

# The Peace Army of Costa Rica



Peace Army Trainers (left to right) Alexandra Kissling, Lizette Aguilar, Randy Gray, Lorena Pinto, Diane Blangren, Christine Essex, Rita Marie Johnson, Luis Diego Soto, Carol Marianne, Aurora de Pass Jimenez, Terrie Rodriguez, Sharon Boyd and Sylvia Siemon de Perez

By Donald Snedeker



**B**usiness people know that a stable socio-economic environment is fundamentally good for business; it encourages domestic and foreign investment and sets the stage for job creation, economic development and human progress. With that thought in mind, what is being done in Costa Rica to further strengthen the social stability of the country?

With a clear vision of Costa Rican teachers integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into classrooms on a daily basis, Founding Director of the Rasur Foundation, Rita Marie Johnson, is actively implementing her Peace Army of Costa Rica initiative.

Dr. Johnson has been working with a volunteer group of 18 bilingual educators, professionals, and concerned citizens since October 2003 to become trained peace builders. These individuals will offer public and private school teachers the opportunity to learn two SEL skills that have already been proven highly effective. In turn, the teachers will pass these skills on to elementary and high school students. This collaboration with teachers in creating peaceful classrooms will also benefit them by making their difficult jobs somewhat easier and more rewarding.

*Business Costa Rica* interviewed Dr. Johnson just before she was starting, in

mid-March 2004, a yearlong pilot project with 14 teachers from a large public school in Desamparados. These teachers and the Peace Army volunteer trainers have committed to participate in nine Saturday sessions, along with weekly coaching and practice sessions, throughout the school year.

**BCR:** What is the Peace Army of Costa Rica?

**Johnson:** It's a growing force of trained peace builders to implement a proven social and emotional skills-based program in schools.

**BCR:** What inspired you to create the Peace Army?

**Johnson:** Seven years ago I read an epic poem called "Rasur or Week of Splendor" written in 1946 by Costa Rican Roberto Brenes Mesen. Woven

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throughout the story, I found the keys to peace that I had been seeking. I was especially inspired by the words, "Before directing the lightning in the sky, we must first harness the storms in our own hearts." As a result, I began developing peace education projects. The fruit of that labor is the Peace Army.

**BCR:** Why call it the Peace Army of Costa Rica? It sounds military-like for a group that is supposed to be fostering peace.

**Johnson:** An army is normally thought of as a large organized force to **overpower** others in war. The Peace Army will be a large organized force to **empower** others to become peace builders. Costa Rica is known for not having an army; now it will be known for having the first army in the world that is actively building peace through social and emotional learning. I believe we need to take this extremely positive step to safeguard Costa Rica's peaceful heritage while providing a model to the world.

**BCR:** What exactly do the Peace Army trainers do?

**Johnson:** They empower teachers to instruct students in proven methods for "feeling peace" and "speaking peace," which were carefully chosen after 10 years of research.

**BCR:** How do the trainers teach those skills?

**Johnson:** They teach "feeling peace" while building emotional intelli-



Dr. Rita Marie Johnson, Founding Director of the Rasur Foundation, interacting with children

gence through a technique developed by the Institute of HeartMath called "Freeze Framer," which is now available in a scientifically validated software program. It comes with a finger sensor for monitoring heart rhythms and it teaches children in 6 to 10 sessions how to align the activity of the brain and the heart. As a result, through cultivating a peaceful state-of-mind, students improve emotional stability, impulse control, anger management, problem solving, and academic test score performance. This method can be effectively taught either with or without the use of a computer and software.

They also teach the skill of "speaking peace," which implies engaging in empathetic listening as well as verbal responses that disarm conflict and lead to creative solutions. This is the method of *Nonviolent Communica-*

*tion: A Language of Compassion*, as developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg in his influential book and fieldwork. Over 20 years ago, he founded the Center for Non-violent Communication, which now provides training in over 30 countries. The method has stood the test of time and has proven to be effective across cultures. It has now been adapted to the classroom as described in the book, *The Compassionate Classroom: Relationship Based Teaching and Learning* by Sura Hart and Victoria Kindle Hodson. Dr. Rosenberg has said, "I believe the message of this book can change the course of learning and life for all of us."

Sura Hart is planning on visiting Costa Rica in May of this year to work with the Peace Army and offer a workshop to the public.

**BCR:** What is the purpose of the Peace Army pilot project that you are conducting at the public school Exce-lencia Elías Jiménez Castro in Desam-parados?

**Johnson:** We will prove that these two social and emotional intelligence methods, if practiced on a daily basis in the classroom, will reduce violence and create a culture of peace in the school. But even more importantly, we will start a grass roots movement that does not require changing curriculum, but instead systematically builds upon our human need to give and receive compassion.

**BCR:** Why is this type of learning important in creating a more peaceful society?

**Johnson:** Social and emotional learning is the first step toward lasting peace. Without it, we tend to revert to mechanical emotional reactions and negative social behaviors, which lead to the many forms that violence takes. We have the tools now to stop cycles of violence and replace them with responses that enrich our lives.

**BCR:** What is the longer-term goal for the Peace Army?

### Peace Education Law on the Books

In December of 1997 the Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica passed a law dealing with alternative resolution of conflicts and the promotion of social peace through education. The law (7727 of December 9, 1997) states that "every person has the right to an adequate education about peace in the elementary and secondary schools, which have the obligation to make understandable to

their students the nature and demands of permanent peace building...The Superior Council of Education will include in the official education programs elements that foster the use of dialogue, negotiation, mediation, conciliation, and other similar mechanisms as methods of conflict resolution. Education should promote a culture of peace and respect for human rights."

**Johnson:** After demonstrating the effectiveness of the Peace Army during 2004 at the Escuela de Excelencia Elías Jiménez Castro, we plan to train all willing teachers in Costa Rican schools over a ten year time period.

**BCR:** What support do you have for the Peace Army in Costa Rica?

**Johnson:** Dr. Oscar Arias, Nobel Peace prizewinner from Costa Rica, recently wrote in a letter of strong support to the Templeton Foundation: "We are envisioning the Peace Army as a lasting force in Costa Rican culture and as a shining example of the possibilities for human progress." Executive Director, Luis Alberto Cordero, has committed the Arias Foundation to being a partner in the project.

In addition, the Peace Education Law, passed in 1997, which requires peace education in every school, provides a clear legal foundation for the implementation of the Peace Army in Costa Rica.

**BCR:** How will the Peace Army be funded?

**Johnson:** I am relying on the longing for peace of people everywhere to help me fund this project. All peace-loving people that I have talked to would like to see a country model for achieving a lasting culture of peace. I believe of all countries, Costa Rica has the best chance of doing this.

I still need funds for the pilot project and will need to raise funds this year to be ready to implement stage two in 2005. I will need to provide salaries for trainers who will work fulltime to train all willing teachers in Costa Rica. I would love to have the funding to provide ongoing training through interactive video.

I trust that the money will come because humanity is aching for an answer to escalating violence. The Peace Army is one answer that can make a difference. I have dedicated my life to this project and others are joining me. I know we will find the way.

For further information write Rita Marie Johnson at rasur@mail.com or call 282-6576.

## Alliance between the Judicial Branch and the Ministry of Education

Another proactive movement to confront the problem of violence in schools and the greater society is developing. On February 9, 2004 the Supreme Court of Justice proposed an alliance between the Judicial Branch and the Ministry of Education to offer conflict resolution classes in schools by 2005. Judge Rolando Vega, President of the



judicial system's Commission of Alternative Solutions, is leading the initiative with the goal of creating a more peaceful society and reducing the growing number of legal case-loads. The Commission of judges will lead a series of workshops and write a manual to guide teachers in instructing alternative conflict resolution.

### Disturbing News & Events

According to statistics from the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) published in *La Nación* in October 2003, there were 83,838 registered cases of student violence in Costa Rican public schools during 2002. The acts of violence were broken down into five categories: verbal and written abuse, physically abusive conduct, theft among students and of school materials, and destruction of school property. Sixty-three per cent of the reported cases took place in elementary schools, 24% in secondary schools, and 13% in preschools. Authorities from the MEP called the findings "worrisome."

Also deeply troubling is the fact that MEP is investigating 273 cases reported in 2003 of teachers who supposedly abused students verbally or physically. In addition, two cases of shootings of students in schools prompted the MEP to order in February 2004 a nationwide checking of student school bags for "weapons, explosives, illegal drugs, and other dangerous objects" upon entry and during their presence on school property.

### What is meant by a "Culture of Peace?"

Increasing violence in schools is a reflection of the greater social problems that exist in society at large. Costa Rica is not alone nor is the United

States, as demonstrated by the horrific 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Colorado which left 15 dead and 30 wounded. Violence in schools and society is an international problem without borders.

As defined by the United Nations, a Culture of Peace "is a set of values, attitudes, modes of behavior and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations." In 1999 a group of Nobel Peace Prize Winners, including Dr. Oscar Arias, put their collective experience together and came up with an understandable practical pledge for a culture of peace and an international campaign of individual commitment and social responsibility called "*Peace is in our hands.*" The United Nations sponsored the activity and the U.N. General Assembly proclaimed the year 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace and the decade 2001-2010 the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World. UNESCO was designated as the lead agency for this decade initiative.

As of March 2004 the UNESCO "*Peace is in our hands*" pledge had over 75 million signatories. People from around the world have pledged to

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“respect the life and dignity of every person without discrimination and prejudice; practice active non-violence, rejecting violence in all its forms; share...time and material resources in a spirit of generosity; defend freedom of expression and cultural diversity; promote consumer behavior that is responsible; and contribute to the development of [the]

community.” To review the one page Culture of Peace pledge, please see the website at [www3.unesco.org/iycp/](http://www3.unesco.org/iycp/).

The momentum and need for a global pledge such as this is building. Dr. Arias has said: “Peace is not a dream, it’s an arduous task. We must start by finding peaceful solutions to everyday conflicts with the people around us. Peace does not begin with the other

person, it begins within each and every one of us.”

The Peace Army of Costa Rica is a local educational effort with international application worthy of our consideration and support because it builds individual and social stability that can only be good for business in Costa Rica.



### AmCham’s International Center for Conciliation and Arbitration

The *Law for Alternative Conflict Resolution and Social Peace*, passed by the Legislative Assembly in 1998, made possible the creation of dispute centers in Costa Rica. Since January 2000 the Costa Rican-American Chamber of Commerce has sponsored alternative dispute resolution through its **International Center for Conciliation and Arbitration (CICA)**.



The goal of the Center is to professionally and confidentially resolve business and contractual conflicts outside of the court system in a more timely, less expensive private forum. CICA’s Executive Director, Mariana Solís, says the Center “operates in a completely neutral,

objective manner, and our doors are open to both members and non-members alike, nationals or foreigners, corporations or individuals.”

The attractive, equipped, and sound proofed meeting rooms of CICA are available at AmCham and may also be used as a temporary Business Center for interested parties.