

## “Why I Teach Peace(building)”

### Conversations with Educators on Teaching Global Themes of Conflict and Peace



Photo credit: NPR, Elissa Nadworny

*Teachers play an important role in inspiring and preparing young people to learn about global issues and to take action to make the world a more peaceful place. In the Global Peacebuilding Center at the U.S. Institute of Peace, we support the work of educators in bringing peacebuilding themes and skills into their classrooms. To celebrate Teacher Appreciation Week 2015, we asked four outstanding educators from around the U.S. to tell us why – and how – they teach peace. Here are their stories:*

**Judi Freeman, Boston Latin School  
(Boston, MA)**

**What grades and subjects do you teach?**

I teach grades 11 and 12 students at Boston Latin School, the oldest public school in the United States. My focus is principally on multiple sections of my course on 20th and 21st century history, with a focus on discrimination, prejudice, marginalization, and genocide. I also teach the History of Art and Architecture course at Boston Latin School as well as I co-lead the new Senior Capstone program at the school.



**How does your work as an educator contribute to peacebuilding locally or globally?**

Regrettably, when describing what I teach, I often say that I teach the "not-so-pretty moments in history" of the 20th and 21st centuries. My teaching focuses squarely on the issue of why so much blood and violence have dominated events of the past 115 years on this planet. We systematically analyze events that grew violent – from the response to desegregation in our local Boston public schools in the 1970s, to lynchings nationally, to police brutality and responses to it (e.g. Ferguson), to genocides globally.

The through lines in each of these case studies involve prevention. At what point could people have acted differently? Where were the moments when individuals or groups with opposing views could have found common ground? Why does violence often erupt so easily and how can it be prevented? Frequently, my students and I find ourselves asking the question: why is violence often the easier answer in so many global situations? And we wonder: isn't it easier – and obviously preferable – to wage peace than it is to wage war? These are difficult questions and, often, they are unanswerable, but I would

like to think that students leave the classroom at the very least as advocates for – if not activists on behalf of – peaceful resolution to conflict.

Several of my students, thanks to the support of a generous alumnus of our school, Sidney Topol, were able to participate in this winter's U.S. Institute of Peace's course Community-based Peacebuilding for Youth. Moreover, over the past several years, I have brought my 100+ students to the U.S. Institute of Peace's Global Peacebuilding Center programs as part of our annual trip to Washington, DC. All of these experiences have deepened my students' awareness of peacebuilding efforts.

### Onsite Educational Programs:

Are you interested in visiting the U.S. Institute of Peace with your class? Request a visit at [www.buildingpeace.org/visit-us](http://www.buildingpeace.org/visit-us).

**Why is it important for young people to learn about global issues of conflict and peace, and to learn peacebuilding skills? Can you share some examples of how you incorporate these themes into your classroom?**

There is no more important role for teachers than impacting students. I ask students repeatedly to consider their roles. Are they perpetrators? Victims? Bystanders? Resisters? Rescuers? The likelihood is that students who are not equipped with skills to recognize injustice are going to join the great mass of bystanders worldwide. I see my principal task as an educator to activate my students' antennae, to get them to identify injustice, discrimination, the potential for violence before it escalates into something worse, and to become active voices in doing something about that.

I've just returned from a trip that I organized for my students to Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic. I have been leading this trip for the past 14 years. We visited key sites related to World War II, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and key events in central Europe post-1989. We walked in the footsteps of people who experienced terrible crimes against humanity, many of whom did not survive, in places like Buchenwald, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, and Terezin. We gazed into the "No Man's Land" of the former Berlin Wall where people in search of democracy and liberty risked their lives in order to escape the oppression and lack of opportunity in the former East Germany. Students have been writing about what they learned; one just posted to our trip blog the following, which I think eloquently captures what I hope the students recognize, thanks to this experience:

*"In places like Birkenau, one is often tempted to imagine the past unfolding before them in black or white. It is easy to imagine that the sun wasn't shining down on the barracks, that birds were not singing, that the air was never warm,*

*and the grass did not spring up from between the train tracks. The problem with this is that separating the way we experience a place like Birkenau today from how it must have looked in the past is just another way of avoiding our history.*

*The Earth seems to understand this. In the place of all the atrocities of WWII and the Cold War has grown a lush landscape that can't be ignored. Nature has accepted that the mistakes cannot be taken back and the lives lost will never be redeemed. It has chosen to use the past to make a more beautiful planet. Isn't that the goal of all of us attempting to face our history? We always talk about learning from the past. The greatest thing we can learn are the ways in which we can make our world more humane and more beautiful."*

I believe that this student, like many of her colleagues, will be actively engaged in the future with following current events and recognizing those atrocities that this student references. In my class, she has looked at the "what ifs" of history and pondered how things could have been different if citizens learn to recognize difference, find avenues of conflict resolution and reconciliation, and minimize escalation into violence.

**What advice can you give other teachers about incorporating global issues of conflict and peace into their classrooms?**

Teachers exist in a climate today dominated by testing and rigid curricula. Often teaching issues related to local or world conflicts get pushed aside in the mania for test prep and nationally mandated standards. Educators may be the last best hope in the face of the external forces pressuring schools to defend what they see as important to teach. I see no focus more important to my teaching than the goal of creating an active citizenry that (a) recognizes the wrongs in society and tries to fix them and (b) seeks to equip students with the ability to see conflict and advocate for peace in its place. There are many dedicated educators out there; we need to continue to be outspoken voices for this sort of education at the center of schooling nationwide.

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## Andy Blair, St. Mary's Academy (Denver, CO)

### What grades and subjects do you teach?

I teach 8<sup>th</sup> grade World Issues.

### How does your work as an educator contribute to peacebuilding locally or globally?



Misunderstanding and a lack of empathy are two things that keep peace from flourishing. My goals as an educator are to introduce students to the world, help them understand why the world is as it is, and help them care about all people.

At St. Mary's Academy, we are able to do this locally through volunteering with a number of diverse communities: the elderly, the homeless, and the young. This pushes students out of their comfort zone, and that is where compassion is developed.

Students also have the opportunity to connect globally through two trips in collaboration with the World Leadership School. In the Fall, we go to Cochiti, New Mexico to camp and build relationships with the Cochiti people. We also have an optional service trip to Peru. Students have meals with homestay families and build relationships with the local people. It is a beautiful opportunity that helps break down perceived borders between our students and the Peruvian people.

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### Why is it important for young people to learn about global issues of conflict and peace, and to learn peacebuilding skills? Can you share some examples of how you incorporate these themes into your classroom?

The world is more interconnected than ever before. In the same way that we must teach critical thinking and reading skills, we must teach how to make peace. Education empowers individuals to change the world, but only if they are equipped with the skills necessary to do so.

One of my course units is on international conflicts. We use a U.S. Institute of Peace simulation, The Case of "Palmyra", to practice peacebuilding. This lesson allows students to try to make peace and analyze how their assumed personalities can influence peace.

### **Educator Resources:**

Find The Case of "Palmyra" and other Global Peacebuilding Center educator resources, including the *Peacebuilding Toolkit for Educators*, at [www.buildingpeace.org/educators](http://www.buildingpeace.org/educators).

It becomes easy for a social studies class to focus on war, while overlooking the peacemaking process. The objective of every war should be to bring about peace. While it is sometimes a one-sided peace, peace should be the desired end in any conflict.

### **What advice can you give other teachers about incorporating global issues of conflict and peace into their classrooms?**

The best way to incorporate global issues of conflict and peace in your classroom is to make it personal.

I have been able to make it personal by traveling and always learning. Quite often my hook for a lesson will be an anecdote from either my travel experience or a story I have learned from professionals in the field.

I was once told that students are moral philosophers, and that has resonated with me. As teachers it is our role to help guide students through problems. If they view a problem as being too theoretical, it won't resonate. If you can make it personal, they will care about the issue.

## Clare Sisisky, Collegiate School (Richmond, VA)



### What grades and subjects do you teach?

I teach high school seniors in a course called senior seminar that is a government, economics, and ethics interdisciplinary course. I am also the K-12 Director of Global Education at our school where I focus on bringing global perspectives into our curriculum and into the lives of our students and faculty.

### How does your work as an educator contribute to peacebuilding locally or globally?

I focus on working with students and teachers to understand the perspective of someone from a different background or in a different global context. I do this through providing readings and curriculum focused on global issues and connections with people who can share their experiences such as guest speakers or primary sources. I also do this through connecting students in a meaningful way to their peers at our various partner schools around the world. I think understanding that multiple perspectives exist, even conflicting ones, within a group of people that also have commonality and some shared experience is a solid foundation for peacebuilding both locally and globally.

### Why is it important for young people to learn about global issues of conflict and peace, and to learn peacebuilding skills? Can you share some examples of how you incorporate these themes into your classroom?

It is essential for students to discuss what is going on in the world today, and I find that students are extremely interested in exploring and learning about conflict and global issues. They consistently express frustration over the lack of opportunity to wrestle with current global events or happenings in their high school coursework. I believe that facilitating meaningful and in-depth discussion, where multiple perspectives are brought in, on global issues is the first step toward peace building. Classrooms and school programs that focus on project based learning and true collaboration skills are the next step. The final step is providing students the opportunity to put these skills into practice in a context that

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is beyond the classroom. This can range from engaging with people in different locations using guest speakers or technology to creating programs for dialogue on campus focused on challenging and conflict issues.

For example, we have a course that focuses on global challenges as part of the senior seminar program this semester. This course empowers students to research pressing global challenges in an in-depth way, create interactive ways to teach their peers about these challenges, and practice facilitating intense discussion involving multiple perspectives on these topics. As part of this course, in partnership with a student club, the students organized a one day event called the Global Issues Forum\* which brought together students from multiple local high schools to hear from speakers and share what they are doing at their own high schools to tackle issues focused on human rights. Students shared examples of actions tackling refugee issues in Richmond, human-trafficking in Richmond and beyond, and water access issues in the developing world.

*\*The Global Peacebuilding Center was honored to take part in the Global Issues Forum by facilitating two workshops for student participants.*

### **What advice can you give other teachers about incorporating global issues of conflict and peace into their classrooms?**

Many students are hungry to discuss conflicts around the world, and want to understand how these conflicts are connected to the United States and our policies. There is ample opportunity to bring in some of these lessons and discussions into classes across disciplines including science, history, English, and even math and the arts. For example, this past week, we had a student

#### **Student Testimonial:**

In "**Student Voice: Building Peace Through Global Issues Awareness**," a Collegiate School high school senior outlines how she created a Global Issues Forum at her school. This article serves as a model for other students to follow as they engage in peacebuilding projects in their own schools and communities!

The author, who attended Global Peacebuilding Center workshops for students, said "Support from the Global Peacebuilding Center at USIP throughout the year prepared me with facilitation skills and a peacebuilding framework to think about global issues."

Find "Student Voice" at [www.buildingpeace.org/student-voice-global-issues-forum](http://www.buildingpeace.org/student-voice-global-issues-forum).

#### **Student Peace Clubs:**

Are your students ready to take the next step as peacebuilders?

They can use our Peace Club Starter Kit to guide them through the process of starting a Peace Club in their school or

community! Learn more at

[www.buildingpeace.org/peace-club-starter-kit](http://www.buildingpeace.org/peace-club-starter-kit).

presentation on the teenage recruitment tactics of ISIS but topics discussed in the class ranged from freedom of expression as a human right to the role of social media in the lives of young people today to the sanitation challenges of refugee camps. Connecting course material to what is happening in the world today and generating projects based on problem-solving or solution-seeking skills will not only get the students fully engaged, it will help them be peace-makers in their futures in whatever profession or life-path they choose.

## **Monica Shah, Brightwood Education Campus (Washington, DC)**

### **What grades and subjects do you teach?**

I teach Peace classes to 2<sup>nd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> graders, Human Rights classes to 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> graders, Great Books Roundtable to 7<sup>th</sup> graders, and U.S. History & Geography to 8<sup>th</sup> graders.



*Photo credit: NPR, Elissa Nadworny*

### **How does your work as an educator contribute to peacebuilding locally or globally?**

Four months into the school year, when asked if having Peace Class is a right or privilege, Brightwood students argued that it is a right—that every child should be able to learn about and practice peace.

I believe that my work as a peace, human rights and social studies teacher is helping to build peace both at the local and global levels. Not only have students learned ways to develop and foster inner-peace, but they have also been learning about peace activists and movements from around the world.

Peace is a subject that needs to be taught, just like reading, math, and science. One of the goals of my peace classes is to develop social emotional competencies and equip students with skills to create and maintain intrapersonal, interpersonal and intergroup peace both in and out of school. In class, students can be seen practicing mindfulness, learning about human rights, acting out roles in conflict

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resolution scenarios, engaging in nonviolent communication exercises, playing cooperative games, and reading multicultural literature that helps build empathy and empower bystanders.

While there are many studies linking social emotional learning to positive school culture and academic engagement, to a student it is common sense: school is a much better place when everyone is kind. Peace Class students know that anyone can be a peacebuilder, and students at Brightwood build peace every week by doing kind acts with and for each other.

**Why is it important for young people to learn about global issues of conflict and peace, and to learn peacebuilding skills? Can you share some examples of how you incorporate these themes into your classroom?**

Day after day, students, especially in urban environments, are suspended from school. Should students be punished because the society they live in is failing to teach them nonviolent ways to engage in and resolve conflict? We do not expect students to intuitively know how to do algebra, so why do we expect students to simply know how to act nonviolently? My students grow up amidst violence, watch movies and TV shows that portray violence as justified or even honorable, and play video games that glorify violence—so how can we expect them to act peacefully?

As peace educator and journalist Colman McCarthy once said, “Unless we teach our children peace, someone else will teach them violence.”

I strongly believe that peacebuilding must begin within oneself. Then students should explore peacebuilding amongst their peers, the school community, their neighborhoods, city, country, and the world. I am extremely passionate about providing youth lessons, nonviolent tools, and creating opportunities for my students to be peacebuilders. I also think it is critical for them to learn about the issues and struggles that other youth are facing around the world so that they can learn from their tactics and movements, and potentially work in solidarity with them to make a greater impact.

Organizing in- and out-of-school experiential learning opportunities is one way that I expose students to global issues of peace and conflict. For example, I have taken students to the U.S. Institute of Peace, the American Friends Service Committee, Gandhi Memorial Center, Free the Slaves, Newseum, United Nations, and other institutions, museums, and cultural institutes to further my students' knowledge and exposure to diverse cultural and international issues. I've had students Skype with young peace activists in Afghanistan and Sudan, and Peace Corps Volunteers in Nicaragua. My human rights students this quarter are partnering with the Peace Corps to engage in a mapping project

and participate in a pen-pal partnership with a school there. I will also be hosting Peace Corps volunteers to come and speak to my students about their experiences for International Month. All of these opportunities allow students to learn about the work of many different organizations and career paths in peacebuilding.

For my middle school human rights classes, I aim to empower and work with my students to study the human rights issues that affect and matter most to them. Last quarter, my students were most interested in learning about police brutality and discrimination so the students worked closely with the ACLU to participate in a Know-Your-Rights training regarding police encounters. This quarter, my human rights students unanimously decided they wanted to learn and do something about modern-day slavery.

### **What advice can you give other teachers about incorporating global issues of conflict and peace into their classrooms?**

The first time I ever heard about a “peace class” and met a teacher (Colman McCarthy) who was teaching peace was in Washington, DC in 2008. I fell in love with this idea and began chasing this dream. However, I knew that in order to teach global issues and peace education, I would have to infuse it within a curriculum in a creative manner, which I did my first two years as a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teacher. This year, my dream came true. I have the honor and privilege of actually teaching peace and human rights classes, while still incorporating those themes into my 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes.

Other educators should know that students truly enjoy learning about current events and global issues. As most youth are digitally connected to the world, they also need a place and time to process and critically think and discuss the information that they see in their news feeds, and determine its significance and credibility.

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In my history classes, to make lessons relevant and enriching, I make sure to always connect a unit they are studying with something that is happening today in society, whether locally or globally. For example, my 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History students are studying the Indian Removal Act. I’ve modified their essay prompt so that in addition to analyzing primary and secondary sources related to Cherokee Removal and Andrew Jackson’s actions as president, they will also compare it to the impact of the World Cup

and Olympics on the Favela residents, requiring students to critically think about when or if a government has a right to remove people from their land.

Anyone can be a peace educator no matter what subject he or she teaches. You can incorporate lessons about social justice in math, language arts, science and social studies. In a history classroom, teaching peace and conflict should require teaching a “people’s” history and not simply relying on the traditional textbook. I have used my textbook once this entire school year— only to use it for its copy of the Declaration of Independence. While textbooks often do a decent job of listing out the various conflicts that have occurred throughout history, they often fail to provide multiple perspectives on events and sufficient information about those who resisted war and led peace and nonviolent movements.

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This year in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes, I also incorporated the National History Day\* program, which had the theme of Leadership and Legacy. While some students already had an idea of what their topic would be, I helped many of my students choose a topic related to peace and conflict studies by creating a gallery walk activity of social justice leaders around the world and throughout various time periods. This resulted in 50 of my students each researching various activists fighting for peace and justice. My students have shared that this was one of their best academic experiences.

While my degree in International Education certainly has helped me bring global education and peace studies into K-12 education, the number one thing teachers need to remember is that there are many ways to weave global peace and conflict studies into the curriculum as long as there is passion and interest in doing so. There are also a growing number of professional development workshops that can assist teachers in getting started. I will continue refining my peace pedagogy this summer through school visits in Buenos Aires, and at a nonviolence immersion and peace education program in India sponsored through the International School for Jain Studies.

*\*The Global Peacebuilding was pleased to award the U.S. Institute of Peace Special Award to two remarkable student projects at the Virginia District Five National History Day Competition this year. Read more about the competition and the winners at [www.buildingpeace.org/USIP-special-award-2015-NHD](http://www.buildingpeace.org/USIP-special-award-2015-NHD).*

*The U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) is our country's global conflict management center. We work to prevent, mitigate, and resolve international conflict through nonviolent means. The Global Peacebuilding Center extends USIP's educational work with young people and educators.*

*Learn more about engaging the next generation of peacebuilders at [www.buildingpeace.org](http://www.buildingpeace.org).*

*If you are an educator who would like to explore working with the Global Peacebuilding Center more closely to integrate the themes and skills of peacebuilding into your classroom, please contact us at [buildingpeace@usip.org](mailto:buildingpeace@usip.org).*