

# RPECnews

The newsletter of the Richmond Peace Education Center

September-October 2009

## *Profiles in Peacemaking*

### **RPEC Peacemaker of the Year for 2009: ROSMY (Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth) by Jeremy Raw**

**A**t the youthful age of eighteen, ROSMY is emerging into its own adulthood. RPEC Board President Chris Clarke recently described ROSMY as “one of those groups that saves lives.” While that is a huge achievement itself, ROSMY has continued to enlarge the vision of what is possible for a small organization to accomplish in an extremely challenging environment.

ROSMY started as a small group of volunteers called together by Jon Klein in 1990 and the group has successfully overcome harassment and adversities. From a simple start of offering hope and support to a few young people at a time, ROSMY has developed into a strong organization whose new Institute for Equality aims to teach the entire social service system in Virginia how to respond appropriately to the difficult challenges faced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth.

ROSMY's successful on-going programs include youth support services and youth leadership development. ROSMY sponsors twice-weekly support groups in Richmond, and recently started a group meeting once a week in Charlottesville. A team of trained volunteers coordinated by Alison Mitchell, ROSMY's Youth Services Coordinator, operates a 24/7 hotline providing telephone support for youth in crisis. The Youth Engaged in Leadership (YEL) program develops young people's ability to act as leaders within



ROSMY, among their peers and in the larger community. This spring, YEL sponsored the Second Annual Alternative Prom, a safe and fun experience that is rarely available to sexual minority youth.

ROSMY recently bought its own building at 2311 Westwood Avenue in Richmond, which they are continuing to renovate. The new space radiates comfort and welcome, a perfect environment for youth to discover themselves, find support, and learn the skills they need to succeed in life without losing themselves. The Steve Midgett Memorial Library, a public lending library open weekdays from 9 to 5, features a rich and well-organized collection of works exploring many aspects of sexual orientation and gender identity.

But ROSMY's solid organizational presence stands in stark contrast to the challenges that sexual

minority youth still face in Richmond. The situation of LGBTQ youth is one of the most difficult imaginable, subject to violence and abuse, yet lost in silence and invisibility. “Sexual orientation and gender identity is one area that we just can't seem to advance around [as a society],” said John Dougherty, ROSMY's Executive Director. “It has a lot to do with the lack of language, because people don't talk about it, and are not given the tools to talk about what it is to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.”

Based on surveys in other states, it was recently estimated that there are 65,000 sexual minority youth in Virginia. Nobody knows how many LGBTQ youth there are in Richmond or in Virginia, and certain state leaders apparently don't want to find out. The Virginia Department of Education will be administering the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (NYRBS) this year, but the General Assembly demanded that all questions related to sexual practices and sexual orientation be stricken from

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## Reflections

Adria Scharf

Director, Richmond Peace Education Center

The Richmond Peace Education Center is a partner organization to RePHRAME (Residents of Public Housing in Richmond Against Mass Eviction), an alliance of public housing residents and community groups working for better low-income housing options in Richmond. On September 15, RePHRAME held a public forum called "One City: One Community," which focused on the planned demolition of Gilpin Court. Below is a portion of my comments that evening. I was asked to talk about why RPEC supports this effort.

We are proud to stand with RePHRAME as a partner in the struggle for housing justice. At the Richmond Peace Education Center, we work to provide peaceful alternatives to violence. All forms of violence cause injury or harm, by definition.

When we think of Richmond's problems with violence, many of us think first of gun violence. And that is a problem that deserves our attention.

But there is another sort of violence, one that does not capture the headlines, and that we as a society have trouble acknowledging, but which if we do want to build a more peaceful and united city, requires our serious attention.

That is the chronic institutional violence of severe economic and housing insecurity that a large segment of our community experiences every day. That violence is compounded for many families in public housing. It does violence to a community to impose decisions upon it without giving the community a say in its own future. And it can be a form of violence to displace economically vulnerable families from their homes.

Our city is one community, just as the name of tonight's forum suggests. We are all part of that community. Our lives, our futures, are all intertwined. But we will not achieve peace as a community so long as any significant portion of our community is collectively devalued, blocked from economic opportunity, or threatened with displacement. Social justice is the foundation of peace.

Our city has a history of displacing low-income African-American communities in the name of "development." We continue to live with the legacies, and the trauma, of previous planning decisions that did just that. Given this history, we as a city have an obligation to learn from our past and to make sure that we do things differently this time. We need to be very proactive in forging a different approach. We need to have a much more inclusive conversation about how we move forward with development this time around, and with development of the Gilpin Court area in particular.

As the city moves forward with plans for downtown revitalization, it must do so in a way that respects the rights of public housing residents and ensures that they have an affordable secure home and a voice in the process.

We can come together to build a more peaceful, more inclusive metro-region, and we must work proactively to address violence in all of its forms.



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the survey. “We know 40% of run-away youth identify as LBGT,” said Dougherty, “and yet when it comes to social service emergency calls or homeless shelters, our institutions in the state of Virginia are not asking whether that's why they ran away.”

But the pretense that sexual minority youth do not exist, and that their problems are not significant, exacerbates the problems those youth experience, including domestic and sexual violence, homelessness, and suicide. And the damage bred from willful ignorance lands on ROSMY's doorstep again and again, often quite literally. “There's only so much we can do,” Dougherty said, “if, for example, a person calls and says I'm being discharged from the hospital, I'm HIV-positive, and my parents kicked me out. And the hospital's discharge plan is ROSMY – we can't provide medical services and counseling, but on more than one occasion they have provided cab fare and the kid is dropped off here.”

Despite generous donations from individuals and even some major Richmond corporations, including Capital One and Bank of America, there is a limit to the support that ROSMY can provide directly. And service providers who should be offering services often have little idea how to support LBGTQ youth. Dougherty remarked that he was surprised by “the number of trained professionals who have worked for years with kids going through different struggles, but when their client says that they're gay, they call us and ask what they should do next.”

Concerns such as these led ROSMY to found the Institute for

Equality to teach social service providers and agencies the language and the tools they need to be true helpers for sexual minority youth, rather than helplessly standing by. The Institute offers nationally accredited training, and is emerging as a model for how to build communication competence within mainstream social services. Grant funding is allowing the Institute to offer its one-day training program free through December in the Hopewell area. For a small fee, the training is also offered in Richmond, and group training programs can be scheduled by contacting Sarah Koski at ROSMY.

Despite being barely a year old, the Institute has already been effective, and is now working with the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work and the National Institutes of Health to identify the characteristics of effective training programs around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Institute has helped ROSMY initiate discussions with several state agencies, including the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Secretary of Public Safety, the Department of Criminal Justice Services, and the Department of Education

But ROSMY's success goes beyond the creation of effective programs. “What is remarkable about this organization,” Dougherty said, “is that so much is done by volunteers, and driven by the passion of people who want to see a community that is accepting, that is supportive, that is positive for all youth. We have volunteers that are straight, gay, parents of gay youth, parents who have come out themselves, just this whole spectrum of people.”

Yet Dougherty himself deserves much credit for ROSMY's

flourishing, not just because of his own professional experience as a child and family counselor, or his insight into the special challenges of sexual minority youth, but also because of his leadership. Dougherty joined ROSMY in April 2006 and he “pulled ROSMY back together” said Chris Clarke. Kaaron Austin, ROSMY's office manager, worked at another agency that hired Dougherty. “I told [that agency] that if they wouldn't hire him, I'd adopt him!” Austin said with a smile. Even though ROSMY had almost no money when Dougherty started, Austin didn't hesitate to follow him.

Ashley Mitchell described her work as a dream job. Mitchell started as ROSMY's first intern, working for nothing, and graduated into her current position as Youth Services Coordinator earlier this year. “If only there had been such an organization when I was growing up!”, she said. She has found it tremendously rewarding “to sit with a young person, one-on-one, and for that person to feel safe enough to tell things that they have never told anyone.”

Whether it is one-on-one, or an entire agency at a time, Dougherty said, “it really is as simple as starting a conversation, and having the right skills and language to talk about it, to change how our society responds.”

The Richmond Peace Education Center will honor ROSMY with the Peacemaker of the Year award for 2009 at RPEC's annual dinner and auction that will take place November 7, 2009. Join us as we celebrate ROSMY's powerful presence in the Richmond community, their success in challenging an insidious silence, and their remarkable example of how strong the voice for peace and justice can grow to be.

# Happenings

## Recent Programs

### **Conflict Resolution Training Team News**

The RPEC Conflict Resolution Training Team has had a busy summer and early fall! We've presented two-day workshops for educators and for teens, half day workshops for almost 600 Richmond Public School employees, and several shorter workshops for young people.

On August 18 and 19 we held a workshop for more than 25 educators at the Berryman Center. This two-day session was led by Wendy Northup, Paul Fleisher and Ram Bhagat. Participants included educators from Richmond, Chesterfield and Henrico schools, Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Precious Blessings Academy, St. Edwards-Epiphany School and several day care and after-school care programs. Five of the participants have also decided to apprentice to become members of the RPEC training team.

In August, the center provided training to Richmond Public Schools Principals and Vice Principals, guidance counselors, new teachers, security specialists, and bus drivers.

On Saturday and Sunday, September 26-27, the Richmond Youth Peace Project offered its fourth annual training for about twenty new teen trainers. This two-day workshop, led by Santa Sorenson, Ram Bhagat and Paul

Fleisher, was also held at the Berryman Center. Three of our new young adult trainers—Caitlin Britton, Vreni Michelini and Jen Lewis also participated as apprentices. The workshop was supported by a generous grant from the Virginia Nonprofit Housing Coalition and was free of charge for participants. The young people who successfully completed this training will become members of the RYPP teen conflict resolution training team, and earned school community service credit as well.

Over the past two months, RPEC has also offered a number of shorter conflict resolution workshops at sites, including Asbury United Methodist Church, Volunteer Ministries Youth Community, and the Sacred Heart Center. Anyone interested in scheduling a conflict resolution workshop for their school, congregation or workplace should contact Santa Sorenson at [santaredhawk@aol.com](mailto:santaredhawk@aol.com) or call 232-1002.

### **Family Peace Festival**

On September 13th, RPEC co-sponsored the Family Peace Festival. This festival is Richmond's own home-grown celebration of peace, tolerance, and cultural diversity. Organized by volunteers, it is intended to encourage mutual collaboration and appreciation among Richmond's diverse communities of faith. This year's festival featured performances from the Latin Ballet of Virginia; Ezibu Muntu; and Rasul Elder who per-

formed Spoken Word and Hip Hop, as well as Falun Gong, a Chinese dance. There were interactive children's crafts and games, a "Chalk For Peace" art activity coordinated by Art 180, and a variety of ethnic foods. The festival also included many exhibitors and vendors from the greater Richmond area. It was held at St. Joseph's Villa.

## Upcoming Events

### **Jerusalem Women Speak**

Jerusalem Women Speak: Three Women, Three Faiths, One Shared Vision, will be held at the University of Richmond's Jepson Hall, room 118, on Thursday, October 8, beginning at 7 p.m.. Three women, Christian, Jew, and Muslim, from Israel and Palestine, will share their experiences and their hope for a better future in their native land. The speakers include:

- Ruth El-Raz, a board member of Bat Shalom, a joint Israeli/Palestinian women's peace organization, who is an active member of Checkpoint Watch;



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# Happenings

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- Jala Basil Andoni, of the Wi'am Center for Reconciliation and the Arab Educational Institute (AEI) in Bethlehem;



- Hekmat Besisso-Naji, a community trainer originally from Gaza.



The program is co-sponsored by the Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond, the Richmond Peace Education Center, and the Bon Air Faith Club. It is part of the Partners for Peace speaking tour. The talk is free and open to the public. Donations to support the tour are welcomed. *Arrive early, as seating is limited.*

## Restorative Justice Conference

On November 10, an important day-long conference on "Restorative Justice" will take place at the Virginia Holocaust Museum from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The Richmond Peace Education Center is a co-sponsor the event, which is being organized by the Restorative Justice Association of Virginia with support from a coalition of organizations. Several decades of "get tough on crime" policies have left the U.S. correctional system in a state of crisis. Over 2.3 million people are locked up in the United States on any given day. It's time for an alternative, restorative, approach. RPEC members may register for the discount price of \$30. To learn more, see [www.rjav.org](http://www.rjav.org).

## How to Support RPEC

### Drum Slam

On Saturday, October, 24, come to the Drum Slam for Peace. This percussion party will benefit the Richmond Youth Peace Project for teenagers. The slam will take place from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. at The Camel, 1621 W. Broad Street in Richmond. It will feature Drums No Guns and other World Percussion Ensembles. The suggested donation is \$15. Preceding the drum slam, Drums No Guns will provide free drumming lessons to youth between 4:30 and 7:30 p.m. To register a young person for a lesson, contact 232-1002.

## Annual Auction Event

The annual auction event is the major fundraising event for RPEC each year. This year we will hold the auction event on Saturday, November 7, beginning at 6 p.m.. We will celebrate ROSMY as Peacemaker of the year (see lead article). Once again we will enjoy the delightful facilities and magnificent nighttime views of the Troutman-Sanders building. And once again we will savor the food provided by Karen Murphy as well as her auctioneer skills. Musical entertainment will be provided by Ian McVoy (harp) and Daniel Gonet (flute).

In recent years the auction has contributed over \$10,000 to support RPEC's programs. You can help in several ways: first, attend the event and take home great values; second, contribute your skilled service for others to bid on; and third, volunteer to help with the auction. Call Johnnie at the office (232-1002) to sign up, contribute or volunteer.

### Campaign Time

Work for the government or the schools? Know someone who does? Support peace with every paycheck! RPEC's campaign codes are:

- Local Government & Schools: #140
- Combined Federal Campaign: #24756
- Commonwealth of Virginia Campaign: #3751
- United Way: #3181.

Please write both the code and "Richmond Peace Education Center."

# Life in Prison

Al Simmons

**W**hen my wife, Marcia, her daughter, Anne, and I were taking the two hour drive to Butner Federal Prison so I could report for a two month sentence for protesting at the School of the Americas, there was a lot of blue sky conversation. We talked of family, friends and the kids, the music we liked, the ailments we had and the food we ate too much of, but beneath the blue sky talk and the conversational pudding, my mind was tracking a darker sky. How would I, a sixty something white guy do on the inside? How would I deal with sullen, indifferent guards or young, angry inmates, and, more importantly, how would they deal with me? Would I be broken in some unimagined way from which I might not mend? These were some of the unformed questions buried in the shadows that fear and anxiety kept me from looking at head on.

I expected loneliness, bad food and deprivation as the price I would pay for my non-violent civil disobedience, and, if going to prison helped diminish in a small way the level of violence against our sisters and brothers in Latin America, then the prison time would be worth it. None the less, as we approached the barbed wire entrance to the prison after a nervous lunch at Taco Bell, my mind was a jumble and a little voice inside said, "Al, what have you gotten yourself into?" Marcia, Anne and I hugged goodbye in the entry way. Calm but worried, I turned toward the long corridor to the inside and they turned toward the outside sunshine. Suddenly this abstract became concrete.

Processing in for the next hour and a half was smooth and quick; inventory of the clothing I was wearing, contraband search, issue of temporary clothing and forms asking about my health and state of mind. Then came a bump in the road. Since I was a misdemeanor, not a felon, I had no pre-sentencing investigation. My counselor said, "Until we figure out where you go, we will put you in the SHU (special housing unit) also known as "the hole." I was manacled, strip-searched again and put in a cell with a very disturbed man in a wheelchair who talked incessantly.



Federal Correctional Institution  
(FCI) - Medium

The next twenty-four hours were filled with screaming from adjacent cells, incoherent ramblings and little sleep due to a guard who came by, hourly, to shine a light in my eyes to make sure I was O.K. I was very relieved to be assigned to my permanent dorm the next day. I found out later that there was no actual reason I was sent to the SHU other than my counselor giving me an early lesson in the arbitrary use of power.

I was assigned to VANCE B dorm; one hundred and fifty men in 2 to 3 person cubicles. Our cubes were open, but the dorms were locked. This low security section of Butner Prison had eight identical sections holding 1200 men. There were also two medium sections and a large hospital. All told, about 4000 inmates are at Butner.

My immediate relief was that, while there was a lot of yelling,

cussing and posturing, violence was very rare. Noise and constant loud speaker interruptions were ever present. There was supposed to be a consistent body of regulations that ran our lives, but rules changed as often as the guards or their moods. The place had a very ad hoc feel to it.

My typical day went something like this: 6 a.m. - lights on; 6:30 a.m. - chow; 7 a.m. - locked in dorm; 10 a.m. - work in mess hall (locked in); 6:30 p.m. - dinner, shower, exercise, write letters, watch TV, talk, etc; 10 p.m. - lights out. Next day, do it all again. The days had a sameness to them with a little more freedom of movement on weekends.

There are scores of details that made up the day, but time and space lead me to forgo the minutia and speak of a few broad impressions.

First, a disclaimer: I served only two months at a low security prison. My experience is neither as deep nor as varied as the many inmates whose long years put them in a variety of prison settings. That said, some of the relationship patterns seem entrenched and wide spread.

The lack of trust and respect between the inmates and the staff was palpable. Some tension between the guards and the guarded is inevitable, but the level was extraordinary. Among the many reasons for this, a couple stick in my mind: One, the

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## Life in Prison

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rules and how they are enforced varies from guard to guard, shift to shift and mood to mood. This lack of certainty made inmates feel governed by the whim of whoever was on duty. Second, staff would often mislead or lie to inmates. One personal example: I was a good inmate with decent people skills and a commitment to civility and decency. Yet, these values did not keep my counselor from lying to me about a visitor. He told me on a Friday to come see him on Monday to approve a visit. He neglected to tell me that he was off for the next two weeks, thus unable to approve a visitor. This kind of misinformation is common. I found myself, in my short stay, losing trust in many staff and feeling that they often regarded the inmates as impediments to their day. Because the guards had all the power and the prisoners so little, there was a lot of resentment.

Another strong impression was the racial wariness and mistrust. African Americans are sentenced to prison far more often and for longer terms than white inmates. Consequently, prison society is dominated by African Americans. It is sadly ironic that prison is one of the few cultures in which they have more social power. A couple of ways I noticed this was that white inmates, talking about African American inmates, spoke furtively and under their breath. African Americans spoke freely and openly about their disdain for whites and the white power structure. Another example of the racial divide was the social order in the main TV room. There were four TVs and about 80 chairs; all the TVs and chairs were controlled

by African Americans. On more than one occasion, I was sitting in a chair and told to give it up. A kind of reverse to the way the south operated until about 1965. The whites and Latinos resented this system, and African Americans resented the fact that they were far more likely to be in jail and, to a certain extent, held all whites responsible.

These factors created a culture where African Americans were in some ways more comfortable with prison life than whites. What I gleaned from this was a sense that the racial inequities outside the prison walls are magnified and distorted on the inside. Our prisons will never be color blind until our broader culture embraces equality.

I considered my short time inside a privilege and an opportunity. I had the privilege of giving up privilege and living at the bottom of the barrel. I had a chance to experience people and situations different from my safe, normal world. I don't delude myself that my time inside was nearly as dangerous or demeaning as the lives of poor people around the world or in our country, but I did feel more in touch with the poor and powerless than ever before. I came out believing that many inmates are not a threat to us and should be freed.

Our prison system feels irrationally punitive and needs to change. The years of wasted lives on the inside when many of these men have so much to offer is, in itself, a crime. I'm not so naïve that I don't recognize that many of the inmates I met were dangerous, scarred people who need to be separated from the public. I'm certainly glad they're not my neighbors. Yet, is our prison system, so tainted with vengeance, racism and mistrust, creating better

or worse citizens? Is our reliance on sending more and more people to prison for longer and longer sentences moving us toward a more perfect union? I think of the many inmates, black and white, gay and straight, young and old with so much to offer and so many years to serve before they walk in the sunshine of freedom.

My small prison journey left me troubled. We have two million, four hundred thousand people locked up. There must be a better way. If we can encourage young people to have fewer babies, but can support them when they have babies, fewer people will end up in prison. If we graduate more students from high school, fewer of them will go to prison. If we support and strengthen families before they go off the tracks, fewer people will go to prison. If we offer good drug treatment to everyone, not just the well-insured, fewer people will go to prison.

I fear for my country if we can't stem and reverse the rising tide of imprisonment. Will we reach that nightmare when we are all either prisoners or guards? With what are we left if we secure our safety but lose our humanity?

## **GO GREEN!**

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# Richmond Peace Education Center

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## CALENDAR

### ONGOING

- Every Sunday**      **Food Not Bombs Richmond-Meal Sharing**, 4:00 p.m. in Monroe Park. contact 359-4880 for details.
- Every 3rd Wed.**      **Amnesty International**, University of Richmond campus. Contact Ray Hilliard at 289-8289.
- Every Thursday**      **Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth (ROSMY)**, 7:00-9:00 p.m.. Call support line 353-2077 for more information; 353-1699 for the administrative line.
- Every 3rd Saturday**      **Equality Virginia**, 12:00 noon at the office. A political advocacy group working towards equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens of Virginia. Open to the public. Contact number is 643-4816.
- Every 4th Saturday**      **Pax Christi Peace Community** - Call Paula Powdermaker for details - 355-7395.
- Every 2nd Saturday**      **Walk for Peace** - 9:00 a.m.- 10:00 a.m.. Meet at the Boulevard entrance of the Virginia Museum. Wear black.

### COMING UP

- October 8**      **Jerusalem Women Speak**. See page 4 for details.
- October 24**      **Drum Slam for Peace**. See p. 5 for details.
- October 25**      **Bon Air Presbyterian Church**, 9201 West Huguenot Road will be showing the film, "**Soldiers of Conscience**," from 5:00 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.. Eight U.S. soldiers today, some who killed and some who said no, reveal their inner moral dilemmas. The general public is invited.
- October 28**      **Rethink Afghanistan**. Film screening followed by discussion. 7:00 p.m., VCU Commons Forum Room
- November 7**      **RPEC ANNUAL AUCTION**. See page 5 for details.