



INDY'S WEEKLY ALTERNATIVE NEWSPAPER HIGHLIGHTING ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

A decade of teaching peace

BY ALEX MATTINGLY

The Peace Learning Center celebrates with Community Fest

Celebrating a decade of operation and growth, Indianapolis-based nonprofit Peace Learning Center will host Community Fest on Oct. 13, from 1 to 4 p.m. at their facility in Eagle Creek Park. Director Tim Nation invites the community to enjoy a day with family and friends that will include music, kids' activities, hayrides and even yoga.

It is fitting for Community Fest to be held at the Eagle Creek site, since it was there that, 10 years ago, the PLC began operation out of a house formerly owned by the Lilly family. At the time, it was being used as a park storage facility, a fact learned by Nation and Charlie Wiles after they stumbled across it while skiing.

Wiles, the organization's co-founder, saw it as a chance to have "an actual, physical location where young people and the community could come and be inspired by peace."

PLC began operations in a beautiful, if dilapidated, mansion overlooking the reservoir in Eagle Creek Park. Co-founder Dan Stratton spent several months renovating the facility prior to hosting the first group of 4th Grade students from Indianapolis Public Schools on Oct. 13, 1997. Stratton, with 20 years of martial arts training, also brought a unique perspective to the peace education curriculum. A program he called "Safe Escape" taught students how to evade an attacker if they felt physically threatened. Once a student felt safe they were encouraged to use verbal techniques to diffuse a conflict peacefully.

This lofty sounding goal was undertaken with the help of Americorps, which provided volunteers for the PLC. Created only three years before the PLC as a national incarnation of the Peace Corps, Americorps coordinates the time and efforts of more than 70,000 volunteers, addressing needs in education, public safety, health and the environment. In fact, one aspect of turning 10 is that Americorps will no longer be providing those volunteers. Nation says they are prepared.

"We were so fortunate to have Americorps for 10 years. We were planning on transitioning into a staff and away from Americorps members, and it's been great because our community has really stepped up to help our organization," Nation said.

Just as Americorps has helped the PLC, Wiles believes the PLC has helped members of Americorps.

"What I've been most impressed with is all the Americorps folks that have come through the program and have taken that experience and spun it into their vocation. It's become an integral part of their lives, the idea of peace education and working with young people to improve the future," Wiles said.

Willing to be peaceful

Students who have been through the program have also incorporated those messages into their thinking. Leif Carlson, a former Americorps member now working as a contract employee for the PLC, recently interviewed a group of students from George Washington Community School that had been through the program.



Wiles and Tim Nation co-founded PLC 10 years ago.

Charlie

Adryan Matteson, a senior at the time of the interview, said that to live a peaceful life one needed to “be happy, have an open mind, be willing to be peaceful, and have respect for other’s points of view.”

Kacey Hicks, also from GWCS, came away with a similar view after attending Peace Camp, a summer program provided by the PLC that also emphasizes leadership skills. Hicks viewed peacemakers as those who “choose to help others, specifically helping them to be better people.”

Hicks also suggested that the PLC expand its horizons to include adults. “Adults need to learn the same peace skills that children are learning,” Hicks said.

This is something Nation believes as well. “We’re trying to help adults learn the skills so that they in turn support the kids. We have a lack of conflict resolution skills in our society,” Nation said. “We try to stress that, when faced with conflict, you should ask questions. Don’t assume you know what the other person is thinking.”

To emphasize these ideas, the Peace Learning Center has employed individuals that have put them into practice, who can act as role models to the students. This includes Alfretta Graves, a student activist during the civil rights movement’s most tumultuous years and who spent 10 years at the PLC.

Graves, who left this summer to move to Memphis, Tenn., shared her story with students. “I would tell them about working in Tennessee, where I went to jail during the student nonviolent movement, when the students were arrested during a protest. The kids always had questions. At first they’d be alarmed, but after we talked a little they’d be curious,” Graves said.

Graves was also involved in the expansion of the program, witnessing as it evolved to engage the community. “I was in Peace Education, which is the program where students came to the PLC. There are schools now bringing youth programs out to the PLC, and who go through the program on Saturdays, and once a year we had a senior citizens group come out. We also encourage many parents to come along to observe and get involved,” Graves said.

Looking toward the future

This may be the key behind many of the Peace Learning Center’s efforts. Ultimately, it is as much up to the community as it is the students to ensure that nonviolence is seen as a feasible means of conflict resolution. To this end, Nation has big plans for the future.

“One of our main philosophies has been primary prevention, providing people with the skills to prevent conflict. We’re promoting a safe and common language to deal with conflict, and to do that we want to teach a lot of people these same skills,” Nation said. “We have three campuses for which we’re trying to realize our capacity to work with as many young people as we can. We’ve also been launching an adult education program this year where we’re promoting workshops and learning experiences for businesses, faith-based groups and community organizations to help them build healthier organizations, have the difficult conversations and build diversity.”

Nation pointed out the community’s desire for these kinds of programs. “We recently had an event at an Islamic center that was aimed toward helping people understand the faith. We had such a tremendous turnout that we needed to set up a tent behind the building,” Nation said.

These successes bode well for the future of the PLC, but the next 10 years will depend on more than numbers. The community will decide for itself whether or not to put the philosophy of nonviolence into practice, and how to support kids trying to do the same. To the skeptics, Wiles would continue to emphasize the practical side of these ideas.

“We’ve told them all since the beginning, conflict is a part of life,” Wiles said. “It’s like breathing. But here are some skills that can bring it to a more positive outcome.”

WHAT: Peace Learning Center’s Community Fest, featuring: Guilty Pleasure, Bobby Maull, Kenyetta Dance Company

WHEN: Saturday, Oct. 13, 1-4 p.m.

WHERE: Eagle Creek Park, 7540 W. 56th St.

WEB: <http://www.peacelearningcenter.org/>

TICKETS: \$6 the day of the event and children 12 and under free; advance tickets \$5 and can be purchased from Peace Learning Center by calling Gina Woods at 317-327-7144. Entrance to Eagle Creek Park is free with a ticket to Community Fest. Tickets available at gate.
