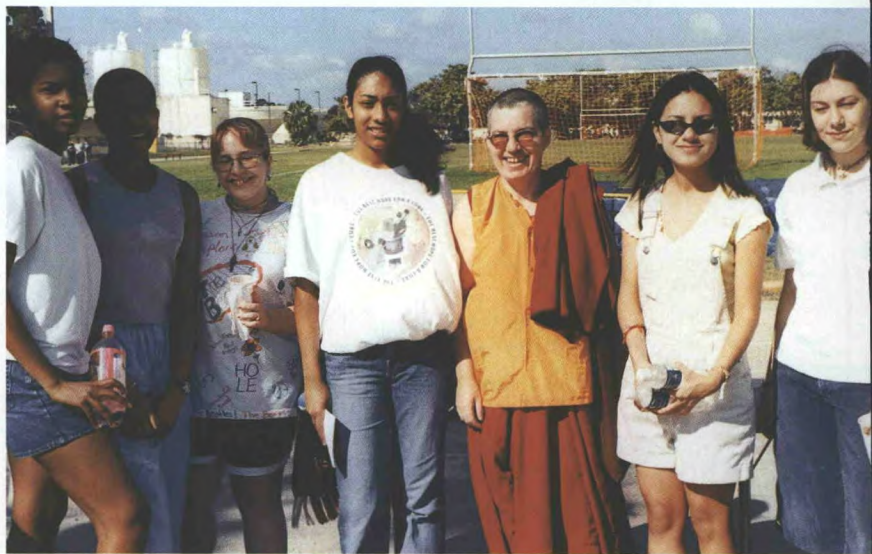


a teacher helps kids 'REACH FOR PEACE'



Jackie Downey



Reach for Peace kids, with Ven. Chantal, center, doing a walk-a-thon to raise money for the monks' visit

A struggle with breast cancer in 1993 led Florida art teacher **JACKIE DOWNEY** to search for answers. She found them in Dharma books and a side trip to Tibet in 1995 during an educational trip to China. She is co-founder of Reach for Peace, a club for high school students.

When I visited what was left of the monasteries in Tibet, witnessed the soldiers along the roadsides, saw the barbed wire, etc., I felt something stirring deep inside. Upon my return to America I sought out a Dharma center in southern Florida, and attended some teachings. What impressed me most about the teachers was the sense of sacredness they held for all life and the sheer joy they projected. They were able to maintain a serenity and peacefulness that I had not seen nor felt before. "If the Dharma can bring this to one's life," I thought, "I am interested in having it too!"

In the late '90s, violence spread across the nation's schools, including the Columbine shootings. I teach in a high school of 3,500 children where this very thing can happen as well – on any day, at any time. Our children are emotionally uneducated and lack the tools necessary to live peacefully side-by-side in this crazy world they inherit from us. They lack a value system that once came from family and community and which gave a child a sense of boundaries and of belonging.

Reach for Peace, a club of high-school kids aged 14-18 interested in non-violence and bringing goodwill to campus, was born. A few other teachers and I were con-

cerned about the lack of kindness, compassion, and cherishing others that was being demonstrated on a daily basis on campus in all relationships – not just student-to-student. We agreed it was time to make some change.

We began by inviting some Tibetan monks to create a sand mandala for peace and non-violence. They came twice, accompanied by a full military honor guard, and created a Chenrezig and White Tara mandala on each occasion.

The kids were curious, entertained, puzzled, happy, blissful and calmed by the monks. They couldn't get enough of their company and asked all kinds of crazy questions. Every student had the experience of visiting with them for at least 10 minutes. The monks ate in the cafeteria with the kids. They had the opportunity to discuss universal values with students and teachers explaining how important these are for worldwide peace and harmony.

Chris, a student who has since graduated, said, "The monks coming to my school was a healthy and refreshing experience for me as it was at a very difficult time in my life when things were changing. They offered a sense of hope and peace for me and for others too. They were willing to open up and answer any questions that we had



for them. I admired their honesty and openness. In my life now, I am living with a sense of peace and patience with things that I wouldn't have had before."

community, and create awareness for the values set forth by the school board.

One of the guest speakers was a Holocaust survivor, a conflict mediator did a series of sessions with our kids, Ven. Robina Courtin spoke about Buddhist thinking and Ven. Chantal Carrerot spoke about meditation. These speakers have related stories of compassion, kindness and sacrifice that have given them the power to live through difficult times with calm minds.

I feel very excited to see the kids' high-level energy and the way they work with it. Working within the public school system [at the same high school for the last 22 years] I am amazed that I have been able to do all of this without too much opposition! The kids' work for others inspires me to become as compassionate and caring a human being as I can.

I am devoted to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and have recently attended a number of his teachings. I have taken Buddhist vows, which I try and abide by – especially not killing or harming any sentient beings, lying, cheating others, being very honest in my dealings. I try to be a role model for my students so they will see someone who tries to do what is right, even when it is very difficult to do. I become a more humble person each day. My practice becomes clearer, I become more ego-less, I seem in some way to be coming less "I" and more like I belong to a universal community as I work more and more with the students around me and with the members of my Buddhist community.

His Holiness spoke a few years ago at Florida International University as a guest of Professor Katz, and received an honorary degree that day from the university. As usual, His Holiness was greeted with a crowd of people. He had a message to educators. He said it was time to educate the hearts of our children and not just their precious minds. I think this is the most important gold thread

that has to sew the aching world together. What he said is my main inspiration for education for the future of the world and the health of our planet. ☸

Preparing the Peace Garden

Through the hard work of many students, teachers and parents a wonderful Peace Garden was planted and dedicated by the monks for a place for meditation, teaching and quiet reflection.

Reach for Peace eventually turned into the Human Relations Council, which carries out projects that relate to equality and fair treatment of all students and people on our campus, within our community and internationally. This year we will help a community in South Africa with its school – raising funds, sending school supplies and money. We will work with the elderly in our community and will be doing an on-going project with the homeless. We also continue with conflict mediation, rewards for kind behavior, encouragement for good character development, and so forth, have guest speakers in, and have assemblies about our values.

Last year I introduced a class called Character Education, an outreach class given for credit under the curriculum of Peer Counseling. It continues to be a class of very dedicated students who reach out through projects within the school and

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