

A Brief History of the Richmond Peace Center

A Peace Center is Formed in Richmond

In the spring of 1979, members of St. Paul's Episcopal Church invited Rev. William Sloan Coffin to bring his passion for peace to the Richmond community. It was a time when the Viet Nam war was very much a part of peoples experience - a time when the nuclear arms race was a major issue. Coffin inspired those who heard him to explore how to bring the concern for peace to a wider audience. The result was "The Richmond Conference on the Arms Race". Speakers at this conference included Randy Forsberg, who later drafted the Nuclear Freeze Resolution, Perren Mitchell, U.S. Congressperson from Maryland, and Senator Les Aspin. About 150 participants attended the day-long event at the Mosque (now the Landmark Theater) in the fall of '79.

Afterwards, the group who had been meeting regularly to plan the Conference continued to meet at Union Theological Seminary (UTS), trying to figure out how best to widen the community's awareness of need to find more peaceful approaches to conflict. The group included representatives from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education (PSCE), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Richmond Friends Meeting, the Peace and Justice Committee of the Catholic Diocese, First Unitarian Church, Episcopal, Presbyterian and Mennonite churches, and concerned individuals. It was clear that the effort would be more effective if an organization could be formed with some staff to focus the energy of the community. It was also clear that the person to lead the effort was a young seminary student at UTS who had just finished his studies.

So Steve Hodges agreed to take on the organizing task. Building on the group who had put together the arms race conference, Steve took the idea of a Peace Center to the Richmond community, and especially the churches in the community. By May of 1980 the first issue of the newsletter was published, and in June enough support of time and money had been committed to inaugurate the organization.

Finding a name was no trivial matter. Steve had been counseling young men faced with President Carter's revival of the draft, so one version was "Richmond Peace Education and Draft Information Center." Another was "The Center for Education on International Security and Peace." But the name that was finally chosen was "The Richmond Peace Education Center" (RPEC), and that has always been the legal name of the organization.

Office space was provided by Pace United Methodist Church and Steve, was the staff person. The first Annual Meeting was held that October, and the officers of

the first Board of Directors were elected to be: Katherine Smith, Chairperson, Ineke Emerson, Secretary, and Peter Hobbie, Treasurer.

The Early Years (1981-83)

Certainly the focus of RPEC in its early years was the nuclear arms race. Steve and other RPEC volunteers were invited to speak at universities, schools and churches on the issue. An "Encounter With Peace" weekend retreat/workshop was created which introduced the moral aspects of nuclear weapons to participants. In 1981 the Richmond Nuclear Freeze Campaign was organized and the Virginia Interfaith Peace Coalition (VIPC) was formed. RPEC was a key in the formation of both groups. In 1982 public demonstrations opposing the arms race were becoming regular events, in Richmond, Tidewater and New York City. Richmonders filled three buses for the June '82 peace rally in New York, joining 750,000 others in the largest peace demonstration ever. Dan Berrigan came to Richmond in the fall to further challenge all of us.

Of course there were other issues including Central America, war tax resistance and the beginnings of the nonviolent conflict resolution programs. In 1983, RPEC participated for the first time in Martin Luther King Community Learning week. RPEC offered its first major program, which featured Major Kermit Johnson. The following year Steve began offering courses on nonviolence, which evolved into a group called SPAN (Spirit, Politics, Alternatives, and Nonviolence).

In 1981, at the invitation of Bishop Walter Sullivan and the Catholic Diocese, RPEC moved to its present offices on the third floor of 14 N. Laurel. Since that time we have enjoyed rent-free space, a major contribution to our financial stability. In 1982, Jan Sisson joined Steve as a part-time paid staff person; Henry Solanky came from India, with support from a local couple, to work at RPEC; and Phil Bauman decided that RPEC was the right place for him, and he raised his own salary to prove it. RPEC's logo is one of Phil's contributions.

The Mid-Eighties (1984-88)

The issues of the mid-eighties continued to include the nuclear arms race, and speakers in the area included Helen Caldicott, founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility. Paul Fleisher wrote a musical drama, "Bombs Away", to help children and adults talking about the realities of the nuclear threat; and a group traveled to NYC once more for a rally for peace on the occasion of the 1988 Special Session on Disarmament.

But other issues shared the spotlight at RPEC, and especially the campaign to oppose U.S. intervention in Central America. Steve, Wendy Northup and Chris

Campanile traveled to Nicaragua with Witness for Peace in 1984, and Jack Payden-Travers went the following year. Jack helped to form local Witness for Peace and Pledge of Resistance groups which organized frequent demonstrations, including civil disobedience in Senator Tribble's office in 1985 and 1986 which led to the arrest of 20 protesters. Suzanne Kelly and Jim Schillinger led work brigades to Nicaragua to help build housing and harvest the coffee crop. Larry Pagnoni traveled to Cuba and returned with a different picture of that society. In 1984, the first VCAN (Virginia Central America Network) conference was held in Roanoke, and that conference was held annually through the early '90s.

In 1987 RPEC organized a weekend conference "Reweaving the Web of Life", which featured Richard Falk and Brian Swimme and brought new awareness to many members of the critical importance of ecology issues. As a result, one study group was formed that met regularly for over ten years.

RPEC participated in the formation of the local Rainbow Coalition in 1986 and joined in the protests of companies doing business with South Africa. And in the fall of 1987, Valerie Batts conducted RPEC's first workshop on racism. RPEC also joined the small group of people opposing the use of the death penalty as a way to deal with the violence of our society. And 1988 saw the beginning of the Conflict Resolution Project, led by then volunteer, Candace Powlick. In August of that year dozens of Richmonders went to the Pentagon for the Ribbon Project. We joined people from around the world remembering on ribbon segments the things we would miss most in a nuclear war and circling the Pentagon and much more with a plea for nuclear disarmament.

In 1986, Steve decided to become a candidate for U.S. House of Representatives from the Third District. The low-budget campaign did not bring victory, but it did produce some fascinating public debates and certainly raised awareness of some of the issues that are not often dealt with. In 1989 Bob Holsworth, former RPEC Board Chair, saw publication of his book "Let Your Life Speak", a work on politics, religion and antinuclear weapons activism based in part on the early days of RPEC.

The mid-eighties also saw the beginning of an annual RPEC Bazaar, which was part fund-raiser and part community-builder. Various peace and justice groups from the area took responsibility for one "booth", so it brought lots of activists together in a common cause. And in 1986, the Annual Dinner meeting was augmented by a benefit auction for the first time. Jack Payden-Travers and Rob Conrad were the first auctioneers. In 1985, Board member, David Bailey, gave a wonderful rendition of Mark Twain as a benefit for RPEC.

Toward the end of 1984, Steve decided that he wanted to devote more of his energy to educating and motivating peace people for nonviolent direct action. The Board agreed to hire a new Coordinator while keeping Steve on staff -

actually, two Co-Coordinator, Wendy Northup and Elaine Shurie (who split Steve's part-time hours and part-time salary). Elaine became the "office" person and Wendy the "public" face of RPEC. In 1987, Elaine left to join the YWCA and Wendy continued as Coordinator until 1990. Sharon Ackinclose took on the task of Office Manager in 1987, replacing Jan Sisson. 1987 also brought "Woody" Smallwood to RPEC as the first staff person with the specific responsibility of developing bridges with the African-American community. A year later, Duane Hudson (now Salim Khalfani) took responsibility for this effort.

Conflict Resolution and the Gulf War (1989-94)

1989 was the year of "programs!" Key topics included the Middle East, from both Arab and Israeli perspectives; Northern Ireland and the Corrymela community; South Africa: the nuclear arms race (as William Sloan Coffin returned to Richmond after 10 years); Parenting for Peace and Justice; peace issues related to the environment; programs on Undoing Racism and self-esteem for African-American youth; and the Creative Conflict Resolution teams conducted 58 workshops for groups as diverse as the Richmond Police Department, inmates at Goochland Women's Prison, and numerous churches and schools.

Students at two schools were trained as conflict managers, and 20 people were trained for the Alternatives to Violence (AVP) program developed for prison inmates. Wendy and her son Adam journeyed to the Soviet Union as part of the first US/USSR family camp, designed to break down stereotypes from both societies. The following year the group from the USSR came to the U.S. and spent some time in the Richmond area so that RPEC folks had a chance to interact with them.

Then in August of 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and subsequent developments in the area raised the specter of war in the Middle East. Members of RPEC called for patience as UN troops deployed on the Iraq-Saudi Arabia border, asking that sanctions be given more time. But war and the bombing came. RPEC organized daily protests at the Federal Building while the bombing and invasion continued.

In 1992, the Christian Peacemaker Teams National Conference was held in Richmond, and RPEC cosponsored the event. Many participants were trained in "The Listening Project", and that was later used as a technique to explore the death penalty with State Legislators. The efforts to take AVP to the prisons and the Conflict Resolution programs to the schools were expanded as more people became qualified trainers.

The Annual Dinner and Auction continued to be a good source of financial support, as well as a great way to gather our active members. Another fund raising/community building event was initiated in 1991 when John McCutcheon

agreed to come to Richmond to share his musical talent and songs with a message. That tradition continued for seven years.

Staff changes continued. In 1991, after two years as Program Director, Candace Powlick replaced Wendy as Director staying until 1993. Sarah Foster was Director for one year in 1993-4, but left to work on a curriculum to help ministers in war-torn Central Africa cope with the genocide that surrounded them. Later she went to Africa to train ministers in teaching the techniques. Adelaide Folensbee, then Board Chair, accepted the task of interim-Director and kept the ship afloat until Chris Klug was selected in mid-1995.

Chris and Paula Powdermaker alternated as Office Manager from 1989 through 1993 and then Lee Pfahler, a Mennonite Volunteer took that responsibility for two years, when Jane Hare, who is also a Mennonite Volunteer, joined RPEC in that capacity. In 1993, Ruth Anne Young became RPEC's first Development Director, with primary responsibility for fundraising.

The Late 90's (1995-99)

When Chris Klug became Director in 1995, he brought an understanding of nonviolent conflict resolution that implied a long term commitment to the process. While one could introduce the concepts in one or two hours, longer programs were required to begin to make a difference. During 1996-97, a number of extended programs were conducted in Richmond area institutions. These included: the Turning Point Academy, where youth with discipline problems are assigned; the PARK school for pregnant teens in the Richmond School system, staff of the Daily Planet, Fort Lee summer program for teens; RUPES summer program for violence prevention with Richmond City youth; Dinwiddie County Schools; JEB Stuart Elementary School. There was even an extended program conducted by Chris for Norton Elementary School in southwest Virginia. In addition, 60 persons received "Training for Trainers" during that time. In some cases the training was for teachers who could continue the process in their own schools. In others, persons were trained to lead the AVP workshops in prisons. The AVP program is one that has been strong since it was introduced in the late eighties. This is due in large part to the AVP committee of Ruth Dahlke, Marilyn Robertson and Don Ayers who organize the programs in several area prisons (James River for men and Goochland and Pocahontas for women). Between 1996 and 1998, fifteen programs were conducted in the prisons for nearly 200 inmate participants.

Another new program during this time is the Inter cultural Education and Training in Nonviolence, in which participants spend 3 to 6 weeks in India or with the Lakota Nation in western South Dakota. As the State of Virginia accelerated the use of the death penalty, RPEC members joined others to protest this violence in our churches and on the streets.

In 1996, the Board of Directors chose race relations and racial learning as a primary focus, with the goal of looking at itself for signs of racism and developing programs that address racism. The Virginia Organizing Project (VOP) held several Dismantling Racism workshops for Board members, and several of those members were trained to conduct the workshop. During 1998, RPEC became an "affiliate member" of VOP. However, while the Board experienced this process as empowering, some RPEC members did not appreciate the emphasis that was put on anti-racism work. During that year, several issues of the Newsletter dealt extensively with racism and its effects, plus a spirited exchange of letters voicing different ideas about how best to deal with the issue.

Programs with an international focus included:

- Programs on the School of the Americas, presented by Jeff Winder. RPEC members also participated in the demonstrations at Ft. Benning, GA, in 1997 and 1998.
- A 1999 series sponsored primarily by the University of Richmond with significant RPEC input, "Transitions to Democracy", which featured Gayle Kaylor speaking on South Africa, Oscar Arias Sanchez on Central America and Jose Ramos Horta on the Asia Pacific Rim and East Timor.
- Peace Essay contests in 1998 and 1999, made possible by two generous grants from a member, that elicited over 250 entries each year from school children from many communities in Virginia.

In 1999, when NATO began its bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, RPEC members again stood witness against the violence, and the Board endorsed a Fellowship of Reconciliation statement opposing the bombing.

The end of the nineties also saw an inevitable shift toward the use of technology. In 1996, Paul Fleisher developed a web page for RPEC which provides a local calendar of events, and information about RPEC and the issues of concern to our members. This past year an "action alert" system has been set up for our members with E-mail access.

The Annual Dinner and Auction continued to be the major fund raising event. In 1998 we decided to invite diverse groups of local artists to perform at the Spring Concert, and the a cappella vocal group Vivace sang that year, while the African Dance troupe Ezibu Muntu performed in 1999. In the mid-nineties, the Board initiated an annual Garden Party where members could gather for good food and music while supporting the Peace Center.

Staff changes were frequent during this period. Chris left after two years to return to the Midwest. In 1997 Aqueelah As-Salaam was selected as the new Director, but in the summer of 1998, Aqueelah left to become Director of the Institute of Southern Studies, in Durham, NC. Lee Smith was chosen as Interim

Director, and he served for six months. In the spring of 1999, Ken Willis was chosen as RPEC's seventh Director. Ruth Anne Young served as Development Director for one year. She was succeeded by Dothula Butler (2 years) and then by Dorothy Jefferson (1 year). Joy Kraybill and Melody Steinman each served for a year as Mennonite Volunteers, working on the Newsletter and helping to coordinate the volunteer effort. While the turnover in Directors made sustaining the programs difficult, the commitment of Jane Hare as office manager (and Marcelline Niemann as part time secretary) during this entire period kept the organization on even keel. Of equal importance has been the commitment of many volunteers throughout the life of RPEC.

9/11, Gulf War-II and RYPP (2000 - 2006)

Ken Willis continued the focus on undoing racism, initiating a series of inter-racial dialogs. When the attack on the World Trade Center captured the attention of the nation, racism took on a new meaning, and RPEC programs adapted to the new situation. RPEC joined with the ACLU and others to present a major program on The USA Patriot Act. Subsequently a resolution opposing the act was taken to Richmond City Council where it was approved. When the U.S. chose to respond to 9/11 with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, RPEC members were actively involved in organizing prayer vigils and protest actions. These efforts have continued through the 4+ years of the war in Iraq. Much of the focus of the Newsletter during these years has been on alternatives to war. In 2006 two well-attended programs examined "Iraq: Untold Stories" and the use of torture in the "War on Terror."

Conflict resolution training for schools and community groups continued throughout this period. One important initiative was the formation of the Richmond Youth Peace Project, largely through the efforts of Board member Ram Bhagat. This project included organization of the Richmond Youth Peace Summits in 2005, 2006 and 2007, and the training of a number of area youth in conflict resolution skills with the expectation that they would be able to share their skills with their peers. Another major peace education initiative is the Family Peace Festival, a daylong interfaith event to remember the victims of 9/11 and to promote unity, healing and peace in our community. The 2006 event attracted nearly 1,000 participants.

During this time RPEC moved its offices from the Catholic Diocese to the Berryman Center in the Woodland Heights neighborhood of South Richmond. The RPEC website was significantly upgraded, and an extensive on-line Peace Curriculum was developed and posted on the website.

Our major fundraising events continued to include a Spring Concert and an Annual Auction Event. John McCutcheon returned in 2002 and in subsequent years. We upgraded our Annual Auction event in 2003, bringing in a

professional auctioneer and catering the food. We also began presenting an annual "Peacemaker of the Year" award as part of that event. The list of honorees now includes Bishop Walter Sullivan (2004), Congressman Bobby Scott (2005) and NAACP Executive Director Salim Khalfani (2006). Our primary funding sources, however, have continued to be our members and area churches.

In June, after over 5 years as Director, Ken decided to step down. Adria Scharf was selected as Director. Since Adria was in the process of completing her doctoral dissertation, she chose to begin her work at RPEC on a part-time basis. Long-time member and volunteer Paul Fleisher, agreed to step in as Assistant to the Director on a part-time basis. Johnnie Taylor continues as Office Manager.

John Gallini, 1/10/06