

Teaching peace

Rotarians start with students to heal a divided city.

By Rochelle Arms and Carolyn Fanelli
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Six teenage students, each dressed in a different color, dance on stage to a soundtrack of swirling, adrenaline-pumping music. The audience is packed with parents, teachers, and students. There are babies crying, bursts of applause, and sporadic exclamations as people recognize a performer. Just another high school talent show, it seems.

This scene, however, is anything but ordinary, and without the efforts of two dedicated Rotarians, it never would have happened.

One remarkable detail is the location — Mostar, a small city in southwestern Bosnia-Herzegovina. Mostar was decimated by the conflict of 1993-94 and divided into two cities, with Bosnians living and working on one side and Croats on the other. The so-called line of confrontation separating the city is a road lined with the crumbled, concrete ghosts of destroyed buildings, as well as newly reconstructed, pastel-painted apartments and offices. Some young people have never crossed the road to meet their peers on the other side. In fact, some have never even seen the stunning emerald-green river that runs through their town, nor the famous 16th-century Old Bridge, reopened in July with the help of Rotarians, that was shattered during the height of violent conflict.

But in this high school auditorium, Bosnian and Croat students perform together, and their parents and teachers sit side by side. The production is actually a peace event coordinated by Education for Peace Initiative of Bosnia (EFP-Bosnia), based in Sarajevo, with the help of dedicated teachers and administrators.

The International EFP Institute in Switzerland operates in several countries, including Bosnia and Iraq. The organization is dedicated to ending the cycle of violence passed on through the generations, by educating children and their parents and teachers. The institute provides a framework for exploring peace through all academic subjects and conducts training seminars to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to integrate the "principles of peace" into their lesson plans.

Here in Mostar, the students demonstrate what they've learned through a performance that depicts a struggle for power among six continents. In the climactic scene, one continent conquers the others. After a moment of exultation, she realizes the horror of what she has done and emits a scream of grief. She then resuscitates the other continents, indicating that the world is strongest when they live together in peace.

Swiss Rotarian Peter Gut first learned of EFP in 2001 and was especially interested in the pilot program in Bosnia, having served as RI's Presidential Extension Administrator to Bosnia, Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro from 1997 to 1999.

"My first visit to Mostar in the spring of 1998 made a deep impression on me and gave me the hope to someday bring the Rotary ideal of peace to this divided city," says Gut, a member of the Rotary Club of Küsnacht-Zürich. "After hearing about EFP, I was fascinated with how this program might help Mostar."

A year later, Gut learned from Gideon Peiper, a member of Rotary Club of Ramat-Hasharon, Israel, that a private donor was interested in supporting a project to help young people in Eastern Europe. Gut immediately thought of Education for Peace. By this time, the Bosnian government had asked the group to create a plan for the country's schools.

The two Rotarians arranged for the donor to fund the first year of EFP's efforts in Mostar.

"I believe that people talk too much and do nothing," says one of the students. "This performance was our way of saying that we do care what happens in our communities tomorrow."

Gut continues to help raise funds for the organization. Naghmeh Sobhani, director of EFP-Balkans, says "(Peter Gut) has made it possible for EFP to help whole communities of children, youths, and adults heal from the horrific wounds of conflict and violence and to build peace and interethnic harmony."

Two [Rotary World Peace Scholars](#), Rochelle Arms and Carolyn Fanelli, also completed internships at EFP last winter. "This was a great way to see how some of the theories we learn about are put into practice in a postconflict environment," Arms says.

The two were joined by another scholar, Danielle Reiff, a scholar at Sciences Po in Paris, and a Japanese Rotarian, Prof. Hiroshi Tsenoi, one of several Japanese professionals working to bring EFP to Japan, at an intensive one-week training seminar.

This year, Fanelli's host, the Rotary Club of Brisbane Mid-City, Australia, has begun raising funds for the effort. "This is a brilliant reflection of the global interconnectedness of Rotary and its impact on world peace," says Brian McIntyre, 2003-04 president of the Mid-City club.

After the performance at the Mostar Gymnasium, the lobby echoes with laughter and congratulations

from parents and students. As the crowd drifts away, a student says quietly, "Our presentation shows the dream of all of us that Mostar be united again into one city."

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