

Chicago's Peace Warriors

Winter 2011-2012



Illustration: Jordin Isip

By Kazu Haga

A group of students from Chicago's North Lawndale College Preparatory High were in the middle of a weeklong summer training to become Peace Warriors—peer nonviolence leaders. Suddenly, a sophomore named Alicia got a text message alerting her that one of her close friends was just involved in a shooting and was in critical condition at the hospital.

A conversation about the violence in Chicago followed. At one point in the discussion, Tiffany Childress, science teacher and civic engagement director at the school, told the students: "This level of violence is not normal. I've seen wealthy neighborhoods in Chicago where young people getting shot is not part of the daily reality. Even in this neighborhood, 50 years ago we did not have this level of violence."

The reactions came quickly.

"What!?"

"Really!?"

"How do you know that? You weren't around 50 years ago!"

The students were surprised, confused, resistant. The violence in their communities has become so normalized that they literally could not believe that this does not happen everywhere, that this is not how it has always been. It was a chilling reminder of the need to inspire hope, to give youth a vision of peace.

North Lawndale, a charter school located in gang territory on the west side of Chicago, is working hard to provide that vision. In 2009, Chicago witnessed 458 murders—more than the number of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Many of those killings involved teenagers. Yet, that same year, the rate of violence at the school dropped 70 percent.

Childress was at the heart of the change. "Several years ago there was a culture of violence that surrounded our school, and it was spiraling out of control," she began. "We needed to do something to get a hold of it."

That year, she had a conversation with a woman about Kingian Nonviolence at a birthday party. She was immediately interested and attended a presentation shortly thereafter. Kingian Nonviolence, she learned, is a training curriculum developed out of the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by two of his close allies, Bernard Lafayette Jr. and David Jehnsen. Used in schools, prisons, and communities around the world, it provides a framework to understand conflict and violence, and teaches communities a way to build peace.

King believed that nonviolence is not a passive, but a proactive force that can defeat violence and injustice. It is not about teaching people to turn the other cheek, but about teaching people how to confront the forces of violence and injustice in their lives and create a real, lasting peace. It is, as King put it, "the antidote to violence."

Childress saw right away how this curriculum could offer a new way to deal with conflict and violence in her school. "I was blown away by the material after the first day," she said.

With the support of school president John Horan, Childress facilitated a two-day workshop for the faculty as part of their professional development and organized a five-day training for a group of student leaders chosen by the teachers at the school. These were the first North Lawndale Peace Warriors, students who would lead their peers in creating a culture of peace in their school. "The kids are the most well equipped and knowledgeable source for figuring out how to make their schools peaceful," Childress said. "They know their peers, they know what would make good incentives, they know who's ready to jump off, so you have to make them an authority so they can have ownership of the process."

The summer Peace Warrior training, which is now an annual event, includes a study of the principles and steps of Kingian Nonviolence (see sidebars below), the history of the Civil Rights Movement, and role plays dealing with conflict.

For example, one role play last summer involved a scenario in the school cafeteria: two boys getting into a conflict over a girl. A couple is sitting together. When the boy gets up to go get a drink, another boy comes and takes his seat next to the girl. When the first boy comes back, an argument begins to escalate. Just at the point where the conflict begins to boil over, the trainers had the actors pause.

Senior Kingian Nonviolence trainer Jonathan Lewis asked the students: "What are some nonviolent responses that the students could have taken that would have resulted in a different outcome?"

The ideas came quickly. "What if the first boy pulls up another chair and introduces himself to the second boy?" one young man suggested. The students realized that if they took a minute, they could think of dozens of ways to handle situations that easily escalate.

Lewis said: "One of the most important tenets of Kingian Nonviolence is to suspend your first judgment. Maybe

**SUBSCRIBE
ONLINE & SAVE**

Current issue pdf just
\$4.95. [Subscribe](#)

[Print](#) [Share](#)

CONTENTS

[Vol. 26, No. 2](#)

Winter 2011-2012

SPECIAL ISSUE

[The School-to-Prison Pipeline](#)

[Editorial • Stop the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#)

[By the editors of Rethinking Schools](#)

[Schools and the New Jim Crow • An Interview with Michelle Alexander](#)

[By Jody Sokolower](#)

[Arresting Development • Zero Tolerance and the Criminalization of Children](#)

[By Annette Fuentes](#)

[The Classroom-to-Prison Pipeline](#)

[By Linda Christensen](#)

[Haniyah's Story](#)

[Teaching Haniyah](#)

[By Jody Sokolower](#)

[Chicago's Peace Warriors](#)

[By Kazu Haga](#)

[Teaching the Prison Industrial Complex](#)

[By Aparna Lakshmi](#)

FEATURES

[Candles in April](#)

[By Jamila Appleby](#)

[Plotting Inequalities, Building Resistance](#)

[By Adam Renner, Bridget Brew, and Crystal Proctor](#)

[Who's Crazy? Students Critique The Gods Must Be Crazy](#)

[By Chris Hawking, with Cresslyn Clay and Colin Pierce](#)

COLUMNS and DEPARTMENTS

SHORT STUFF

[International Movement for Public Education](#)
[Gay-Straight Alliances Show Long-Term Benefits](#)

[ACTION EDUCATION • Occupy Movement Spurs Education](#)

the second boy meant no harm, and maybe the two kids would end up being great friends. Yet, in our society, we are always taught to distrust people. Having students think through possible nonviolent responses to conflict makes them realize that they already understand how to de-escalate conflict. They just need to get creative and they need to practice.”

For Leticia, a 16-year-old trainee, a key learning was the first of the six steps of Kingian Nonviolence, information gathering: “Most times, we take action before we even realize what the problem is. Whether it’s a schoolwide thing or a problem between two kids, we need to gather information and understand what’s really behind the problem before we act.

“I hope to stand up. We have problems in our school like gang violence and cyber bullying. It’s time for people to take action. We often complain about things, but we never talk about the situation and come up with a plan. I want to be the person who stands up and takes action, because it’s time.”

Creating a Schoolwide Solution

The initial trainings provided a common framework for students and staff to understand the conflicts in their school, a common vision to build toward, and a common language. “Once we had that,” Horan said, “it was all about figuring out how to constantly reinforce this throughout our school. We have to teach the skills of building peace, just like we teach for the SATs.”

“We made a commitment to create peace in our school instead of just paying lip service to it,” Childress explained. “Schools set academic goals each year, and we wanted to set peacemaking goals. Who sets goals for peace? But we have to dare to dream big, and we have to set measurable goals. We set goals like having 90 percent of our school days earning an “A” in peace, that 100 percent of our faculty and 25 percent of our students will be introduced to this philosophy.”

Students and faculty drew up posters of the six principles and plastered them over the campus, embedding the language into their vocabulary. The Peace Warriors wrote and created PSAs that were played over the school PA system. Each year during freshmen orientation, Childress and the Peace Warriors introduce the philosophy and their school’s commitment to peace to the incoming class. Part of the funds allocated to substitute teachers has been diverted to an in-school suspension teacher who teaches the philosophy as part of the “Learning to Rise” program. The entire faculty is trained every other year, and a Peace Committee composed of Peace Warriors and faculty provides mini-lessons on different aspects of the philosophy to the entire student body every week during assembly.

From the beginning, the school tracked data associated with measuring peace. Not only how many fights they had but also what time of day it happened, what areas on campus, the ages of the offenders.

“We learned a ton from tracking that data,” Horan explained. “It helped us to figure out not only how successful we were, but also when, where, and how to deploy our staff.”

The school also began tracking “Days of Peace” with a large public calendar marking off each day and offering student incentives for consecutive days with no fights. The incentives, which included dress-down days, a DJ in the cafeteria, a peace dance, and a community peace march and barbecue, helped to change the culture of the school.

The Days of Peace campaign was an idea that grew out of joint meetings between the student Peace Warriors and faculty. “It was so important to have the youth’s voices present from the beginning,” said Childress. “We would have never come up with some of these incentives ourselves. The students and faculty are both responsible for creating the culture and community at our school, so the solutions to our problems have to be figured out collectively. The incentives made peace cool and desirable in the school. The students took ownership of their community and began keeping the peace themselves.”

Childress noted that the community peace march and barbecue were especially important, because the culture of peace they are creating needs to extend beyond the school. “The barbecue showed the larger public about the work we were putting in at our school, and allowed for more engagement from parents and the community at large. We started with the school, but we need to involve the community, to involve the parents if we are going to have sustained success.”

It hasn’t all been easy. As the school began to introduce Kingian Nonviolence, some community members saw it as nothing more than a band-aid solution to society’s larger problems. It’s one thing to teach students about the importance of investing in peace while on campus. But once they leave the school, they end up back in the violence of the larger society. The students have come to respect the school and its goals enough that there are few fights on campus. But plenty of violence happens just off campus, where the students interact with the larger community.

“Our school is located in gang territory,” explained Childress. “Ninety-eight percent of our students are on free or reduced lunch. Many of our students come from families with multiple generations of gang involvement. Too many of them have lost family and friends to the streets.”

Students living under crisis, perhaps receiving text messages during class that a family member or close friend has been shot, perhaps living in homes without proper heating or where they have not eaten a full meal in days, are often too damaged to hear the message about peace and nonviolence.

“At the end of the day, we are just a school,” added Childress. “That’s why we created my position of civic engagement director. We are organizing our students to meet with their aldermen, educating them about how power works. But after the geometry and the biology and the social studies, we’re lucky if we are able to do one civic project a month.”

Despite all the limitations, Dwayne, who is now a senior and has been a Peace Warrior for three years, believes the training brought about a personal transformation as a step in the schoolwide transformation: “I wasn’t always nonviolent, and I’d messed up in the past. It was a struggle for me at first, but I know that this is the only way we are going to make permanent change.”

Rasheed, who graduated last year, has hopes that the school program will have a broader effect. The Peace

[Activism](#)

[REVIEW • Of Thee / Sing: A Letter to My Daughters](#)
By Beverly Slapin

[GOOD STUFF • Ordinary Heroes](#)
By Waahida Tolbert-Mbatha

[RESOURCES](#)

Got an idea for an article? Got a letter to the editor? Contact Jody Sokolower, policy and production editor:
jody@rethinkingschools.org

Warriors, he said, “promote peace in our school and outside of the school, to form a better community, which we call the beloved community. We show people that Kingian Nonviolence is a way of life that can better our lives and society as a whole.”

The Six Principles of Kingian Nonviolence

Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people. It is a positive force confronting the forces of injustice and utilizes the righteous indignation and spiritual, emotional, and intellectual capabilities of people as the vital force for change and reconciliation.

- **The beloved community is the framework of the future.** The nonviolent concept is an overall effort to achieve a reconciled world by raising the level of relationships among people to a height where justice prevails and people attain their full human potential.
- **Attack forces of evil, not people doing evil.** The nonviolent approach helps one analyze the fundamental conditions, policies, and practices of the conflict rather than reacting to one’s opponents or their personalities.
- **Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause to achieve the goal.** Self-chosen suffering is redemptive and helps the movement grow in a spiritual as well as a humanitarian dimension. The moral authority of voluntary suffering for a goal communicates the concern to one’s own friends and community as well as to the opponent.
- **Avoid internal violence of the spirit as well as external physical violence.** The nonviolent attitude permeates all aspects of the campaign. It provides a mirror-type reflection of the reality of the condition to one’s opponent and the community at large. Specific activities must be designed to maintain a high level of spirit and morale during a nonviolent campaign.
- **The universe is on the side of justice.** Truth is universal and human society and each human being is oriented to the just sense of order of the universe. The fundamental values in all of the world’s great religions include the concept that the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice. For the nonviolent practitioner, nonviolence introduces a new moral context in which nonviolence is both the means and the ends.



Investing in Youth, Not Security Guards

It isn’t only students who need to change. For youth to have hope in the future, the adults need to have faith in them. Schools, and society in general, often set low expectations of our youth, especially those coming from low-income neighborhoods.

“Many teachers don’t believe that students can live differently. They think that having metal detectors and police officers in the hallways is normal and acceptable,” said Childress. “Having higher expectations of our youth and believing in them is the first step in reversing the school-to-prison pipeline.”

Horan agreed: “A lot of adults believe that kids aren’t capable of pulling this off. And that idea plays itself out racially and economically. It’s a justice issue. If we think that kids who go to nice suburban schools can live without metal detectors, why can’t our kids?”

“When you believe that kids *can* pull it off, you can turn off the metal detectors and security guards. Having eight security guards costs you around \$400,000, and security guards don’t teach peace. They teach kids to hate security guards. What if you could teach peace with the money you saved?”

North Lawndale did just that. With the savings made from not having metal detectors and security guards, the school created a new program called Phoenix Rising, which sends students to various summer leadership, wilderness, and academic programs around the country.

“The beloved community is possible,” Horan added. “It’s just a matter of adults believing in our kids and adjusting the resources accordingly. It will ultimately save the school money, and will teach kids skills that will serve them a lifetime. Treating them like prisoners only teaches them that we don’t believe in them, and that we expect them to screw up.

“Our inability to be peaceful in our school has larger social implications. Our failure to understand peace is a form of enslavement. We have to invest in peace.”

Restorative Justice

To truly invest in peace, the school realized it needed to develop restorative justice practices to deal with the conflicts that did arise. The nonviolence training taught them the negative impact that punitive forms of punishment—from suspensions to calling in law enforcement—can have on students and on the community.

Punishment can cause emotional harm. A punitive process that does not honor the voice of the “perpetrator” can lead that person to feel that an injustice was done to them. That pain can lead them to focus on anger toward the system handing down the punishment instead of taking ownership for their actions.

If North Lawndale was going to break the school-to-prison pipeline, they needed alternative strategies to deal with conflict. They needed to find strategies to hold perpetrators of violence truly accountable without further isolating, labeling, and criminalizing them—strategies to enable them to right the wrong and restore the broken relationship.

“We raised funds to have 35 or 40 youth trained as peer jurors for a restorative justice conferencing process,” explained Childress. “Now, when a fight breaks out, instead of being suspended for a day, they have to talk about what happened with a group of their peers. They then decide together what the consequences should be, and figure out an outcome that works for all parties.”

One peer jury conference resulted in the two “offending” youth agreeing to walk around the school with large

posters advocating peace. It was a form of punishment, but it was something all parties agreed to as an alternative to suspension. In the end, the two youth turned it into a positive experience, getting other youth to sign the posters and committing themselves further to peace.

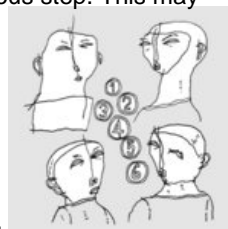
As Howard Zehr wrote in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, "Restorative justice is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible." It allows people to hold *themselves* accountable, while at the same time teaching them a set of values and principles for dealing with conflict in the future.

"At the end of the day, we have to have high expectations for our kids, have faith that they can resolve conflict in a humane way. We have standards for academics, how do we not have them for humanity?" asked Childress.

The Six Steps of Kingian Nonviolence

The six steps are not static. At any point in the process, one can return to a previous step. This may happen repeatedly until you are able to achieve reconciliation.

- **Step 1: Information** gathering is determining the facts, the options for change, and the timing of pressure for raising the issue. It is a collective process.
- **Step 2: Education** is the process of developing articulate leaders who are knowledgeable about the issues. It is directed toward the community through all forms of media about the real issues and human consequences of an unjust situation.
- **Step 3: Personal commitment** means looking at your internal and external involvement in the nonviolence campaign and preparing yourself for long-term as well as short-term actions.
- **Step 4: Negotiation** is the art of bringing together your views and those of your opponent to arrive at a just conclusion or clarify the unresolved issues, at which point the conflict is formalized.
- **Step 5: Direct action** occurs when negotiations have broken down or failed to produce a just response to the contested issues and conditions.
- **Step 6: Reconciliation** is the mandatory closing step of a campaign, when the opponents and proponents celebrate the victory and provide joint leadership to implement change.



Investing in Peace

According to Horan, without a schoolwide commitment to building peace, their success would not have happened.

Childress agreed: "My administration trusted me and gave me free reign, which I think is often the biggest obstacle for teachers trying a new, alternative strategy."

And although "teaching peace" may not seem to fit within a typical school's curriculum, Dr. King believed that this was one of the critical roles of education: "The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with great reason and no morals."

In an effort to create peace, society often invests in violence prevention strategies, mistaking the two as the same. We can invest more in metal detectors, policing in schools, and even lock up every single young person in Chicago, and we would theoretically "prevent" a lot of violence. But that does not mean we are creating peace. Violence prevention is not enough. We must invest in peace creation. We have to teach people, young people in particular, the skills necessary to create peace in their lives and in their communities.

As Rasheed explained: "Nonviolence gave us the skills to act. And no matter how much violence there is in the world, nonviolence is much, much stronger. The universe is on the side of justice."

Kazu Haga (kazu@peacefund.org) is the program director of the Peace Development Fund and is a Level II Kingian Nonviolence trainer. For more information on Kingian Nonviolence, visit www.positivepeacewarriornetwork.com or <http://www.uri.edu/nonviolence>.

© 2012 Rethinking Schools • 1001 E. Keefe Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53212

Business office

- Phone: (414) 964-9646
- Fax: (414) 964-7220
- Email: office@rethinkingschools.org

Orders:

- Phone (US & Canada): (800) 669-4192
- Phone (International): (802) 864-0095
- Fax: (802) 864-7626
- Email: rts.orders@aidcvt.com