

PEACE FESTIVALS AND CITIES OF PEACE

By Bill Bhaneja

(Notes for a speech delivered at the “Doing Our Peace” event, September 17, 2011, Providence Renewal Center, Edmonton. The event was organized by Canadian Department of Peace Initiative, Edmonton chapter)

Canadian Department of Peace Initiative (CDPI) is a non-partisan campaign for the establishment of a Department of Peace in the Federal Government. We have always recognized the importance of the Cities of Peace as a key component of the DoP movement. The cities provide a solid foundation for developing a demand and strategic focus for peace building.

It is in this context I would like to comment on Ottawa’s Peace Festival which is now in its fifth year. The two UN International Days of Peace (Sept. 21) and Nonviolence (Oct02) book-end the 12-day festival. This year we will have 25 events by 19 civil society peace organizations and participants, exceeding our goal of one peace event per day.

The Idea came to us at one of the global summits of DOP/MoP when a delegate from the US mentioned that they were thinking of 11 days of peace activities leading to 9/11. We wondered if we could do something similar in a Canadian setting, using the two universal UN resolutions. The resolutions define the spirit of CDPI/DoP mandate of working towards Culture of Peace and Nonviolent Resolution of Conflicts. The effort coincided with the work of a local civil society group, the City of Peace Ottawa formed around the same time. To learn more about the City of Peace Ottawa, their website is info@mycityofpeace.com. Its founding chair Dr. Peter Stockdale is also a co-founding member of CDPI. The City of Peace Ottawa mission statement states:

To develop Ottawa as a model city of peace, and be a model for other peaceful cities, promoting social harmony and inclusiveness.

This is a tall order, but the group has been active in working with CDPI Ottawa in developing every year the coordination of Ottawa Peace Festival around the theme of “Peace, Unity, and Harmony”. Even though our two groups are seen as the lead by most Festival participants, our described role is essentially that of facilitator. This is to put together the festival calendar, following up with the groups and participants in choice of events in developing couple of unique themes and events for the festival, followed by developing the media campaign, and encouraging not only Ottawans but the groups involved to attend each other’s events.

What Peace festival (PF) has allowed us to accomplish:

* better liaison with other community groups in Ottawa (they range from faith groups to anti-war groups), it has helped us to understand what the peace mandate of other groups is, and at the same time for them to understand what we are doing in CDPI's (role and function)?

* PF has brought us to events/activities where we have co-sponsored/ partnered with new groups on their initiatives (anti-CANSEC arms bazaar, Ottawa Folk Festival, One-World Film documentary fest, DoP petition signing etc.)

* PF has helped through panels/workshops discussions, bringing topical peace and justice issues where public has been longing to learn and express their views. Some of the progressive politicians have joined us to express their views independent of their party position in such forums.

* It has enabled us to celebrate the lives of champions of nonviolence (women peacebuilders, exhibition about nobel peace laureates like Dr. King, Mandela, Dalai Lama, Lester B. Pearson and focussed events about the lives of nonviolent leaders such as Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi).

* We have from time to time participated with other groups on finding ways of helping with local issues such as youth crime prevention, restorative justice, inter-communal harmony, inter-faith dialogue, sustainable environment. That has been a two way exercise, both learning and providing insight on nonviolent communication, mediation, and conflict resolution.

All this amounts to what one may say constituency building for Dept of Peace through walking the talk – partnering, co-sponsoring, supporting all those who are for nonviolent/ nonkilling peace. The concept has proven to be a multiplier in terms of not only reaching out to other peace groups but also getting the message across to broader Ottawa community. Key to success in such constituency building is a genuine respect for the participants approached for participation in spirit of cooperation instead of competition regardless of whether the group/person has moorings in compassionate faith or in anti-war justice grouping.

The five Festivals mounted so far have been done without a dime from any levels of government. They have been through the volunteer effort of organizations and individuals, work accomplished by what I call the “People and Communities of Conscience”. They are the citizens who feel passionate about ideals and ethics. All events are free and everyone is welcome in the spirit of the common theme of nonviolent peace.

Peace Festival's strength is its effort to bring together local groups, its weakness remains sometimes reluctance of members from one civil society group to participate and appreciate the other group's socially relevant work. We continue to work in ameliorating that situation. We believe: “peace unites, violence divides”.

Hope this gives you some idea about our effort at working on the cooperative tool of Peace Festivals and their potential in contributing towards building Cities with Culture of nonviolent Peace at their core.

Thank you.

Bill Bhaneja, Ph.D.
Co-founder and Ottawa Chapter Co-Chair
Canadian Department of Peace Initiative
381 Wilbrod Street, Ottawa, ON K1K 6M6
www.departmentofpeace.ca