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THE PEACE CHILD FOUNDATION
"City at Peace"

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Hon. DANTE B. FASCELL

OF FLORIDA
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, July 25, 1990

Mr. FASCELL. Mr. Speaker. I rise today to give recognition to a group whose work with children across America and around the world is helping to promote peace and harmony and build bridges across racial lines. The Peace Child Foundation brings children from diverse backgrounds together to work toward a common goal of creating and performing in a musical revue, combining and sharing their unique cultures and experiences.

The Peace Child Foundation is a nonprofit organization which acts as an umbrella for local groups in cities around the United States; helps them get started and gain sponsorship; and oversees the international projects of the foundation. The local groups bring children of different races together to create and perform a musical production extolling harmony and peace. Internationally, Peace Child selects American youth to join with children from other countries to perform and share their cultures and ideas. With these small steps, they are aiding in the peace process in a unique way.

I was recently fortunate enough to see "City at Peace," presented by the Miami branch of the Peace Child Foundation. It was comprised of 112 students who sang and danced their way into the audience's heart. They put their individual talents and interests together and produced a moving show, encompassing the ideals of peace and racial harmony, combined with an antidrug message. Through their effort and group commitment, these young people learned that although they come from different backgrounds, they are all part of one community and can work together to create something truly special on their own. Hopefully with this experience, these children, and those they come in contact with, will grow older and wiser without the prejudice and fear that comes with the unknown.

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Play Plants Seeds of Peace

Youthful Cast Draws Valuable Lessons From Work on Today's Problems, Future Hopes

By Maria Koklanaris
Washington Post Staff Writer

There were about two dozen teenagers in the auditorium at Stuart Hobson Junior High School, and they were angry.

"My little brother was shot just because he looked at somebody!" cried out one girl. "All he did is look at somebody!"

"Racism has kept blacks and other minorities from taking part in this country's wealth," lamented a young man.

"I use drugs," confided another. "I'm trying to quit, but it's hard, man. My friends use drugs, too . . . It doesn't matter what color you are if you're dead."

The scene wasn't real. Instead, it was part of a performance of "City at Peace" by a racially mixed group of students from the city and suburbs. But it could have been real, they know.

And that was the whole point.

"City at Peace," produced by the Fairfax County-based Peace Child Foundation, uses teenagers, drama, song and dance to portray the transformation of Washington from a place torn by drugs and violence in 1990 to a harmonious community in 2010.

The message, full of hope is: It can be done, if everybody helps. If everybody cares.

The story was written by director Carlo Grossman, who has 15 years experience in children's theater, with help from cast members. It focuses heavily on the problems that stem from racial prejudice and the need to overcome that prejudice. Some of it is based on actual events, such as last year's shootings at and around Dunbar High School.

The Peace Child Foundation, which sponsors exchange programs between children from the United States and the Soviet Union, was created in 1982 by David Wolcomb, who

wrote the musical "Peace Child." The foundation, originally formed to back Wolcomb's production, went on to produce other shows focusing on world peace and nuclear disarmament.

Two years ago, a black student from a District high school who had traveled to the Soviet Union as part of a cast wrote foundation officials a letter. The message: we need you right here at home.

"That really did it," Grossman said. "We realized we'd been working internationally so much, but there are so many problems right here at home."

And so "City at Peace," performed here for the first time last year, was born. Last year's performance was woven around the shootings of four students at Wilson High School.

This year's show, which opened last weekend at Stuart Hobson, continues this weekend

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Cast Learning Lessons From 'City at Peace'

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with performances open to the public at First Congregational Church, 945 G St. NW, and Holy Spirit High School at East Capitol and Sixth streets NE.

Other performances are planned for at least four city high schools. June performances are planned for the Martin Luther King Jr. Festival in Atlanta and in a special show for some members of Congress sponsored by Del. Walter E. Fauntroy (D-D.C.).

The cast, which includes a few students from last year, is made up of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. To find some, Grossman held open auditions in local schools. For the rest, he conducted what he calls targeted auditions—contacting social workers and youth centers and explaining his project.

"I know that some kids who don't consider themselves talented would never come out for an audition," said Grossman, who worked in children's theater for a dozen years in San Francisco. "I don't expect them to come up with the traditional monologue or song and dance."

Instead, Grossman asks those seeking parts to do "some theater games, some improvisation. Then we just talk."

That way, he identifies talent such as the two boys sent by social worker Tilla Durr. The boys, one from Southeast Washington and the other from Landover, come from families that "have experienced a lot of hardship and a lot of despair," Durr said. She said "City at Peace" and the friendships made through it have helped her clients begin to overcome.

"These kids have been stereotyped in terms of poverty, in terms of race, in terms of ability," she said. Experts say theater experiences, acting out different roles, are frequently therapeutic for such youngsters.

After two months in the cast of "City at Peace," the boys are "more trusting, feeling more self-confidence, feeling that they've felt very loved, that they've learned a great deal, that they're in an environment there that's conducive to healing."

Grossman and his wife, Jody, the show's producer, said this is part of their mission.

"It's very important to me," said Jody Grossman, "that it be more than theater."

So before the acting, singing and dancing come Carlo Grossman's "trust exercises." His favorite is the "Blind Walk," in which one child allows himself to be led around, eyes closed, by another.

And then, there's the writing. "I make them write almost every rehearsal," he said. "It drives them crazy."

Sometimes, the writings are trite and cursory: "We had a good rehearsal tonight. It's a great show."

Other times, "you find out things about their lives," Grossman said. "Things they wouldn't discuss in a group, such as molestation, home problems, deep personal feelings."

After a dress rehearsal last weekend, some of the students told an observer what they've learned from the show.

Kimberly Saunders, a senior at Wakefield High School in Arlington, said that people in the District and their problems were just faces on the nightly news before "City at Peace."

"I don't spend any of my time in D.C. at all . . . I didn't know any kids from there," she said. "It wasn't alive, until I witnessed it personally."

Abby Friedman, also a Wakefield senior, said the best part of "City at Peace" comes after rehearsal.

"We've bonded together," she said. "We go out together after the show . . . It's not just that we're doing a play together and then we're going to forget each other."

And Thomas Peterson, a seventh-grader who recently moved from Seventh and F streets NW to Montgomery County, said the show has helped him realize that violence never solves problems.

"I didn't have many friends when I went to my new school," he said. "I got in a lot of fights. Here I met a lot of friends and I don't fight any more."