

Dr. Nina Meyerhof & Children of the Earth: Planting Seeds of Global Peace

Roberta Nubile

When I first heard of peace activist Dr. Nina Meyerhof through a mutual friend, I soon wondered why I hadn't before. After meeting Meyerhof for an interview in between her many travels, I understood. Her self-described "Johnny Appleseed" method of global peace efforts—moving about, planting seeds, too busy to publicize her many accomplishments—has made her less of a household name than colleagues like Jane Goodall or Deepak Chopra. Her efforts toward the cause of peace are no less remarkable, however.

Raised in Vermont and

Switzerland, Meyerhof is an international educator, speaker, writer, peace activist, and founder of the South Burlington-based Children of the Earth (COE). COE is a non-profit United Nations-recognized NGO whose mission is to inspire young people to become peace builders. She is also a founder of the Vermont Peace Academy, a non-profit organization that promotes the teaching, learning and practice of peace through education in nonviolent communication, diversity, cross-culture understanding, and leadership.

Meyerhof's work spans 40

years and is guided by one single doctrine: that children have great potential for bringing about world peace. Her appreciation for children, which "is just something that is a part of me," she says, feeds her unwavering passion for teaching peace as first and foremost an inner process of self-esteem, and realizing one's own unique potential to bring about change.

Passion, skills, work and play, are all woven together in Meyerhof's life.

During summer breaks from her job as Special Education Coordinator for a ten-school district in southern Vermont, and while pursuing advanced degrees in educational policy, Meyerhof started a values-based children's farm camp in her family's Southern Vermont home that ran for three decades. "The focus was no rules," Meyerhof says, and that "we were in life together. What were the new standards?"

The camp, called Heart's Bend, ran from 1970 to 2000 and became a well-known accredited alternative program. The children, ages 4-18, worked in the garden, cooked, cleaned, and held family councils where issues were discussed. The older children cared for the younger. Meyerhof encouraged the children to select their own activity, but once selected, "you were obligated to follow through," she



photo: Margaret Michniewicz
Children of the Earth founder Nina Meyerhof (above) at her Vermont home; (left) in Africa.



says. Heart's Bend alumni and photographer Richard Cole recalls his experience at the camp during middle school, writing on his Web site that, "It was the summer between sixth and seventh grade. I was at 'Heart's Bend,'

a summer camp in Newfane, Vermont. Heart's Bend was not like other summer camps that I had been to, and I doubt that there is any other like it. I went to this summer camp for four years. There is something about



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those four summers that has affected my personality in a significant way. I can not be sure what it was exactly that had such an effect on me, but after Heart's Bend I was never the same again, nor did I wish to be."

In 1990 Heart's Bend hosted an international leadership camp that brought together 33 young people from 20 different countries. The group composed a proclamation called The Children's Declaration for Peace (see sidebar), which Meyerhof says, "They wrote with their hearts, not their egos. Their declaration became the inspiration for the next 20 years of my work." They travelled to The Children's World Seminar at the U.N. in New York City to present the declaration. From there they went to New Jersey for an expected 10-minute private audience with the Dalai Lama. Meyerhof says, "It turned into one and a half hours, where the Dalai Lama blessed the Children's Torch of Hope, which was then carried to youth events throughout the world."

This event sparked the next phase of Meyerhof's quest to bring her vision to the global community, and marked the birth of Children of the Earth. COE's presence now spans four continents and 50 countries, and operates through programs called Social Action Chapters and Spirit Youth Hubs, events such as World Spirit Youth Councils, and a virtual network called SpiritYouth, "where youth come together online to talk about spirituality as part of a movement," says Meyerhof. The programs are consciously designed by Meyerhof to encourage youth to undergo personal and spiritual transformation, form community, act locally in a myriad of socially conscious initiatives specific to the cultural and social needs of that area, and then connect globally with like-minded youth.

First, Meyerhof finds the youth who are receptive to what COE offers. Through her contacts in the global community, Meyerhof identifies those who share her vision. "I look for young people that have the dream in them to help others," says Meyerhof. "We teach meditation, which helps one to find their inner authentic self. The quietude leads to self-acceptance, which leads to a vision of what one's life is about. We also talk about self-esteem, which is *not* rating self high or low in comparison to others, but finding out who you think you are and what you have to offer. A person who has inner awareness creates momentum in others. It's like combustion."

Meyerhof's interest in self-esteem is a cornerstone of her work in peace building and stems from an understanding of the needs of young people. Meyerhof's doctorate focus was on



(above) Pakistan - COE Chapter Leader, Ashfaq Hussain, impacts 14,000 children through his work with 20 teachers in 10 districts to improve the quality of education. During the recent floods in Pakistan, Ashfaq provided flood victims with fresh water, food, milk powder and tents for shelter. (right) Nepalese children in schoolhouse made possible via COE. (below) Map showing global reach of Children of the Earth

self-esteem in development. "I have always advocated for those that didn't fit in and wanted to empower them to be all they could be," she says. Meyerhof developed a self-esteem model to be used in schools and also co-authored the book *Conscious Education: The Bridge To Freedom* with Vermont peace activist Dot Maver and Montessori pioneer Phillip Snow Gang.

Through her work in self-esteem, Meyerhof developed several theories about what it takes to create a peaceful individual. "The first is that we recognize all human beings as individuals and that we are all part of the family of human kind - that disharmony is our own creation," she explains. "Therefore, developing one's spirituality is key. First and foremost is a love of self and finding our unique gifts through meditation."

COE's programs adapt to the culture they inhabit. Ron Miller, an author and activist in the field of holistic education calls his colleague's accomplishments across cultures impressive. "Remote islands in the Philippines, a village in Africa. She energizes people - not just kids, but whole communities," he says. "She is completely convinced that empowering young people to become aware of what is going on in the world and address it in local ways, by becoming part of a local network, then knitting that into a global network, is the way to heal the world. She has a total com-

mitment to her vision."

In her own words, Meyerhof describes her work as depending on the where and the what. "I never go as a voyeur," she says. "I would incorporate myself into village life. We create



environments that support the process. We may call on an elder or spiritual leader in the community to help with the process but we allow the youth to find their way. They are resistant to being downloaded on, so I would invite the question - how do I

match what I have inside to what I want to know?"

Dot Maver, PhD, president of the National Peace Academy, and a friend and colleague of Meyerhof's for over 30 years, further illustrates how Meyerhof does her work wherever she happens to be with a story about September 11th. According to Maver, Meyerhof was in New York for the U.N.'s International Day of Peace, meeting with then-Secretary General Kofi Annan, Jane Goodall, and other peace activists. "They were about to ring the peace bell at 9 am when they got news that the first plane had hit. They evacuated the U.N. Nina, instead of heading for safety, headed north to Ground Zero and immediately

to create something of apparently nothing, as with her organization, and does so with joy and sustained commitment."

And her next phase? Meyerhof has planted many seeds of peace throughout the world and recently challenged herself to travel less, take on a leadership role and build infrastructure with a strong foundation to COE, now 20 years old. "I want to create a spiritual hub for COE in Vermont, so the work can sustain itself on many levels," says Meyerhof. To that end she has developed COE's Web site and a monthly newsletter, and has a handbook and template in the works. "I want to pull everything together and give it a new platform," she says.



approached leaders of fire brigade and policemen and women saying, 'You have to give us a space for the children who are already impacted'," Maver explains. "Nina was given a corner of the armory closest to Ground Zero and proceeded to create a healing center for the children impacted by 9/11. This center was supported by Mayor Giuliani, Michael Jackson, Raffi, and the Clintons. FAO Schwartz donated toys. Children of the Earth made all that possible. Following that, President Bush honored Nina at the White House with a National Service recognition award for her work with the children who were impacted by 9/11."

Meyerhof is one of many women peace activists in Vermont and throughout the world and describes meeting kindred spirits: "We hear the connectivity in our voices," she says. "As women we express ourselves differently. We are strong but not aggressive when we stand in our authenticity. Men build dynasties, women build collectives."

One of those kindred spirits is Cami Davis, a professor of art at the University of Vermont (UVM) and environmental and peace activist, who worked with Meyerhof at the Earth Charter and the Summit for Peace at UVM. "What strikes me about Nina is her courage," Davis says. "Her indefatigable dedication to the spiritual dimension of children is so clear that it permits her to go into the international arena without hesitating and interact with world leaders. She seems

Still, there is that trip to plan in 2012 to bring youth to meet with Mayan elders in Guatemala. Johnny Appleseed never actually stopped planting seeds either.

Roberta Nubile lives in Shelburne. □

The Children's Declaration for Peace

Authored cooperatively by 32 children from 21 different countries, ages 11-19 on September 1990 at Neufane, Vermont, USA.

In the name of love, unity and harmony, we, the children of the world, declare that now is the time for peace. As creators of a better tomorrow, we envision social and environmental equilibrium, individual and international co-operation and the fulfillment of human potential as global goals.

As part of the earth's living system, our harmonious co-existence with nature is essential for the sustainability of humanity.

We pledge our support to the United Nations. However, we also stress the need for a more equitable distribution of power to all countries to encourage the evolution of peace. We desire self-determination for all people and hope that the emerging leaders guide rather than govern.

We, the children, as one of the world's greatest untapped resources, accept the responsibility to further the love, unity and harmony which exist in peace. □

COE organized 2,000 young people in Thailand, which led to the development of the "Peace Revolution Program."

