

Peace Army Battles for Non-Violent Resolutions

BY BETSY YAGLA
Tico Times Staff

AT first glance, it may seem a bit on the hokey side, but soldiers (teachers) in the Peace Army soon end up converts of their leader, Dr. Rita Marie Johnson, and her techniques, which include puppets and finger sensors.

Johnson's primary focus is "to really create one country where the children learn to be peacemakers." To do that, Johnson, from the United States, created the Peace Army, which is working to slowly change social and emotional learning in schools across the country.

The army chose the Desamparados elementary school, Escuela Excelencia Elías Jiménez Castro, as its first battleground to teach peace.

The Peace Army's efforts, which began in October, are aimed at 21 of the school's teachers, who will then teach the army's ideas to the students.

DARY Vargas, a 25-year-old army recruit, teaches second grade and is in her first year of teaching.

"This program has helped me deal with all the stress of teaching and being a new teacher," she said during a Peace Army meeting.

"This has helped me so much. It has helped me teach the kids better by seeing what they need and getting to know them as human beings," Vargas said. "With all the teaching standards and regulations, it's hard to see what the individual student needs."

The program teaches two different methods.

The first is called "Freeze Framer," which was developed by the Institute of HeartMath, a non-profit research organization based in California that tries to help people find balance between heart and mind. The computer program is designed to teach people to "feel peace" and build emotional intelligence.

THE school has 10 computers with the program installed. It works by using a finger sensor that monitors heart rhythms. The user tries to align their heart and mind, which generates a peaceful feeling.

The second method, which the army has just started teaching, is non-violent communication – learning to identify the emotions of yourself and others.

In this form of communication, the teachers role-play by using real-life situations they have experienced in the previous week. They explain the situation and then a student tries to guess – not ask – their emotion. Once the emotion is discovered, they then guess what is needed to resolve the emotion – whether it be love, understanding or order.

After role-playing, Juan Carlos López, a young Desamparados teacher, explained that once his role-playing partner discovered his emotion, he felt understanding. Without acting, his wide face had changed from looking slightly hurt to relieved.

"MY need isn't just in my mind," he says. "It's real. Real enough that you could figure it out and it validated my need."

The program helps the students get in touch with basic universal needs.

"Once you get in touch with the feeling and the universal need, that's really when the moment of peace begins," Johnson said. "Then you can say, 'Oh, that's why I

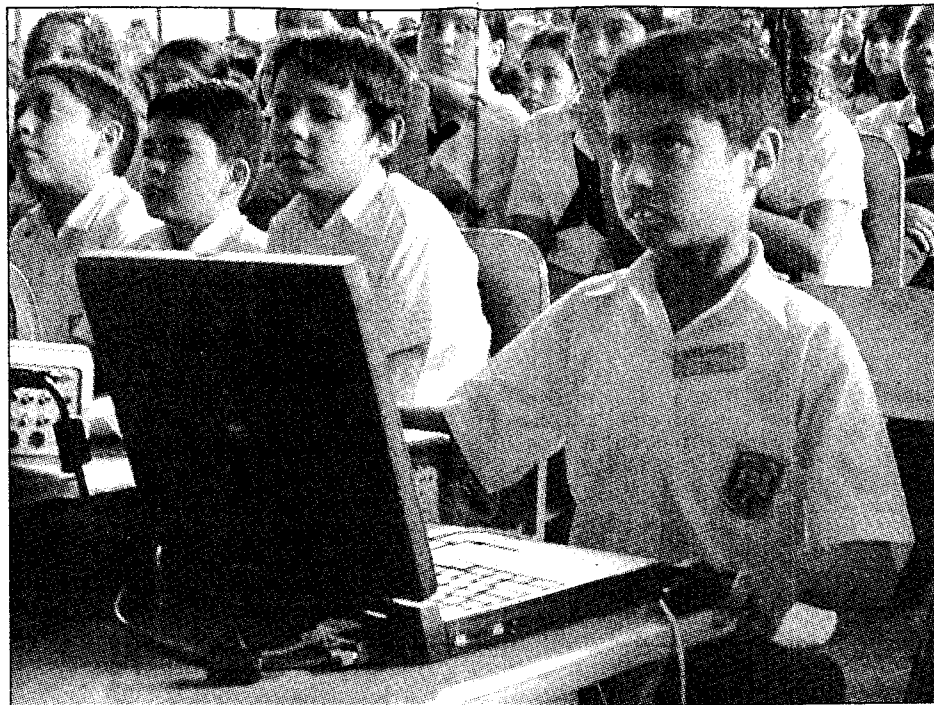


Photo courtesy of Rita Marie Johnson

PROGRAMMING peace: A student at the Desamparados elementary school, Escuela Excelencia Elías Jiménez Castro, demonstrates the "Freeze Framer" computer program. A finger sensor monitors heart rhythms while the user tries to align their heart and mind generating a peaceful feeling.

was frustrated. I had a need to contribute, or whatever it is, and I wasn't finding a strategy to do it."

These techniques are not part of a curriculum that is taught once and then forgotten. It is something that is used every day, proponents say. The principles are so basic they are something many people overlook: being nice to oneself and others and having self-control.

The first method is about feeling peace and the second is speaking peace.

THANKS to a donation, the Peace Army could supply each teacher with two hand puppets and two headbands – both of a giraffe and a jackal – to demonstrate non-violent communication. The headbands can be worn either forward or backward, indicating that the wearer is either speaking to

(Page W-8)

Program Brings Calm to Class

(From W-3)

themselves or others.

As shy seven-year-old Jerry Alfaro puts on the headbands and explains, "The giraffe says pretty things and the jackal says mean things."

Alfaro added that his teachers are nicer this year than they were last year and because of it, he has tried to behave better. He hasn't been in trouble at all this year, whereas last year he got into trouble for misbehaving and running in the halls.

Vargas says at first she wasn't very convinced and decided to join the group mostly out of curiosity.

"I wondered if it could actually work," she said raising her eyebrows and making a questioning face. "They showed us the computer program with the finger monitor and I think a lot of us were skeptical. But just seeing Rita Marie and her husband always smiling, and seeming so peaceful piqued my curiosity."

NOW, Vargas is visibly excited about the program. She speaks quickly and expressively.

"I used to have a problem with a very aggressive student in my class," she said. "He is 11 and the students in second grade are 7. He's been pegged as a problem student - he steals and fights with other kids. He was always walking around with his hands in fists."

The student was a product of his home environment, she said.

"He comes from a problem home and after school he never wants to go home. You can see the sadness in his eyes. He just needs someone to love him. And I am so, so proud to be able to say that he trusts me," she said with a huge smile.

The student not only trusts Vargas, he has developed a strong bond with her as well.

"He calls me *mami*," Vargas said, smiling ear to ear, "and the other kids made fun of him. I told them I see them more than their mothers do during the week and I am their second mom. I had such a beautiful experience because he told me I am not his second mom, I am his first mom."

"**THAT**, for me, was the greatest," she said, her blue eyeshadowed eyes a little moist when she finished her story

The teachers have devoted nine Saturdays without pay to the project and spend their Wednesday lunch hour in the school library or auditorium working with the Peace Army.

"Even though Saturday is family time for them, it's worth it," said volunteer Sylvia de Pérez, turning in her seat to look at Vargas. "Just look at Dary, she is so happy."

But even the Peace Army has worries -but it's a good problem.

"My only concern about the Peace Army is that it will grow too fast," Johnson said. "People want to jump in and help but they want me to go to this school or that school, but what we have to do is do it really well in one school first and prove that it works. We have to walk our talk."

EVENTUALLY, Johnson wants to be able to prove her army works and then spread to each and every school in Costa Rica.

Cynthia Rojas teaches second grade and also gives afternoon classes to women in the Buen Pastor jail. She has noticed a difference in using the techniques she has learned through the Peace Army with the women and her other students.

"Every experience leaves a mark, whether it's good or bad," she said on her way to the jail. "The women at the jail are more resentful of themselves and society and it's much harder to teach them about non-violent communication and controlling their anger."

Although the women in jail are tough, the elementary school students are not always angels.

"My second graders are pretty wild," Rojas said. "When someone acts out, I ask the whole class 'How has that student acted?' And everyone says 'they're acting like the jackal.'"

ROJAS summed up the whole project very succinctly: "Our lives are bombarded everyday with violence and hatred and we are learning to bombard others with non-violence."

For more info, call Johnson at 282-6576 or e-mail rasur@mail.com

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- Cynthia Rojas
Second Grade Teacher