In a way, the youth network itself was mirroring what a noisy, vibrant, dynamic, confused and wilful society looks like. With constant debates, the organizational paper of the youth network took 4 years to finish! Peacebuilding is an enormous project involving not just the formal peace negotiations, but also other processes that are important in order to create the proper climate that generates collective solutions to war. If people do not imbibe a culture that respects the rights of all during peace time, a society in crisis will also fail to recognize humanitarian law and human rights. If young people are not heard in a democracy, how much more will their exclusion exacerbate in a war zone? According to some experts, peace work is largely a problem solving exercise. But as young people, we disagree. It should be a solutions focused exercise, a collective dream and building project for justice and freedom.

From a small group of 20 leaders the youth network evolved to take on a national character. Workshops brought together various organizations to discuss the national character of the Bangsamoro and Communist struggles. But more importantly, the opportunity provided means of dialogue related to local peace situations with discussions ranging from gang wars, to fraternity violence to development aggression to land grabbing, mining to logging, to LGBTQI hate speech. Now, there are 14 clusters of organizations, throughout the Philippines, partnering with Generation Peace.

For readers wanting to venture into volunteer work for peace and human rights, here are some of the insights and lessons learned from our failures and successes: Peace should be defined by all stakeholders. One of the main advocates for peace work in the Philippines, Prof. Ed Garcia, would always say: “We must put people at the heart of the peace process. If the people trust the process, they will trust the outcome.” Arriving at a politically negotiated settlement requires reshaping and reimagining the policy framework, the principles and the practices within the country. Consultations regarding this momentous task are few and limited in most cases.

If the negotiations, agreement and policies cannot be linked to the idea of building roads and bridges, then ownership of the stakeholders is being limited. The Bangsamoro Basic Law should be a matter of livelihood. Peace with the communists should mean better health care, education and employment. Having an Autonomous region of Bangsamoro should mean dignity for indigenous peoples in the Bangsamoro and beyond. Technocratic legalese should connect to the heart and soul of the peace, the people.

The youth have crucial roles to play. One of the Generation Peace projects in 2008 when violence escalated in North Cotabato and Lanao provinces was a peace summit of youth leaders. Initially, it was
designed as a simple peace and human rights workshop with indigenous, Muslim and Christian youth. But because of the great impact of the war on civilians, we decided to recreate the summit. We had a two day workshop and interfaith dialogue, but we also created a media campaign around our site visits. The site visits themselves became a youth peace mission. GenPeace leaders appeared on local radio stations calling for humanitarian gateways, ceasefire and reestablishment of the mechanisms for negotiations. Suddenly the 40 year, low intensity war became a reality for those that never experienced it. Through solidarity and lived experiences, participants became ardent advocates.

One of the greatest realizations of working for peace is in the inherent perception of neutrality of peace advocates. The basis for this is that neutral groups can build trust on opposing sides, can provide informal architectures for peace through back-channels, mediation, and even lobbying and campaign work. However, the work can also mean partisanship for human rights, dignity and humanitarian principles. Must we prevent the participation of youth from rebel camps in peace advocacy? Should we dismiss the military doves? Peace advocates can come from anywhere; this includes former combatants, military leaders, and even aggressors.

Youth work in peacebuilding remains a grey area. The perception is that peace work is activism and is therefore dangerous during conflict because of drawing enemy lines. The youth network matured in such a way that it has connections in all directions. It is this web of relationships that help co-create shared meanings across political, ethnic and religious lines.

Dreaming and creativity are integrated approaches to any peace process. Usually, it is the young, the marginalized, the idealist and the conflict-weary, that must have the strongest voice in saying, “Enough of war.”

Collective dreaming is important because it does not limit the peace agreement. It involves everyone in the communities affected by conflict, as well as the larger society that is indirectly affected by it. It creates solidarity to the marginalized and puts self-determination, dignity, affirmations and assertions at the heart of this very political and technocratic exercise.

What can a small youth peace network do? We built peace in our communities and spheres of influence. We built quietly in urban academic centres as well as indigenous communities pressured from all sides. We built anyway - during times where the legitimacy of the government was compromised, during times where moral leaders were wanted, during times of funding drought because of shifting trends, during times when we were branded as progovernment hog washers or times when we were labelled as propagandists of the rebel movements. We built and build on the youth’s hope. We build quietly, build small but build peace anyway.

Nikki Delfin (30, Philippines) is the coordinator of the Generation Peace Youth Network or GenPeace, a network of organizations and individuals committed to youth-led advocacy for a just and sustainable peace in the Philippines. It is currently composed of more than 40 different youth organisations that focus on different fields, such as peace education, culture and arts, human rights and community development.

Artist: Celia Africa Keller
My name is Meg. Half of my friends from all over the world used to refer to me as their ‘friend who works in the UN’ or ‘my friend who works to save the world,’ or ‘my friend who travels around the world to make peace.’ It took me awhile to find the right ‘strategy’ to make people around me understand what I really do, who I work for, and most of all, what I really stand for.

I started my journey to social work at the early age of 15, when I volunteered and helped my father run a summer camp for street children in my hometown, Bacolod City in the Philippines. Back then, it was about mingling, playing and learning along with the street children, sleeping in tents and doing bonfires. That was when I learned about inequality in my small community. Many of my friends at the summer camp did not go to school. While I was complaining about being asked to wash dishes, they had to work or beg for money so their families could eat.

This opened me up to the whole idea of doing volunteer work, from building houses with Habitat for Humanity, to clean-ups with environmental groups, to visiting rural areas to raise people’s awareness about human security, arms trade, and landmines issues.

Now at age 31, I have probably attended about 30 educational events on different issues, mostly related to peace and human rights education, intercultural learning, and conflict transformation. I have organized or trained in about 16 training courses in the last four years; have worked on three international disarmament campaigns; have co-authored six books and manuals; and have engaged in three lobbying missions at the United Nations in New York. Most of these experiences were life-changing, or better yet, have directed me to where I am right now. However, while these milestones seem to reflect “achievements” in my personal and professional career as a youth peace worker, it’s the lessons (the good, the bad and the ugly) from these experiences that best reflects the achievements that I take as food for growth.

I share my story with a two-fold purpose – first, I am giving myself the chance to reflect and write about what peace work has taught me in life, and secondly, I take this opportunity to share my reflections of my work through the years with others. This is simply a personal story of my journey as a young peace worker.

1. Keep the “faith” and be patient
By faith, I don’t just mean in the religious sense,
but the importance of loyalty and trust in what we are doing. The type of work we do is not something easily understood by many. We are either considered social workers, development workers, or the peacekeeper sent by the UN - but the essence of being a peace worker is something more complicated. Through the years, I have realized that my dedication to peacebuilding is what actually led my friends to eventually understand what I do.

2. We sometimes assume we’re helping, without really knowing.

In 2008 I went backpacking in Costa Rica and Panama. On the way I visited little towns and offered some volunteering work. I stayed for a very short time and my (then) immature and idealistic self thought “wow, I am helping everywhere I go!” Now I realize I have not communicated back to these people; I do not even remember their names! While I have learned to give my small contribution, I actually do not know how much it helped (and I am just hoping it did make some small difference).

3. Not everyone we work with will have the same principles and values for peace that we stand for.

This is one of the most challenging things I have had to face as a peace activist. There’s no perfect organization, and there’s no perfect boss, manager or colleague, but the moment we feel that our values are not upheld, either we do something about it, or it’s probably just best to go someplace else. While it is important to try to do our part, it is also important to be realistic and see if our efforts are gaining results. If not, we will be drained, tired, and will not find meaning in the work we are supposedly passionate about. Simply, if our workplace does not ‘practice what we preach’ or is ‘walking a different talk,’ working will not be fulfilling anymore.

4. Treasure collaborative learning and collaborative work.

Being a coordinator gave me a chance to facilitate and promote participatory, open and collaborative processes - may it be for an event, a publication, or a campaign. It makes a big difference to the people I work with! We become more motivated, inspired, and it is more fun to learn while doing things together. We can be important pillars that support collaborative work instead of competition. Sharing the idea of working together and contributing with each one’s capacity and limitations is what we want to promote.

5. Draw the line between work and fun.

Although it seems like the boundaries are very thin and almost invisible, especially when our jobs are so close to our hearts (that they don’t seem like work at all for us), it is important to make a distinction between what stays in the office/field, and what we can and should take to our homes. I have made this mistake several times over. While it is good to be able to talk to my family and friends about work, there were many times when discussions would go sour, arguments would go overboard, and finding who is doing it right or wrong, or debating ‘how things should be done’ has ruined many weekends or holidays. I would sit hours in front of the computer even during very short
vacations, or spend my 2-3hrs lay-over at the airport trying to find a free wireless internet spot right next to an electric outlet, or worse, scheduling a working meeting with a colleague who happens to be at the same airport at the same time (which I’ve done twice, by the way!).

6. We have to take care of ourselves as much as we care for others!
   I cannot reiterate this enough! In 2010, I had a biopsy, had to take a one-week ‘bed-rest’ for over-fatigue, and my vision got worse – all in one same year. I worked an average of 10hrs/day in front of the computer, skipped mealtimes, slept less, and even in my sleep, my mind was heavy with thoughts and plans. I slowly understood the need for that ‘balance’ in my life, that my fulfillment should not just be about work but also about myself. We are young and our energy is unstoppable, and it is important to learn and find that balance, before it is too late.

7. Have a support group.
   Honestly, I don’t know how I could have survived many challenges in my work with such a positive outlook if not for my support group. They have journeyed with me on the bumpy road, given me advice and reminders, helped me take decisions, or simply listened to me as I poured my frustrations, complaints and disappointments. We do need them! They will keep us sane and will guide us back on track when necessary!

8. Self-evaluate and dare take new and more sustainable directions in work and in life.
   In my case, I have recently realized that I needed to move on to more sustainable ways of doing peace work. I realized I was no longer happy with what I was doing, I was burnt out, and was not taking care of myself. I decided to move on and work on a personal peace project that I hope to dedicate my time to.

   Whatever it is that you have gone through, whatever hardships and challenges you have faced as a peace worker, see the brighter side of it. Did it make you a stronger person? Did we learn from it? It is important to have a thankful heart.

10. My work led me to the most amazing people.
   I am most inspired when I am around people, whether when doing trainings, attending a forum, or in a partnership meeting. I believe it is the passion and dedication for the work I do that draws me to people that I am able to build long and meaningful relationships with.

   This list can go on. My journey of 16 years in youth peace work has in many ways made me who I am today – a truly happy person with a truly happy heart, capable of seeing conflicts as opportunities for change and transformation, ready to make the most out of what I have. I am a happy young peace worker. And I believe that at the end of the day, this is what truly counts.

Meghan Aurea Villanueva (31) is a specialist/strategist in sustainable peace and youth work. She is a freelance trainer on Conflict Transformation, Peace and Human Rights Education, and Advocacy. Based in Barcelona, she is currently exploring on bridging peace work and environmental sustainability through a social enterprise start-up.

Artist: María Albero - Escuela de Arte de Huesca (Spain)
The Audacity Of Peace

Luis Alfonso Miranda Pérez

I would like to share with you a piece of my childhood in Mesoamerica - from my abrupt arrival to the land of the Mayas and my difficult upbringing in a post-war environment, to becoming involved in community efforts and returning to the United States, while learning to move on from a conflict. I will recount how conflict became a personal catalyst for peace. My story speaks of a post-war generation eager to change the narrative present in the country and contribute to society, and how I found myself building a space for peace and transformation in one of the most unlikely places.

I was just 3 years old when my world was shaken upside down. My mother found herself in deep trouble while we were living in Los Angeles. Abruptly, I was placed on a plane with my aunt and a ticket to a new destination: Guatemala. Little did I know about the country, its people, the experiences, or the wisdom that awaited me.

Guatemala is a majestic country blessed by its legendary past and, at the same time, cursed by the disturbing cycle of violence. After a military coup in 1960, war raged between an oppressive military regime and a series of indigenous paramilitaries, taking the national front stage for over 30 years. The results were forced disappearances, systemic violence, and genocide. I was 8 years old when a peace agreement was signed, but there was one problem: war might have ended but there was no peace. The culture of violence had become so pervasive across generations in Guatemala that we internalized it: the violence wasn’t just normal but also part of our national identity. Here, the volume of every day violence and death is greater, and still grows larger even after peace was signed, than during the years of war - or at least it still feels like it. The industries of war were transformed into industries of contraband and drug trafficking.

I grew unsatisfied with the specter of doom that clouded my everyday existence in Guatemala. In the midst of a war-torn and poverty-stricken country, optimism and hope were hard to find. I knew of primary-school classmates who had to move due to extortion by criminal organizations. On occasion, other children would suddenly recluse themselves after being sexually molested. Sometimes, their family members were killed - brutally and unnecessarily. No family could really escape these stories, not even mine. We endured while my sister and her family lived under constant fear. They were kidnapped and robbed multiple times and eventually murdered. It is hard to remain hopeful amidst the angst of a state of insecurity, and not being
able to see an end in sight. The immensity of the personal horror could only be overshadowed by the pain of knowing that others would have to relive this reality. Being only a child, what was I to do?

I dared to believe that we could build a better world and looked for ways to channel that energy constructively. I was living in Izabal, the region Northeast of Guatemala, surrounded by a tropical rainforest and a stunning lake. However, it is also one of the most dangerous regions outside of Guatemala City due to the drug trafficking. It was there that I began participating with a local humanitarian organization that worked on basic human needs and environmental conservation in our region. I sometimes helped during the disasters, for example, at points of distributions after natural disasters that happen yearly. Often, I traveled to remote communities. In all of the destinations there were children, eager to play and to receive an education – to just live a normal life. I learned lessons about the vital role of, not only primary education and conservancy education, but also of fundamental living necessities. I couldn’t understand it then, but I was moved by how ordinary people were very quietly, but steadily, taking ownership of our reality in Guatemala. They specially kindled in me the two most important questions that I could ask myself as a young person: why not me and why not now?

I dared to stand for something – and my peers soon followed. I chose to organize my peers to help our community. It began by just a few conversations between classes at our primary school. I wasn’t sure what to expect; whether there would be rejection or cynicism, because, when it comes to peace, we lived in such a sterile environment. Indeed, cynics were not hard to find. But I did discover that my generation shared something in common: we were all sick of this reality even if we didn’t know how to get out of it. At first, we decided to start by assisting our immediate community. We assessed our local needs, and chose to work on inequality. We felt that we wanted to build solidarity starting with our generation, so we decided to create projects to help other children. Because we were inexperienced, we reached out to organizations that shared similar values looking for advisors and mentors who could assist us in our path. We approached our local school to start simple initiatives like donations of items from children that could help other children.

Donations did come in, and the project was working! We were content with our first project and what we had gathered. After, donations continued increasing to the point that they tripled. Simultaneously, more and more children wanted to be involved. We hadn’t even named ourselves at that time, but a new community was formed and a new identity in me cultivated. It is today that I realize this identity was of a ‘peacebuilder’. That very year, I was named best young leader in Guatemala for my efforts in humanitarianism. And just like my Guatemalan chapter had started, it all ended abruptly.

I was placed again on a plane with the little possessions that I had and a one-way ticket to the United States. Living in Guatemala became too dangerous and our future looked bleak, so returning to my native land was imminent. The group continued operating after my departure, but the energy began slowly fading away until, sadly, they disbanded.

Even though this experience taught me great things, it still took me years to become sober from the internalized insecurity of Guatemala and to adapt into the normality of living again in the United States. My mother, not having a legal way to escape our reality in Guatemala, crossed the Rio Grande River to give me
the opportunity for a decent life and safe future. I spent my adolescence in Salt Lake City. Since my mother was an undocumented resident, we were forced to move into a poor neighborhood. She struggled finding work and we could barely afford somewhere to live. Even though Salt Lake City was drastically safer, I still felt terrified. Large crowds of people reminded me of the gangs, even if I knew they were harmless. I was also surrounded by many other migrants from Mexico and Central America. They didn’t seem to fare any better. I remember a classmate getting suspended for pulling a knife in a fight after school. Another neighbor suddenly stopped coming to school – he ended in juvenile detention for working with drugs. Despite the fact that we left our country behind, the mentality remained engraved in our beings. Escaping Guatemala did not equate to healing, it just entailed an odd beginning of restoring my own humanity. I was the lucky one.

My only way to soar from the past was in the pursuit of a life where I could heal and restore my humanity to its fullest potential. At the most fundamental level, it required that I heal myself - both spiritually and emotionally. That meant that I had to believe in my inner worth, to recognize the demons from my past and the role they played in my emotional survival. I had to understand and embrace that their presence was no longer required in my new life. I no longer felt the responsibility to sustain the culture of violence. I used the fire from Guatemala to organize more young people who, like me, want to make the world a better place. I participated or chaired other youth leadership organizations and initiatives in Central America, Czech Republic, Mexico, Russia, Japan, and the Netherlands. Interacting with our shared globe, with love and patience, and nonviolently assisting its transformation became my craft. This is why I chose to devote my short existence in this world to the work of peacebuilding.

I had no idea what Guatemala had in store for me, but it helped me to become the person that I am today. I left Guatemala inspired by the ordinary people who were doing extraordinary work. It is they who kindled my passion to question the roots of our problems, to understand the intricate global society we live in, and to formalize arguments for sustainable change in our societies. Guatemala created the environment where I could form my dream, and further catalyze the transformation process that was necessary to pursue it. But most importantly, my childhood experience taught me that no matter where you stand, how young or old, how poor or rich, the place to change is here, the time to change is now, and it starts within us all.

Luis Alfonso Miranda Pérez (26) is a peacemaker from the United States and Guatemala. Starting early in his life by working for his community, he has gone on to manage humanitarian efforts in Mexico, participated in youth leadership development projects in Czech Republic and the Netherlands, launched a social enterprise in Japan, and chaired an academic leadership community and a citizen diplomatic initiative between US and Russia. Currently, he is a master’s student at the London School of Economics and his dream is to become a mediator and peace process designer.

Artist: María José Guzmán Moras (age 12) contributed this drawing to complement her uncle Luis’s story. Both her mother and father had their lives taken away by the prevalent organized crime in Guatemala when she was just 6 years old, leaving her and her siblings orphaned. In this piece she reflects on the gruesome reality and the pain of her childhood experiences while remaining optimistic of a better future for her and her family.
Sarajevo in 1992 was a city under siege. It was not a place you wanted to be, and definitely not a place you wanted your children to be. Yet that was where four year old Lejla Hasandedic found herself. She left on the last bus escaping the city before the siege hardened. Her parents were waiting for her in Mostar, the city famous for its beautiful 16th century bridge. There had been very little communication between the two cities in the preceding months and for a time her parents thought their daughter had been killed in Sarajevo. When she arrived in Mostar the war had not yet started there. They were supposed to be safe. A few weeks later the conflict that was gripping the entire territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina enveloped them.

Lejla Hasandedic’s childhood was the Bosnian War. From the ages of four to eight she lived in various different dark shelters, hiding from shelling and gunfire, constantly worrying about whether relatives and loved ones were still alive.

Today Lejla is a clinical and research psychologist working at a clinic in Sarajevo. In her free time she is a youth ambassador for the United Religions Initiative, an NGO which works to bring people of different faiths together. Since the age of 15 Lejla has led a two-track life: Whilst completing her education and starting her career, she has also been working on peacebuilding efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and especially in her home town of Mostar.

Being raised during the war and amidst the tense atmosphere which followed it, Lejla - a Bosniak - could easily have become suspicious of members of the other ethnic groups in her country. That changed with one event when she was eight years old: “In the streets one day I met a girl from another part of the city. I became so excited that when I came home I exclaimed to my parents ‘I met a person who’s a Croat from the other part of the city, and she’s the same as me!’ We liked the same things, we talked about things like Barbie dresses and make-up, about Backstreet Boys and other things young girls were interested in. We didn’t discuss the war or all the terrible situations we had been through. She invited me to visit her place. My parents were very scared about that but they allowed me to go there. When I went there I saw that they were ordinary people like us. They were living the same lives as us. Then I started asking myself why we needed to hate those people when we could live together, enjoy times together and learn from each other.”
Lejla started playing an active role in building bridges between the ethnic groups in her community when she was in secondary school. At the time the school system in Bosnia-Herzegovina was completely segregated along ethnic lines, but Lejla went to an experimental school where Bosniak and Croat children studied under the same roof. They followed separate curricula and had different teachers and largely remained separate, but at least they were in the same building and so had an opportunity to interact.

The authorities were concerned about the potential for conflict if they came into too much contact. This started changing during Lejla’s first year at the school, when she and some of her fellow students from both ethnic groups set up a joint student council. They received a meeting space from the school and had the opportunity to work together across ethnic lines.

This proved an invaluable opportunity for a city which was still largely divided. One of the most important and symbolic activities of the student council was crossing the iconic Stari Most bridge together. The Stari Most bridge was built in the 16th century and is one of the most famous landmarks in Bosnia. It was destroyed during the war but rebuilt following it. The bridge is a world heritage site and a popular tourist destination, but it is in the Bosniak section of the city and for that reason many Mostar residents of other ethnic backgrounds had never set foot on it.

The student council at Lejla’s secondary school decided to challenge the ethnic divisions by crossing the bridge together: “It took us almost a year to convince our peers that it would really be safe to go there, and to build relationship and trust between ourselves so that we could cross the bridge together. It was a very important day for us; to the tourists and others around us we probably just looked like a bunch of young people going through the city together, but for us it was a life-changing experience because all of us came together and crossed the bridge. It was not just crossing the bridge as a building or a monument, but it was for us crossing the bridge between us, crossing the bridge between borders in our heads and it signalled the start of building a new and better future for all of us.”

Crossing the Stari Most bridge was an iconic step in bringing the ethnic communities of Mostar together, and it had a great impact on those who participated: “Now all those people are working and even living in different parts of the city, they can work together and nowadays we have fewer and fewer people who decide not to cross this bridge. Now the people of Mostar are really happy and proud to have this bridge as part of their home town.”

Lejla has continued to work on peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Later on during her secondary school she participated in exchange programs with
a school in Richmond, Virginia in the United States. The exchanges brought together youth from Mostar, a city facing divisions between Croats and Bosniaks, and Richmond, where racial inequality remains a problem. Since leaving school she has been involved with the United Religions Initiative (URI), where she works to bring together young people, not just from Mostar, but from the entire Balkan region. In a region which has gone through so much conflict in the last decades, URI helps build bridges between people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds to show them how much they do really have in common. Lejla Hasandedic remains committed to working towards a more peaceful and sustainable Balkan region.

Lejla Hasandedic is a 27 year old peacebuilder from Bosnia and Herzegovina. She works as a psychologist at Psychiatry Clinic in Sarajevo, but also strives to contribute to peace on a daily basis. She is an activist in the Global Network of Religions for Children; a youth ambassador and the assistant of the coordinator for Europe in the United Religions initiative; and is the coordinator of the youth club Tignum in Nahla – an interfaith base organization.

Artist: Óscar Bermúdez Pena (Madrid, Spain) – This artwork transmits the equality and the power of geometry. Simple shapes come together to form a connecting system, just like the Stari Most bridge. The identical hands allude to equality between races and beliefs.
Since my childhood I witnessed prejudice, even in modern progressive families, particularly about educating female children. I was born in such an atmosphere, and through my interactions during my work in different villages, my observation was further strengthened: girls are excluded from schools.

I was born into a moderate Muslim family in a place called Bijnore, India, an area with a high Muslim population. This is a place where young girls were not allowed to go to school - not even primary school. I was privileged though that my parents moved to Delhi, India’s capital, when I was just an infant. This meant that I was able to attend school and get an education, something I may not have been able to do if we had remained in my parents’ town.

However, we went back to Bijnore every summer to visit friends and family. It soon dawned on me that my female cousins were not serious about their studies. In fact, they had been told they had to learn to do household chores instead of focusing on their studies, as the latter would not help them to get married. They were not allowed to go outside, work and become economically independent. At the same time, my male cousins were going to college and getting an education.

I was too young then to understand the discrimination in modern progressive families regarding girls’ education. Gradually, however, I realized that most of the girls in nearby communities and villages did not even go to school - not even to primary school. They knew how to cook food for their siblings but not how to write their own names.

As we grew older, the visits to the village reduced. We used the summer vacations to catch up on our studies instead. I started taking up internships and volunteering in organizations because my mother wanted me to learn and to do things she could not. My mother was a teacher then but she had to withdraw from teaching as she had to take care of us, her children, and wasn’t encouraged to do both jobs at the same time.

When I was 22 years old I heard about CRY (Child Rights and You). CRY provides research fellowships for studies on children’s rights. I wrote my proposal and submitted it to the CRY research team to examine the ‘Exclusion of Muslim Girls from School’. Fortunately, my proposal was selected and I was awarded a research fellowship to go to remote villages and examine the situation and reasons for the exclusion of Muslim
I conducted an independent research study, I conducted it in three very remote and poor villages in the Rampur district of the western part of Uttar Pradesh, one of the biggest and the most densely populated states of India. The Rampur district also has a very high percentage of Muslims.

I had been to villages like this before. I had an idea of what to expect, as I had studied Social Work and had been on visits to similar areas before. But this was my first independent visit to a village, and working on such a sensitive issue. On the one hand, I had the privilege of being a Muslim so I could understand their local customs and culture, but on the other, the local villagers were shocked by a young girl coming alone from Delhi.

I was very young but I stayed there for a few months and explored the possibilities of helping those girls to go to school. I had access to data of nearby villages where girls were also not going to school and the many stigmas attached to girls’ education. They believed that girls should not get an education because once they get educated no one would marry them; that if any boy saw the girls on their way to school, no one would accept them; or even that hindu teachers would teach their daughters bad things about Islam and force them into conversion.

These were some of the reasons I encountered during my interactions in the village. However, I couldn’t react to the bizarre explanations as I realised these were thoughts that had become part of a collective belief imposed by the revered religious leaders.

As a young peacebuilder I realized it was up to me to support these young girls in going to school. I realized that religion could be a barrier but talking critically about religion could make one a social outcast. I personally would consider myself religious but if religion means depriving people of their rights then I don’t think I am after all. And because of this stand people in the villages were becoming hostile towards me. Some said that they would not allow their daughters to meet me, others said that I was not a true Muslim since I did not use the hijab or the burqa. It was quite frustrating.

As a young peacebuilder, however, I took it up as a challenge. Despite the obstacles, I was confident in my identity of being a true Muslim. I was, after all, brought up with the idea that our religion teaches us to always help others.

I stayed there for two months to understand the situation, map the resources available, talk with schools and Madrasas (religious institutions) and contact NGOs. Then I developed an interview schedule and kept returning to collect data based on one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions. I read books and researched the status of Muslim people’s education in India. After a year, I completed my study, developed my report, submitted it to CRY and initiated
a discussion with local NGOs to ensure that young girls went to school.

After a long struggle of meeting with schools, local NGOs and parents, I finally succeeded!

Local NGOs helped me meet with the religious leaders. I told them that I was also a Muslim girl who lived in Delhi and was keen on getting my sisters to go to school. Initially, it was quite tough. I was shunned by many religious leaders who thought I was not a true Muslim just because I did not cover my head and face. However, after a lot of perseverance, I was allowed to talk to the girls’ parents. The local leaders there introduced me to the them. These were some of the initial hurdles that I had to overcome to challenge the longstanding stigmas associated with girls’ access to education. This was the first step to bringing a positive change in my society.

My mother has been my biggest influence and support. She was the youngest of eight siblings. Her eldest sister, who was like a mother to her, helped her get an education. But she still had not realized her potential. She was great at sports and could have been a state level long jumper but she was not allowed. It was at this point, perhaps, that she decided that her daughters would have all the opportunities in the world. It is thanks to her inspiration that I am a peacebuilder today.

**Iram Parveen** is a 26 year old Peacebuilder who works for Oxfam India. She is currently promoting active citizenship by teaching leadership skills in schools, colleges, rural communities and areas of high deprivation. She is also a member of the Global Youth Advocacy Team which was formed to work on the themes of youth, security and peace, which consists of a group of 8 young people globally.

Artist: **Justine Chen** – The girl in the picture is locked behind the restrictions of her society. The spikes pointing at her, represent the dangers of trying to leave this situation behind. However, because of the author’s efforts to convince these Muslim families to educate their kids, the spikes have been slightly dented to represent progress. The swirl like pattern represents clouds that fog the outside world’s understanding of this problem. Around them there is stitching that represents how this situation was fabricated, but like stitches, this problem can be taken apart. The random, rigid shapes are pieces of the solution that need to be put together. The diamonds in between are cracked like this norm the author is breaking to create a better world for future Muslim girls. The circular shapes are targets on them because of the criticism they may suffer. Finally, coming out of the piece, there are rays of sun, suggesting that if the author keeps doing what she is doing, better days are here to come.
To Travel Within

Najat el Hani

‘East, west, south, or north makes little difference. No matter what your destination, just be sure to make every journey a journey within. If you travel within, you’ll travel the whole wide world and beyond.’

This is what Shams Tabrizi, a thirteenth century dervish formulated as one of his forty rules for the religion of love. Sometimes when you travel far away from home, to somewhere different from the life you leave behind, you choose whether to travel physically only or to add an additional layer by making it a journey within. During the summer of 2012 I decided to visit Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories for volunteering purposes. It was a controversial region that I had only heard of, read about or seen through mainstream media’s general broadcasting. Information retrieved from the latter sources, strongly contrasted with the images I captured. This story provides a narrative that has not been easily broadcasted within mainstream media resources. A majority of the news broadcasts mostly cover subjective stories on the Middle East, especially when it concerns the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With this story I want to contribute to the information gap on a contemporary conflict and its daily paradoxes. I hope it will be shared with young people who want to extend their knowledge in general, and specifically to those global volunteers who are seeking local knowledge on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and are eager to build peace.

From Tel Aviv to Nablus

After my arrival in Tel Aviv, I wandered the city feeling an unknown type of fear and awareness within and around me. However, it was not until later in my travel that I discovered the disturbing elements giving birth to these feelings. Imagine Tel Aviv as the city that captures many pleasures in life: beautiful houses, paved streets, booming nightlife and one of the most beautiful coastlines covered with the best beaches you have ever seen. The sand feels as if satin hugs your feet every time you take a step towards the clean, bright and heaven blue water. No one seems to fall short in anything. Close to the beach there are enough showers to wash off at, as the skyscraping hotels cover the boulevard. Life here seems to be about fun, forgetting what is really going on in ‘the promised land’ and trying to enjoy the city’s luxurious components. Yet, at the end of the day many faces do not radiate mental peace; they seem continuously worried instead. I believe that deep inside, many are aware at what expenses they are living. Little did I know about how these expenses would actually look like.’

When I proceeded on my travel to the occupied
territory of the West Bank, I was still to understand the impacts of constructed borders. People are separated from each other by mile long separation walls twice the height and four times the length of the Berlin wall, with electric fences and checkpoints that are guarded by Israeli military forces. As an occupied nation, Palestine is under legal, financial and physical siege of Israel. Thus, without permission granted at countless checkpoints and constructed border-lines one is unable to travel 10 blocks or a nation away. As a Dutch citizen however, the color of my passport granted me permission to travel through many local paradoxes.

‘Being In Nablus is harder than I could have ever imagined it to be. After crossing the check point in order to enter the West Bank, I saw the situation change rapidly. Israel’s flat and fruitful land made place for many high and dry mountains: Palestine. Imagine Nablus as a grey and sad looking city without all the luxurious components Tel Aviv had to offer - a city that covers nothing more than life’s absolute basic needs. People here constantly remind you to be careful with water and electricity, considering everything can just be cut off for days. What a bitter pill when remembering the public showers and artificial neon palm trees in Tel Aviv.’

**Volunteering**

Shocked by the contrasts, I was still inspired to finish what I came here for: volunteer at the local university by teaching an English class for beginners. The program was organized by the International Youth Exchange Program – Zajel at the An-Najah National University in Nablus. The big and renewed campus that provided education to thousands of Palestinian students gave birth to my inner hope. I was unsure of what to expect from my students, however, they mostly showed us gratitude for showing interest in them. Being there and exchanging knowledge with them from across the separation wall made a lot of impact on this group.

Looking back on my volunteering experiences it is not the English classes I remember most. It is the students’ personal stories on their childhood experiences as former refugees and their inability to live a free existence. The Stories told of the happiness after a return, love, humor and high doses of hope for the future. Even though I thought little of extending their English vocabulary through my volunteering experiences, they underlined it as strongly contributing to their future. Not only by strengthening their professional chances on the job market, but also by learning to communicate with people like us whose life experiences strongly differed from theirs. In this order, the exchange of stories could pave a solid two way street with professional and personal learning opportunities.

As the classes went by, I realized that many Palestinians are imprisoned within constructed borders. Many do not carry a legal citizenship and have never been outside the West Bank. Sadly, they never had the privilege to go to the beach and let their feet be caressed by the silky sand and summer warm water. But missing out on this is the least of their problems, as many Palestinians who do not even possess proper housing facilities. Especially for those that were forced to internally displace and are living in a refugee camp.
Ballata Refugee Camp

One part of the Youth Exchange Program consisted of English classes, but we also had study visits to various locations in the West Bank. The visit that left the strongest impression on me was the visit to the Ballata Refugee camp in Nablus. The visit made an impression not only because the life circumstances were alarming, but also because it provided insights on the contrasting opportunities between my ‘legal students’ and the ‘illegal refugees’ from a poorer economic background.

‘This camp was built between 1948-1951 and was meant to shelter a maximum of 5000 people which were forced to move from the Israeli west coast to the now known Palestinian West Bank. One of Ballata’s inhabitants told us that he and the rest of his family moved from Haifa to Ballata when he was a young boy. The now grey haired man narrated that their moving was directed by the United Nations and was promised it would be for a maximum of five years only. It was a temporary solution until Israel’s new inhabitants would have a safe place to live at. The rest is history, as they were never allowed to return and forced to live in a refugee camp with approximately 30,000 refugees. Imagine how this camp must look like when it was built to shelter 5000 people only. Exactly. It is a labyrinth of small houses, narrow allies with occasional lightening, garbage on many corners and surprised children running everywhere. Smells. Some pleasant and some bad. Small windows, many doors, many voices, electricity cables on dangerous places. Because of these and many other reasons, people have psychological, physical and financial problems and little education, if any.’

During one of my final evenings, I gazed over Palestine’s grey colored mountains while realizing this is an imprisoned nation. We frequently hear about it on the news, are taught multi-sighted stories about at school, but it is difficult to understand what really happens on the surface. My volunteering experiences made me realize that there is a strong difference between hearing about these stories and really experiencing life there. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict knows an extensive narrated history, this volunteering opportunity provided me a platform to retrieve knowledge on multidimensional peace that is usually banned from mainstream sources. With this story, I wish to underline that at the end of the day we are all humans questing for the same basic needs such as peace, dignity and justice. When taking Shams Tabrizi’s rule in mind I realize that volunteering for peace offered me a platform to make a journey within. After return I felt inspired to blog about my stories as a peacebuilding methodology that could help contribute in understanding the results of daily conflict, hope and mutual fear. After all, I cannot help but wonder how far away peace really stands from them, when it feels so close and natural to us. Has universal peace become a 21st century mystical myth?

The 27 year old peacebuilder, Najat el Hani from Amsterdam, shares a story about her travel to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. A story in which she focusses on her 2012 volunteering experiences at the An-Najah National University in Nablus. She currently divides her work between lecturing at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, youth social work and blogging for peace at najatfreedom.blogspot.com

Artist: Marek Wójciak - www.marekwojciak.com
Young people constitute a big part of the population of Kuria, a traditional community found in Migori County, Kenya. Kuria is further subdivided into four clans namely the Wanyabasi, Weirege, Warenchoka and Wakira clans. Farming is the central livelihood of Kuria, with families primarily involved in maize and tobacco farming, and cattle-raising.

All clans are of Bantu (Swahili) background and share a common language: Kuria. With this rich culture as a backdrop, these clans share a lot in common: music and dance and similar traditional rites from marriage to circumcision. However, amidst this lies the tradition of cattle-rustling that has maintained the dynamics of grassroots conflict between the clans.

For many generations, cattle-rustling has been practiced by young males and is even regarded as a symbol of courage and readiness to start a family. In order to pay dowry for a bride, young males are asked to steal or raid cattle from a neighbouring clan. It is a widely practiced activity, meant to show valour, manhood and pride. Poverty is one of the most pressing issues faced by the clans as victim communities are forced to retaliate and steal back as a form of revenge. This unending cycle of cattle-rustling, and the clan members’ ‘an eye for an eye’ mindset has perpetuated inter-clan conflicts to extreme levels of violence.

Young people are center stage in all these instances of physical, social, psychological, structural and cultural violence – often as both perpetrators and victims.

Simultaneously, young women and girls are forced to drop out of school and get married after attaining maturity through the process of FGM (female genital mutilation), sometimes without their consent or the freedom to be able to choose and decide for themselves. Young people are also manipulated by politicians who encourage them to fight other clans for their own personal gain. Young people are seen as powerless, and easily manipulated, compounded by their poverty. They don’t have skills they could put into use, therefore leaving them vulnerable to bad influences amongst their peers, influences such as drug abuse, prostitution and violence.

How it all started
In November of 2010, after the most violent clash between the Wanyabasi and Weirege clans, my organisation ‘Kuria Development Community for the Marginalised’ (KDCM) had a passionate desire to
intervene and begin the journey for change. Comprised of young volunteers from all 4 clans, KDCM offered support for rehabilitation, as well as business coaching and mentorship to the victims of the conflict. We divided participants into groups, each consisting of equal numbers of young people from the four clans in conflict. Together they designed business ideas beneficial for their communities. The joint venture they established was registered into the Interactive Micro-Finance Project, a project organised by KDCM and ‘The Gemach Project’, a USA-based NGO that works to empower poor people in marginalised communities.

The Interactive Micro-Finance Project allowed youth groups to access interest-free loans to help them with their start-ups. After repaying back the loan, they were encouraged to use the profits earned to continue their independent businesses, thus creating more employment and ensuring sustainability.

**Multiplier Effect**

Using the same strategy, the next group in the project was trained by the previous beneficiaries who now had more experience in this field. They become Peace Ambassadors in their respective clans.

By January 2012, we were bringing together young people and widowed women from the four clans in training sessions on business and other essential life skills. Recognising that the lack of formal education amongst young people was a barrier to their development, KDCM empowered vulnerable young people by partnering with a local polytechnic college which welcomes young people from the conflict affected villages regardless of their situation and without bias. At the college they were equipped with skills such as plumbing, tailoring, carpentry, masonry and many others – with the aim of making them valuable in the eyes of the community, whilst at the same time getting them ready for employment.

In the course of this community process, we happened to convince two clans to allow their sons and daughters to join our organisation for a pilot project where they were to carry out a poultry project jointly that would help them earn capital to fund a start-up.

Reports of arson have decreased because the young people typically involved are now actively participating in development activities instead.

This Interactive Micro-Finance Project involving young people from the Wanyabasi and Weirege clans was about managing poultry in a chicken cooperative where they all had an equal share in the business. Equal share meant that they were to share responsibilities and work in shifts to feed the chickens, as well as jointly market their produce. KDCM supports them by finding a market on their behalf as well as partnering with private and public institutions who receive eggs and chickens from the young peoples’ poultry farms.

This project has proven important because it was a start to solving many social problems using one simple idea, and it also made the young people and the entire community realise their key role in peacebuilding and development. Since the initiation of this project, we have had over 15 groups: 300 young people and poor widowed women benefit from our trainings and
poultry ventures.

Thanks to our poultry farms projects, we are seeing an improvement in the way people from both clans relate to each other. They now organise social events like group dances, games and group discussions involving people from both clans. A bond is forming between them. The initiative has established trust. We have them forming partnerships and borrowing funds from us to carry out businesses as groups. Incidences of conflict between clans have reduced, and war between the clans that were previously in conflict has not recurred. Reports of arson have decreased because the young people typically involved are now actively participating in development activities instead.

Women are more empowered. Kuria is a community where women were traditionally undermined and looked down upon. It is believed that they are meant to serve a man; they are forced to get married at a young age, expected to give birth to many children, and denied the right to education and freedom to develop. Many have been left widows because of war or HIV/AIDS. Polygamy is also practiced in Kuria with some men not being able to provide for their huge family, and then abandoning it all to women who have nothing.

Women were encouraged to actively take part in our projects, were trained, taught about their rights, and were given an awareness of gender equality. To date, there are over 100 widowed women from the four clans benefiting from our micro loans. Every woman now feels empowered to provide and protect their families, and many of their children are now attending schools.

Aside from the poultry ventures, we have introduced personal interest free loans for individual benefit, giving opportunities to those people who are talented but lack access to loans from other financial institutions and banks. Through this cycle, we have achieved significant impact on the lives of the people we are funding, and they repay back the loans so that others can benefit from them in turn.

We can’t say that cattle-rustling has completely ceased, and we understand that it is embedded deep in our culture. However, we do believe that stopping it is a long process that involves changing mindsets whilst at the same time creating alternative means of generating income and opportunities.

The project with young people has made us understand the role of young people in peace building and the development of the communities we live in. We have had impact in contributing to building a more just and peaceful community, but still much needs to be done in order for us to achieve our goals. Achievements come with challenges – and we are aware that our resources are too limited to cater for the rising number of micro loan requests from young people and women. Nonetheless, with your help, “WE CAN AND WE ARE FOR PEACE”.

Silvanus Babere (23) is Peacebuilder from Kenya. He is a member of the Young African Leaders Initiative, a college business student, and the Founder and CEO of Kuria Development Community for the Marginalized (www.kuriadcm.org), a youth-led, non-profit volunteer organization working to empower the poor, rural and conflict-affected communities.

Artist: Tatiana Paz Carriazo
Dense rows of white tents and long lines of listless people queuing for a small portion of food and water, of which there is never enough. This was the daily image of Ras Jdir refugee camp in Rmeda where I volunteered during the Libyan Civil War. When I first arrived to the Tunisian-Libyan border in June 2011 the total number of refugees reached almost one million.

The organization that I volunteered for organized caravans bringing donations from Tunis (the capital city of Tunisia) to the camp - despite all the conditions of insecurity of the trip caused by the Tunisian revolution and its aftermath. Beside our typical cargo - toys, food, water and covers - we also brought joy and hope to the refugees. Though our main targets were the young refugees, we indirectly sparked a solidarity in the Tunisian society that resulted in the collection of huge donations for weeks to come.

When I first arrived, the one mission I had for every single activity I carried out was to bring smiles to the children’s faces. Just after a few hours on my first day I realized that such a mission in the midst of the crisis is not just about giving joy to other people but also about giving a special meaning to my own life. The children that I was trying to help opened my eyes on to what is my passion in life.

One day, while I was gathering the kids for the afternoon activities, a five-year-old Libyan refugee asked me:

“How are these people fighting?”

I followed his gesturing hand, as it pointed to the queue of refugees waiting for lunch. That image - of a dispute over food - was one of many daily conflicts in the camp.

“They are not fighting, they are asking for lunch in different ways because they come from different cultures” - I answered. It was this singular experience that taught me the importance of peacebuilding, coexistence and intercultural dialogue among the cultures.

Behind these daunting scenes of suffering in a refugee camp, I was also inspired by life-changing stories of African migrant workers in Libya. I learned about the traditional African beat and dance from Mali, special naming rituals from Ghana, the slave trade that is still practiced in Ethiopia, the colonial
creation of Gambia out of the Senegambia, the Somali Civil War, and other stories that set me on my current path as a peacebuilder. These stories also influenced the process of shaping my own character. This exploration of African historiography opened channels for understanding the continent that I had previously not thought much about. Since then, my compass has pointed me to explore even more about peace and conflict dynamics in Africa.

A few months after my experience at the Libyan borders, I took a trip to Kenya where I launched a project called *Africa Inspire Project* with the help of a wonderful team from Kenya. I had keenly followed the democratic rise in Kenya, particularly in the aftermath of the historic elections in the year 2002. Following the peaceful 2013 general elections, I decided to explore and highlight the role of youth in the peacebuilding processes that had been carried out during the 2007-2008 post-elections outbreak of violence. Having experienced the 2011/2012 post-elections frustration in Tunisia and Egypt when monitoring the elections, I had a desire to learn more about Kenya’s experience and promote its model of choosing peace over violence. Thus, I decided to produce the documentary, *Kenya’s Conscious Transformation*.

I have been challenged with the idea that conflicts in Africa are too complex to deconstruct or understand; however, I refused to give up my quest for searching for proactive solutions. I interviewed Kenyan community workers and youth leaders at the grassroots level as well as government officials, lawyers, award-winning journalists and electoral officials at the national level. Despite what I had seen in the international media - which portrays a situation of tension and potential violence - what I found in Kenyan society was instead resilience and commitment to make peace possible. After that discovery, my quest for combining art with the usage of alternative media to change this negative portrayal of Africa has only intensified.

*I believe that making peace starts from believing in the existence of peace and the sole belief that peace can be sustained.*

Coming from a region where we have been going through many uprisings and revolutions... where everyone around me has lost hope in peace because of the rise of terrorism on a precedential scale... where young activists are falling into depression, desperation, breakdowns, and many times are completely burned-out... It was not a surprise that some of them turned to the usage of violence as the only language that could be heard. I believe that making peace starts from believing in the existence of peace and the sole belief that peace can be sustained. Young people need to see successful models and positive stories to reflect on their understanding of violence and its impact.

My blog, my documentaries and everything else that I do are only the first steps in achieving the ultimate goal of building peace and understanding by raising people’s awareness so that they can rethink their perceptions of each other. Contributing to peacebuilding in Africa defines what kind of a human being I want to be, and at a same time gives me a motivation to serve others like I did at Ras Jdir refugee camp - uplifting others with positive vibes and voices, and inspiring them through what I capture and deliver with the lens of my camera.
Aya Chebbi is a 27 year old award winning Tunisian blogger, women’s advocate and peace activist.

Artist: Aya Chebbi
FRÁGIL
Since 9/11 more than 50,000 people have been killed in terrorist incidents in Pakistan. According to reports, there have been 235 suicide bombings, 9,257 rocket attacks and 4,256 other bombings in the past five years.

14 years ago, when I was 13 years old, my father was put to trial under the Blasphemy Law because he dared to say publicly - during a human rights rally - that the government of Pakistan should stop training and supporting the religious militants, because in the long term they will be a threat, not only to neighboring countries, but will also be a threat to our own state. It was a period when militant organizations were getting open support from the government; the militant organizations were publicly recruiting adolescents and young people, training them, and later sending these young militants to Kashmir and Afghanistan for war. My father had to face the trial for many years, yet – sadly - his words turned out to be accurate when it was proved that these militants were a threat to world peace.

I come from the North West of Pakistan and was raised in a family where we believed in the philosophy of nonviolence, and interreligious tolerance – needless to say – this wasn’t a very common mindset in northern Pakistan. My father’s expression about the religious militants, as well as the troubles he had to go through because of his peace activism, left a deep impression on me. I was already involved in working on the empowerment of young women because young women in my society are marginalized, discriminated and are considered powerless. While I was working to promote leadership among young women, the incident my family had to go through made me think that young people have the power to change the world. It gave me the hope that young people can build peace, and that there are various ways to do it that wouldn’t put them in a big risk! This experience opened up both my mind and heart, and gave me the energy to start exploring the power of young people when it comes to peacebuilding.

It was in 2009, that I, along with a group of other young people established the “Youth Peace Network” as a platform to promote leadership among young peacebuilders and peer educators for peace, nonviolence and tolerance. The members of the youth peace network are all young people, girls and boys from all over Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The Youth Peace Network is a group of trained young volunteers
who identify young people at risk of radicalization in KPK (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and engage them in intensive dialogue, one to one or in small groups, to offer an alternative view of Islam and dissuade people from violence as a mean to solve their problems. They also address other drivers of radicalization such as living conditions and conflicts within society. After the appropriate training, each trained volunteer is expected to work with an average of 10 young people over the course of the first year. The inclusion of youth in peacebuilding activities and initiatives bring vibrancy and creativity to peacebuilding efforts and thus makes this process more effective and participatory.

The members of the Youth Peace Network took different initiatives including the campaign of writing peace messages on rickshaws which is a common transportation source in the cities. Extremists use the rickshaws as a canvas to spread their ideology and to foster hatred towards different sects, non-Muslims and the West, so in response peace activists use them for peace-related projects. Other Youth Peace Network members have established resource centers for Madrassa students where youth can learn scientific subjects, mathematics and English. Members take innovative initiatives at the community level and conduct various programs such as peace education sessions in universities, colleges and communities or interfaith dialogues among Muslims majority and other minorities in the region etc.

To this day, I have worked with more than 12 groups of young people and I have found that young people are very passionate about challenging the status quo in a country. Together, we’re bringing change to the socio-political reality of communities and to the entire country in general. Nonetheless, working for peace is life-threatening in Pakistan and I have faced many challenges and threats from the extremists groups. These threats and difficulties – however dangerous they are – always gave me courage and strength to continue my work as a peacebuilder and I will never be silenced.

Saba Ismail (27) is one of the founders and Vice Chairperson of “CRY (Coalition on Rights and Responsibilities of Youth)”. CRY works to develop a sense of Responsibility among adolescents and young people by organizing them into groups and building their capacities so that they can play their role as agents for change in their communities for promotion of Rights, Responsibilities and Tolerance.

Artist: Victoria Martos - www.victoriamartos.blogspot.nl
The sarcasm falls within the contradiction of mentioning the word “peace” recently; as it usually comes within the context of war. The first image that comes to one’s mind is pictures of rockets, bullets, dust and destruction. I come from a troubled region, which has faced too many wars in the recent years, and which is barely calm. A region that used to be known for its magic, civilization, culture and beauty, has now become always tied with wars and violence.

Living in a harsh political atmosphere for years lead me to loose any will to follow the political affairs or to even hear the news. The worst moment came when, during the revolution in Egypt, friends died on the streets. Watching the best years of your life being wasted because of people, who only care about authority and power over the rights of citizens, kill your dreams and take your breath away slowly.

At the early days of the revolution, we thought that we had nothing to lose; we believed that we were living in the worst situation possible, and that it was probably better to die than to continue living in those circumstances. We were wrong. After three years of going out to the same streets, calling for the same rights, screaming to be heard, it seems that little has changed.

After Mubarak stepped down, most Egyptians felt that they finally owned their country. Quoting one of the Egyptians who was jumping out of joy in a video that was taken on 12th of February 2011, “only today I feel that this land is mine” he said. This simple sentence described it all. Most of the people were happy. People cleaned the streets after the days of revolution, and everyone had positive attitudes, showing love and respect for themselves, their country and each other.

However, things changed quickly and we watched our dreams being taken away again - more brutally this time. We continue to demand to be heard; yet no one cares. Whenever trust, expectations and hope of a better future has been built around a possible leader, that person betrays the people when they gain power. It’s like being back where you started, at point zero again. And the continuous disappointments actually show that it is even worse than that. You start to believe that there is actually nothing to be done at all.

I once read an article that tried to describe the condition that most Egyptian youth suffer nowadays; it defined it as “Post Revolution Depression Syndrome”.

Saja Elgredly
I was one of the Egyptian youth who worked on three different activities and initiatives at the same time. I had a job for 9 hours a day, and when I finished work, I would run to meetings to organize cultural events, or even work in evening support classes for unfortunate children. I had all the energy of the world and nothing would stop me. But drained by the stolen dreams and fading expectations, I fell ill to that kind of depression as well.

I believe we are being kept alive to witness this in Egypt for a reason, even if we won’t understand it anytime soon. But we exist for a reason. Maybe we can not change the situation we are in now, but we are capable of change. I wouldn’t claim that I now work on initiatives or social activities because I believe that I will be able to change something in Egypt. I am doing this because we have no other option. This is the best I can do. One of my close friends describes it perfectly: we have reached a stage of disappointment, such that there can be no more way down, the only way out is to get up again. Youth and children for me have been the only hope for Egypt, they are the change and they have all the power - but only if they can keep the strength and the passion alive.

Deciding to keep away from the chaotic political atmosphere and life, I have chosen to work on inner peace. I believe that if inner peace were accomplished, many of the outside problems would not even exist. If people have respect for their own rights and for other people’s rights, the world could become a better place. For me, this is part of the process for achieving peace in our societies.

My efforts have recently been focused on women’s rights in Islam, spreading culture and children’s education. My first involvement in the field of social development was by creating an initiative with some friends for educating unfortunate children. The project was called “Albedaya men hena”, which in Arabic stands for ‘the start is from here’. The idea was to work in the weekends with the children to help them in their studies with new methods of education. We started by having 11 children. Now we have another branch in Cairo, which is helping around 30 children. Not being able to cope with work and building an NGO at the same time, and due to the organizational problems we encountered (as no one of the energetic team had previous experience with managing an NGO), our dream of creating this NGO had to pause for a while.

This experience gave me more reasons and power to learn and work on myself. I want to be able to revive this NGO again. I am working on obtaining a Master’s degree abroad now and I still keep the picture of the graduating children of “Albedaya men hena” to remind me always that I have an uncompleted mission with those children that I need to go back for.

I have also worked in other fields that I find important. It has often been claimed that the problem with women’s rights and status in Egypt is highly linked to the lack of the right kind of information. A friend of mine and I started an initiative to educate Muslim women about their rights in Islam by promoting educational entertainment, and other creative and innovative methods to reach our goal. It may seem a bit odd to say that we try to teach Muslims about
Islam, but this is the case. There are misinterpretations about our religion that we want to help clarify. For example, the information and explanations given to Muslim women do not tell the whole truth about their rights, and focus instead on selected messages and interpretations about Islam.

**Do not let them disappoint you; continue trying.**

I believe these fields of education are necessary sources for spreading a culture of peace, respect and love. And I will continue to try to initiate a positive change for myself, the people that surround me and my country. I hope that the youth who might read this know that they should never give up. Even when life gives you no reasons to try further, just continue doing what you can and keep trying to work for peace. You never know whom you can help or inspire. I will quote a slogan that has been raised in Egypt since the early days of revolution: “Despair is betrayal”. Do not let them disappoint you; continue trying.

**Saja Elgredly** (25) is a full time student at City University London in the UK. Her passion is to contribute to a positive change and this pushed her to be an active member in a number of social initiatives for her community’s development. She is a cofounder of ‘Albedaya men Hena’, an initiative for educating unfortunate children, and has worked in the ‘refqan’ awareness campaign for promoting women rights in Islam. She is currently studying to complete her on ground experience with academic understanding of the field she is interested in most – communication and development – and dreams to make use of it to benefit her country (Egypt) and the rest of the world.

**Artist:** **Claudi López** - Escuela de Arte de Huesca (Spain)
My country - the Democratic Republic of Congo - has experienced multiple forms of violence since 1996. Violence that is still ongoing today and that has lasted for nearly two decades. Armed violence has killed more than 6 million people in my country and has brought along many other socioeconomic consequences, such as the destruction of the social fabric and the disturbing cases of recruitment of young people and even children for armed groups that have fought on the Congolese soil for the last 20 years.

Since 1996 DRC has faced many violent wars that have resulted in the separation of its North-Eastern part (mostly regions of North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri District and the southern province of Katanga). All these wars have been recognized by the international community and the Congolese people as wars of aggression led by both Rwanda and Uganda. Following these attacks, indigenous peoples decided to initiate popular self-defence movements among the foreign troops. This is where my story begins – as being a force for the protection and defence of our territory and our community.

**My involvement in the People’s Self-Defence Forces**

Towards the end of 2001, because of the suffering inflicted to members of my community, I decided to drop my studies to enlist in a popular paramilitary group. Before that I had no knowledge on how to resolve conflicts peacefully and I didn’t see any options for reconciliation.

The members of our society were in constant conflict with the foreign military aggressors present, which is why I thought it was more important to work with local resistance in order to stop the progression of the foreign aggression troops. I joined the partisans that were camping in the village of Vurondo- Vihya (36 km from Butembo) and became a part of the resistance forces called RNL (Lumumbiste National Resistance). I was trained for a month and after that I was appointed as the person responsible for intelligence. My mission was to infiltrate the areas occupied by the aggressors - doing reconnaissance for our fighters. I spent a lot of time in the city, in the areas occupied by the aggressors, and many did not know that I was a part of the resistance. During that time we conducted several military operations, especially against the Ugandan military and we were able to take back much of the territory of Lubero. In that period I was arrested several times for working with the...
rebellion intelligence service that facilitated the attacks on foreign troops.

Towards the end of 2002, we managed to win a major battle against the Ugandan military in a village located 65 km from Byambwe – to the west of the city of Butembo. The Ugandans lost more than 500 soldiers in this savage fight that lasted for 7 days, and we were able to acquire a truck. I recall that the brand of the truck was FUSO. It is interesting how one can still remember details like this. This truck carried the ore that the Ugandans had recovered from the city of Manguredjipa.

That battle marked the end of the Ugandan military presence in the territory of Lubero and the city Butembo. After this military failure against the strength of our resistance, they packed their bags in only one day. They knew that they would be persecuted even in Butembo city. They let go of the large cities that were occupied by the Congolese rebels who allowed them to fall back. Our military group could ensure the reconciliation process with the Congolese combatants, as they were locals who understood that our resistance was to the foreign aggressors, and on this basis we were able to connect with them.

**Laying down the arms**

At the end of 2002, after the famous - even revered - military defeat struck by our resistance, we conducted a plea to our military chief to convince him that as we had reached our goal of driving away the Ugandan military from our soil, our military struggle had ended. There was no reason to operate as a self-defence force and we had to answer to the call coming from the international community aiming to unite all the people fighting in the Congolese conflict through the Sun City agreement. Back then I was the person who often reminded the leader of our defence force that the objective had already been achieved and that we should let the youth return to civilian life; to give them a way of nonviolence, to give them peace. The time of conflict had ended and we had to allow the farmers who supported our resistance to freely go back to their farm activities, to cultivate their crops once again.

At the same time, the international community acting through MONUC began to educate fighters, convincing them to carry out voluntary and spontaneous demilitarization. Ceasefire had already been ruled over the whole area of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which had allowed to assure good relations between our combatants and MONUC. In the wake of this agreement, more than 50 missions on promoting awareness and reconciliation were carried out by MONUC in our partisan groups. In a MONUC-led initiative, I worked to convince the leaders of the resistance to allow the young fighters to lay down their arms, leave the bushes and hideouts and return to the civilian life.

Under my facilitation, along with both MONUC and officials in the city of Butembo we were able to capture a Chief of Militia and intercept 2,000 young fighters who subsequently decided to return to civilian life. More than 1,500 young fighters decided to integrate into the national army just after the Sun City Agreement. This agreement also gave birth to a government. Thanks to the mediation of MONUC, all the fighters left the rebel camps of the north-western
Taking up different arms

After convincing my former leader that it was time to abandon the armed conflict so that our fighters could join the peace process in the country, my position in the community was strong. I realized that the time of the war was over and instead the time for peace had come. I used my leadership position to continue the path of peacebuilding. My main reason to become a peacebuilder was to make sure that I would not have to see youth enlisting in a violent militia group, but rather to see them as a part of society. I decided to work with them and address the reasons that lead young people to join violent groups in the first place. I initiated a new peace organization called PEREX-CV that we are running up to the present day. Through this organization we conducted several actions for peace and reconciliation in my country.

From the moment that I returned to civilian life, I have been working for the sustainable socio-economic reintegration of young ex-combatants. I strive for these young ex-combatants to be recognised and accepted in society, because I am convinced that political and community leaders who use these youth and involve them in violence, will have difficulty convincing them, once re-integrated into society, to rejoin armed groups in the eastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo. Furthermore, I think that young people, who have never been fighters or have never been enrolled in partisan groups, could also benefit from the socio-economic activities offer the demobilized fighters. With our actions we are also facilitating a reconciliation process between the two different groups of youth.

To achieve all this, in 2010 I initiated three working strategies that allow me to secure the dialogue between former young fighters and the young non ex-combatants. These three strategies promote work in solidarity between the two types of youth, and allow them to exchange experiences through these frameworks. The former fighters get to share their harsh experiences of violence and reflect upon all the suffering and harm they have inflicted on the population, while the community’s youth provide their knowledge of social and economic life for these young ex-combatants to help them understand the realities of the life they come back into after such a long absence.

With my organization, we have already established six youth barza in the city of Butembo, 15 solidarity groups and 6 school clubs for peace. Their objective is to empower youth to become agents of change in our society. Thanks to the various sessions both ex-combatants and other young people never previously involved, have pledged never to join such groups in the future, but instead to cooperate to achieve success.

I believe that my story shows that it is important to be aware of the past and to use it as a means to shape the future. To know when to let go of something, and use your personal experience for something even greater.

This is my story of peace.

Dunia Katembo Colomba is a 37 year old peacebuilder from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He works as a volunteer for his local organization, PEREX-cv. Their main goal is to re-integrate ex-soldiers into civilian life, to build peace in their country.

Artist: Marta Coll - “Monasterio Solar”
The beginning of my involvement in the peacebuilding field came with my own personal struggle to bring peace within myself. Due to my personal experiences, at a young age I came to the conclusion that this planet was only a very sad place, that no real peace could ever be achieved and that, somehow, it was human nature to hurt and kill each other.

The process that lead me to inner peace was a very personal one. Like with most people, it required first the destruction of the ‘dogmas’, the pillars of certainties that we build around ourselves in order to make sense of a world that most of the times seems to make no sense at all.

In my very personal case, the need to find peace within myself was the objective, as the apparent lack of meaning of the bad things I experienced in life was becoming unbearable. A trip to Japan sparked something inside of me and gave me a taste of what inner peace is like. On my new path, I tried to follow that sense of peace, and I was put on a journey in which I met many amazing and inspiring people that helped me out in my desire of reaching inner peace. This led me to take part in many activities: meditations, martial arts and personal pilgrimages to holy sites in Europe, America and Japan.

I somehow managed to be successful in finding peace within myself, and my outlook on the world changed on many perspectives one of them on the possibility of bringing peace. After changing myself and consequently changing my mind about multiple issues, it became clear to me that peace should be the most important goal, for everyone, since no other human activity can fully flourish with the constant threat and destructive impact of war.

One event that was particularly meaningful to me was the Interreligious Peace Conference that took place at the Peace Palace in The Hague on the 11th of September 2013. There were five representatives from the five most popular religions in the world: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The speaker of each religion gave insights on what religions can do to work together in order to promote peace, rather than hamper it, as has happened multiple times over throughout history, and still happens to this day.

After all the interventions were over, the microphone was open for the audience. The first person to come...
on stage had a very negative outlook on the situation and even about the event itself. He said that religions have only contributed to wars and therefore cannot help bring peace, and he concluded that the average person is powerless in front of these global dynamics, so there was no point being there discussing anything in the first place.

The moderator then asked “Does anyone have an answer to this question: what can the average person do to bring peace?” The audience grew completely silent and the moderator was about to go to the next topic when he finally saw my hand raised, from the back of the room.

Invited to speak, I first clarified that I did not have THE ANSWER. But there were still a few things I could suggest to the average person.

We all ask for peace in far away lands, but at the same time, more often than not, we don’t have peace at home. Peace is a state of mind, and there is no point asking for peace in the world if, at the same time, we are constantly in a war mind state with one another: we give strangers we encounter on the street a bad look, we ignore other human beings around us, we argue with strangers while driving and sometimes physical fights break out for the most trivial things.

We need to fix this first. We have to make peace within ourselves first. Then within our family. Peace with our neighbors and peace with the strangers we encounter outside. A simple smile can be an extremely powerful peace message.

My message was very well received and I managed to talk to many people afterwards. There I met Masami Saionji, Chairwoman of the World Peace Prayer society, who invited me to their Peace Sanctuary on Mount Fuji, which was another amazing experience, in and of itself. Since then I have been meeting more and more people who are actively involved in peacebuilding processes, and from whom I have learned allot.

The latest peace event I took part in was the International Day of Peace at the Maarten Luther Kerk in Amsterdam. Thanks to the generous help of Pastor Andreas Wöhle and the careful direction of Shinji Kasema, a member of the World Peace Prayer Society, we organized a twelve hours long event (from 7 in the evening till 7 in the morning), which included artists displaying their work, musicians, singers, actors, dancers etc.

The background of the people present was very different, and this was the beauty of it. There were believers of different faiths, together with atheists and agnostics. The main goal and purpose of all the people present was one and one only: peace.
After seeing the amazing success of that night, seeing people with such different backgrounds coming together, I can say that peace is indeed achievable. If Peace is the genuine goal of a person, nothing will stop him/her. All the religious and cultural barriers that have always been used as an excuse immediately collapse when faced by the genuine love for peace.

Ippolito Forni (35) works as a Security Analyst at a major energy company. He has also been involved in many Peace related activities for some time. The most important and significant ones for him were the inter-religious conference at the Peace Palace in The Hague on the 11th of September 2013 and the Night of Peace at the Maarten Luther Church in Amsterdam on the 19th of September 2014.

Artist: Shanti B.
Mathare is one of the biggest collection of slums in Africa. It is located around 5 km from Nairobi and serves as a home for more than half a million of its inhabitants. Because of the high level of violence, it can be a very dangerous place on its own, but perhaps the most dangerous activity in Mathare is peacebuilding. This testimony comes from Benard Ochieng, who is one of the leaders of the Mathere Organization for Talented Youth.

Let’s start at the beginning. How did you get involved in peacebuilding in Mathare?

It all started in 2004 when I saw a gang of four boys raping a girl and couldn’t do anything about it. I’ve observed brutality in Mathare for a longer time, but this moment convinced me to finally undertake actions to make Mathare a safer place. So, it started with me talking to young boys, one at the time, and asking them simple questions like: “why are you doing this kind of things?”. First, I wanted to learn about the causes of violence in Mathare. Second, I wanted to confront them with their deeds and see their reaction. Their replies were usually similar – they lacked role models, they never received education, didn’t have a job and so on. They came from the slums, and in here you need to bribe your boss to get a job. I realized that I could start by trying to answer their needs.

So, what have you done for them?

Well, first of all, if you want to change the community you need to change youth. Our first project was a school for orphaned kids and children from unprivileged backgrounds who couldn’t afford to go to school. In 2011 we had 150 students and now, just 3 years later, we have 250 students. Many students finishing our school stay with us and are becoming teachers for younger generations. Now our biggest problem is to accommodate all the candidate students. Later on, we came up with the idea to provide the youth of Mathare with additional options for their free time, such as sport and different cultural activities including music and theatre.

Before you address a problem, you need to acknowledge that it exists. When you see violence on a streets or domestic violence in your home, you can either ignore it or - for example - make a song about it. This helps young people to recognize and eventually overcome their problems. You need to understand that here in Kenya we have still got a very strong sense
of tribal community and this may result in conflicts. But when you play soccer you don’t know where your opponent comes from; it’s the same with other activities - theater or singing - they unite. Afterwards, when the game or performance ends, we sit together and talk about problems of youth and community.

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These boys and girls are somewhat lost; they come to us and ask us if they can join us. Once they’re occupied with an activity and they’re helping us, they don’t have time to be consumed by violent activities. Instead they make their own CD’s for example, something that has been very distant to them before they joined our group. And it all started with groups of youth that were gathering in a hall to sing.

What happens when they get older?

For older youth, we came up with an idea of micro-financing. We provide them money to start a business: 10,000 Kenyan shillings or around a 100 euro. This allows them to start their entrepreneurship, and after 2 months they pay this money back. Normally they create some kind of a small business, like selling tomatoes or repairing shoes, it really depends on the person. If they need more money for developing their ideas, we can provide them with another loan - this time with a small interest - so that we can provide more people with funding for their ideas. So far we have provided this kind of help for 40 people. Now they have a source of income and they are contributing to our local community.

We’re also getting involved in gender projects. When women want to run for parliamentary seats, other politicians will always come, very often with guns and just dictate their terms. It’s very difficult to provide women with a platform to meet and get information on their rights. To help address this, we rent various halls, movie to other places and try to invite more people to support our cause.

How do you feel personally about working in MYTO? Did you receive any threats?

Over the years, we have received many threats. For example, I was running in an elections for a position of a Counselor in a local council, and even though I know people voted for me I wasn’t elected. I couldn’t do anything about this because I didn’t have money, and – sadly – money is essential when it comes to Kenyan politics. Nonetheless, I am very happy with the work that I am doing. Here we can develop exactly as we want, and no policeman is asking for a bribe. I have to say that I am really proud of what this place has become.

Do you feel that the situation in Mathare is changing?

Violence has come down, but the situation is still unstable. For example, politicians sponsor young people to fight with their political opponents. Because these kids gets paid 500 shillings, around 5 euro, when they don’t have a job, it’s difficult for us to convince these young people that they shouldn’t engage in this kind of activities. Nonetheless, we try. We tell them that 5 euros in not enough for them in the long run and it’s better to devote their time to community development,
to go to school and invest in themselves or perhaps use our micro-financing to develop their ideas.

You’ve already accomplished much, what are your plans for the future?

We have an idea for a project. The thing is, we have a land in Migori, it’s in the area around Lake Victoria, that could be used to build a school but we currently don’t have enough money - so we need more recognition. We are trying some digital forms to promote our organization and we have also started fundraising activities to get more money from external donors.

**I believe that together we will have more chances of success.**

Moreover, non-formal schooling is not recognized by Kenyan government. In Kenya we have only private schools, government schools and very few non-formal schools. We’re aiming at getting all the non-formal schools together and create a network, to get more recognition for this kind of learning and gain more importance. I believe that together we will have more chances of success.

Benard Ochieng (33) is leader of Mathere Organization for Talented Youth. He grew up in Migori and came to Nairobi in 1998 to look for a job. At the beginning he was working as a carpenter, but then he decided to start an organization to change the lives of the people in the Mathare community. Now he is one of the leaders of the Mathere Organization for Talented Youth (http://mathareyouthorg.webs.com/).

Artist: **Claudi López** - Escuela de Arte de Huesca (Spain)
I think of myself as a “midwife” of refugee youths’ “visual stories,” stories of trauma, courage, sacrifice and resilience; stories that offer rare glimpses into the inner worlds of refugees; stories shared in the universally understood language of narrative art.

This story is theirs.

No one has humbled, taught or inspired me more than refugees, forced to flee violent conflict and persecution in their homelands. I am in awe of those who have survived devastating losses and heartache yet, somehow, manage to remain determined, hopeful – even grateful.

A facilitator of visual storytelling workshops, I have been privileged to bear witness to the life-stories of refugee youth from conflict-ridden countries around the world, including Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Burma.

I’m smiling, recalling how most refugee youth react when I tell them I need their help. Their eyes sparkle. It would have never occurred to them that their life-stories mattered, that they could be instrumental in promoting human rights and peace in their native lands.

Recognizing at a heart-to-heart level the stories of survivors of injustice is a prerequisite to forgiveness, healing, reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, as is enabling those forced to flee to feel heard, regain their dignity and influence the course of their lives. When the visual stories are exhibited, workshop participants see for themselves how emotions conveyed and evoked by a single narrative image can have the power to open hearts, build bridges of understanding and transform viewers’ empathy and outrage into inspired action.

Experiencing the power of their voices and visions can be transformative, for refugee youth – and their communities. Once they have seen themselves as catalysts for positive social change, they begin to realize that along with human rights come responsibilities, including the responsibility to challenge injustice and stand up for their rights.

The visual stories that follow were painted by refugee youth from Burma, also known as Myanmar, youth who had found safety in neighboring Thailand and India.
Nurture Nature. The 16-year-old refugee girl who painted this visual story opted to remain nameless. As a young child, she had fled an outbreak of violent conflict in her native village in Burma’s eastern Karen State. After trekking through the dense jungle for several days she finally crossed the Thai-Burma border. She shared her story at a workshop I facilitated in Mae Sot. Also known as “Little Burma,” this bustling Thai border town has become refuge to about 200,000 migrants from Burma. The girl dreamed of teaching people – including foreign investors, eyeing the wealth of untapped natural resources in Burma’s Karen State – why it was so important to treat our planet like a precious seedling.

In Honor. 26-year-old Jimmy was born in Burma’s most impoverished state, Chin State. Raised Christian in a Buddhist-dominated country, he had fled religious persecution and secured refugee status in neighboring India. Jimmy didn’t know how many political prisoners continued to languish behind bars in his homeland. Since the country’s military junta ceded power to a quasi-civilian government, in 2011, most political prisoners in Burma had been released – bearing scars of having been tortured, physically and psychologically. Despite their courage and sacrifices, today’s political prisoners remain faceless to all but family and friends who have dared to stand by them. Jimmy painted this picture to honor his unsung heroes. Without them, he said, there would be no democracy movement in Burma today. And without justice, he added, peace in Burma will remain an elusive dream.
Inclusivity. The prior military regime in Burma imprisoned cyber-dissidents. To pacify its citizens, the government restricted internet access and blocked content critical of the regime. Since 2012, internet freedom in Burma has expanded dramatically. Yet widespread coverage gaps, sluggish connection speeds and steep service costs have put the internet beyond the reach of the vast majority of citizens. While in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the 21-year-old man who painted this visual story learned about human rights, rights long-denied his people, the Kachin of northern Burma. He returned to Burma eager to introduce ethnic minority youth to their rights and the potential power of the internet to improve their lives.

Justice for All. Since 1996, the Burma Army has burned down over 3,000 villages, mostly in ethnic minority regions of eastern Burma. Ethnic Karen, 16-year-old Saw Yar Zar wasn’t the only youth in the workshop he participated in who had been forced to flee more than one burning village. “I will never forget the smell and crackling sound,” he said, with the help of a translator. Saw Yar Zar wondered why so many members of Burma’s government and national army believed that upholding their values could only be achieved by oppressing ethnic minorities. He dreamed of a world where impoverished ethnic minority villagers were considered as worthy of human rights as wealthy city dwellers, a world where their voices rang just as loud and clear.
Unity in Diversity. Enrolled in a year-long interethnic English immersion program in mountainous Umpiem Mai refugee camp along the Thai-Burma border, 23-year-old Kyaw Dah Sie dreamed of establishing Burma’s first multiethnic soccer league. He believed that if other youth from Burma’s diverse ethnic communities also had the opportunity to study, play and live together, they too would come to discover that beneath their outward ethnic, religious, political and socio-economic differences, deep down, they shared the same deeply-held values: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The six visual stories in “Art of Peace” were painted by six inspiring refugee peacebuilders from Burma (Myanmar). After fleeing violent conflict and persecution in their ethnic villages, they participated in visual storytelling workshops along the Thai-Burma and India-Burma borders. Their names (ages) are Kyaw Eh (19), Anonymous (16), Jimmy (26), L.R.M. (21), Saw Yar Zar (16) and Kyaw Dah Sie (23). In early 2015, the youths’ visual stories will be published in a book entitled Forced to Flee: Visual Stories by Refugee Youth from Burma.

Main picture: Kyaw Eh (19) – This painting portrays the youth’s journey to safety, in Thailand, after his village was gunned and burned down by the Burma Army. It symbolizes an experience shared by all refugees; they have all been forced to flee – to save their lives.
25 Stories for Peace are also available as an app for Android. To find the app, search the Google Play store or scan this QR code: