

Children of War, Leaders for Peace

by Lyn Fine

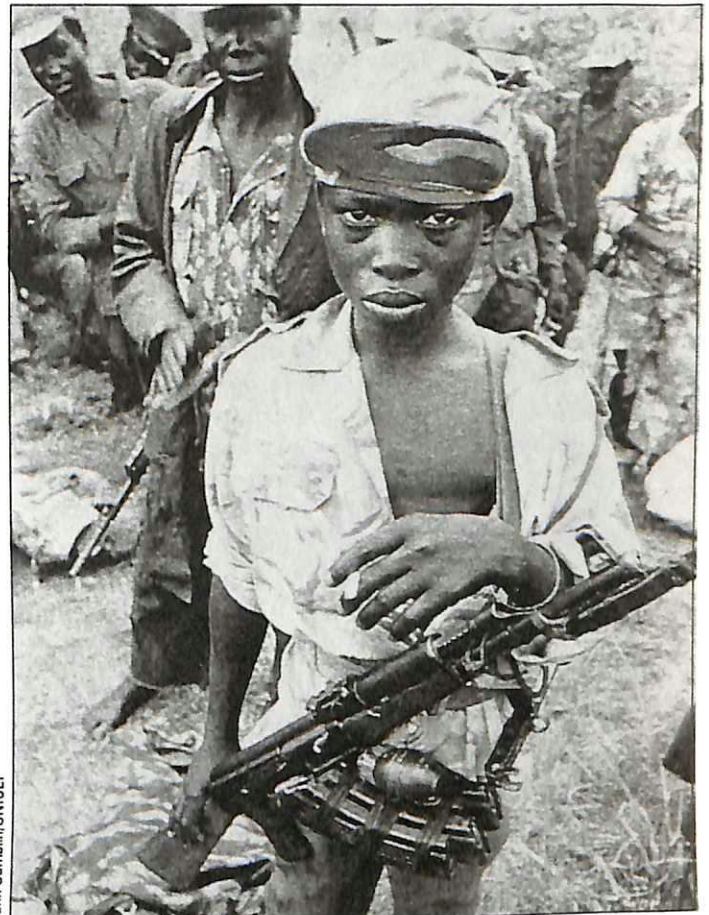
When teenagers from different cultures grow up with violence, how do they become leaders for peace? What forms does their leadership take? Investigating these questions in the Children of War international education program inspired me. This multicultural cooperative project allowed adults and teenagers to work together in actions that were both personally healing and that contributed to creating the conditions for peace.

Between 1982 and 1992, sponsored by the Religious Task Force of Mobilization, the Children of War peace education program brought together teenagers from 15 zones of political violence around the world (Cambodia, Vietnam, South Africa, USA, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Chile, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East) for public speaking tours in the United States.

The participants included an 18-year-old Cambodian refugee in the U.S. named Am Chorn, who organized a theater project and other community-based projects for Cambodian refugees. "I had to kill my own heart in order to endure," he said of the genocide in Cambodia. "The only way for the death and suffering of all my family and friends to have any meaning is by our action together."

Other participants included Marvyn Perez, who fled Guatemala ("Students were being killed or disappearing every day," he said) and at 18 organized the first national U.S. conference for refugees; and Susie Goldberg, who at 15 organized a large demonstration against apartheid in South Africa among fellow students in Los Angeles, California.

Working with a youth leadership development director and a social worker, the young people organized three national and one New York statewide public speaking tours against violence, numerous local youth leadership training weekends and con-



Yann Gambim/UNICEF

Young boys, barely out of childhood, carry heavy guns instead of toys

ferences, and campaigns such as the May 1987 "Stand Together Now with Youth in Detention in South Africa" campaign.

The program's goal was to help build "a powerful youth movement to act on both local and international issues of concern to young people" through training "a new type of youth leader" who could "play

an active role in reversing violence and reclaiming hope for the future" (Maydee Morales, *Tomorrow is Ours: An Organizing Handbook for Young Leaders*, New York: Children of War Program, 1990). The program also conducted training programs for community agencies; developed curriculum and organizing materials, plus a newsletter; and participated in the Hebrew University's "Children in War" conference (Jerusalem, 1990) and the Youth Summit Conference (Tokyo, 1988).

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

During an orientation week for the 1990 speaking tour, the teenagers shared their experiences with each other in small groups and in briefings to the whole group. Telling their own personal stories was emotional and extremely important. Although adults trained in peer-counseling skills were present, they did not function as trauma experts. The similarities

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of age and experiences among the young people seemed to help most, as did the deep listening modeled by the program's adult and youth staff. It was also important that the focus of the group sharing was preparation for a common purpose (the speaking tour), which all the participants saw as meaningful, rather than solely personal healing. The tour was an opportunity for the teenagers to tell the story of their "people", not just their own story.

While listening to each other and learning to tell their own stories, these young people sowed the seeds of empathy and powerful action: "Their stories are my story now," they said of each other. "I learned that my story was important, too. Everybody's story is important."

The young people then traveled in multinational groups of six to nine, with an adult guide, to advocate for peace by speaking to audiences in high schools, colleges, community organizations, churches and synagogues. Many local groups formed after their talks, to continue the interactive process of personal healing and peace leadership action.

The teenagers shared their stories in both formal and nonformal educational settings, and protected themselves from burnout, by facilitating emotional support groups, by giving talks in their own school classes, and by organizing dialogue groups across boundaries (for example, between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland). Dana, from Israel, emphasized the importance of this level of

work when she said, "You have to handle your feelings and your soul before starting to do [peace] work. You have to know how to handle crises, hard situations. And you always have to feel the support, like physical and mental support—because a lot of times people are being depressed, and while they're so depressed they think nobody loves them. And in this time it's very important for people to be shown love."

WHAT IS BEING A LEADER?

These teenagers began to develop a new definition of being a leader. "I don't think being a leader is just being a head of a group. Each and every one of us growing up the way we are, not doing bad things, is being a leader. People look at you and say, I want to be like you," said one inner-city U.S. youth.

From their point of view, they were being leaders when they listened to others and when they used mediation rather than violence during their personal relationships. One young woman said she was a leader when she helped her parents stop fighting. Another said, "I was a leader when I helped a friend out of a suicide pact—I talked him out of it."

HELP IN HEALING

I wanted to understand more deeply what had helped these teenagers to become leaders for peace. Their experiences with violence included close encounters with mass murders at a very young age, as well as intense emotional, structural, and cultural violence. They had lost family, friends, and neighbors. Several had witnessed mass killings of children and adults; others had been coerced to kill. They lived in environments where "you can see death all around you" or "you could be killed at any time".

What contributed to their capacity to transform their emotional pain, to develop compassion, to give meaning to their experiences with violence? What motivated them to become leaders for peace? The following is a summary of what I discovered listening to these teenagers reflect on their lives. Some common elements were apparent across differences of culture, class, age, and gender:

- ♦ the presence in their lives of adults and peers who offered them inspiration, love, encouragement, and recognition;
- ♦ the presence in their lives of adult allies from different cultural backgrounds—adults who were proud of their own cultural heritage, able to listen to young people, able to model collective decision-making and collaborative leadership, who were emotionally open, and were committed to ending violence;
- ♦ the availability of larger frames of reference and meaning, and of opportunities for action in religious,

political, and/or youth movements;

- ♦ their experiences of intentional processes: hearing and telling personal stories with peers; learning to release painful emotions in an appropriate way; collective international/multicultural public action for a common goal;
- ♦ their use of the creative arts as a way to transform emotional pain and create and express new meanings for their experiences;
- ♦ their contact with inclusive concepts of leadership (many talked of how “everyone can be a leader”) and the view of humans as basically good; exposure to concepts of social understanding such as oppression, internalized oppression, issues such as racism and sexism, interdependence, and the power of love;
- ♦ ongoing sources of support through spirituality and/or emotional support groups.

ESTIMATED NUMBERS OF CHILD VICTIMS OF ARMED CONFLICT DURING THE PAST DECADE:

Killed: 2 million

Disabled: 4-5 million

Left homeless: 12 million

Orphaned or separated from their families: more than 1 million

Psychologically traumatized: some 10 million

CONDITIONS OF PEACE

If personal peace can be understood as the practice of nonviolence in our personal relationships and actions—then we need to create social and global conditions of peace which will nourish and sustain this personal peace. What is needed?

On the basis of what the Children of War tell us, as a first step we need to speak our truths with each other across groups of peers, then with each other across groups and then together in collective public advocacy. We need a strong sense of purpose and determination if we are to set aside the time and energy to do this—as strong as that we muster in times of war.

To wage peace, we need to develop the capacity to listen deeply and to be present with strong emotion—then we will be more able to assist others to do the same. We need to model ethical values and the skills of creative conflict resolution and cross-

cultural communication.

And we need to find for ourselves, so that we can offer to others, larger frameworks of meaning through which we touch the context and ground of what appear to be merely individual actions and lives. Over and over again, we need to engage together in multicultural cooperative action projects and peaceful advocacy in which we co-create community projects that move us as a species in the direction of nonviolence and equity on all levels and in all arenas. To deepen the reality of peace and peacemaking requires individual initiative and leadership.

The Children of War program offered participants skills in conflict resolution and communication, an inclusive definition of leadership, and an analytical framework for understanding the roots of prejudice and violence. It also offered opportunities for personal story telling, listening, peer support groups, emotional release and participation in a cooperative public speaking project.

Taken together, these elements seemed to help their development as leaders for peace. Perhaps they can help us to cultivate our capacity for compassion, commitment and community building.

CHILDREN'S TRAUMA

A nationwide UNICEF survey of 3,000 children in Rwanda in 1995 found that they had been exposed to “unprecedented levels of exposure to traumatic events” during the genocidal massacres in 1994: over 95 percent of the children witnessed massacres, and over a third had seen the murders of family members; almost all believed they would die; and nearly two-thirds were threatened with death. Over 80 percent had had to hide to protect themselves, many for up to eight weeks or longer.

CHILD SOLDIERS

In recent years, in some 25 countries, thousands of children under age 16 have fought in wars. In 1986 alone, there were as many as 200,000 child combatants.

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Source: *Reconciliation International*, February 1997