

Pax Christi honors D.C. couple, New Orleans priest

By John Zokovitch

WASHINGTON, D.C. — At an awards ceremony which included social justice advocates from across the United States, Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement, recognized the work of Mary Joan and Jerry Park by naming them the recipients of this year's Teacher of Peace Award. The Parks were honored for their long commitment to teaching peace and nonviolence to children through their Washington, D.C.-based organization Little Friends for Peace. Past Teacher of Peace Award recipients include Dorothy Day, Rev. Daniel Berrigan, S.J., Sr. Helen Prejean, C.S.J., and Msgr. Ray East, who was on hand to formally present the award to the Parks.

"Jerry and I are humbled, honored, grateful and energized to receive this award," stated Mary Joan Park. "We are all peacemakers, peace-builders, peace partners, and we are all on this journey to build a culture of peace. Tonight is a great night to honor and recognize all teachers of peace, of making this a career, validating this mission of peacemaking."

The Park's were honored by Pax Christi USA at a ceremony at the National 4H Conference Center in Chevy Chase, Maryland. The couple has been working in the Sursum Corda neighborhood in D.C. for the past twenty years, and ten years ago they opened up the Peace Room in the Perry School in that neighborhood.

"Martin Luther King, Jr. said that 'every good thing starts with a dream,' and Gandhi said that 'if we want real peace in this world, we shall have to begin with the children,'" said Mary Joan Park. "Jerry and I believe this is our calling, and we are grateful to the God of Peace for leading and guiding us as Teachers of Peace."

Several children, participants in Little Friends for Peace, were on hand to share in the ceremony, and Anne Little, a mom, teacher, and community worker who has worked with the Parks to curb violence,

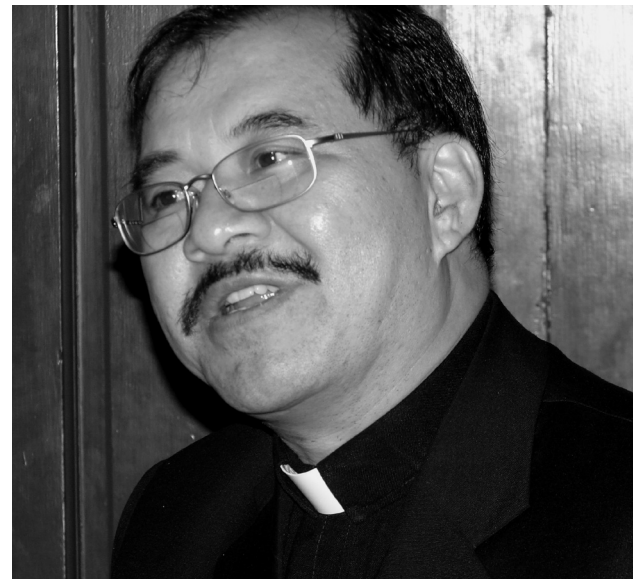
joined them as well. Leaders of Pax Christi USA regions, many of whom have had members attend one of the Parks' many peace camps, were also in attendance.

"We hear so often how important it is to pass peacemaking skills on to children, especially in this culture which glorifies violence," said Dave Robinson, Pax Christi USA Executive Director. "Mary Joan and Jerry have made this their life's work, and their dedication to teaching peace to new generations is essential if our children are to know a better, more peaceful, more just world than what we have now."

Also honored at the awards ceremony was Rev. Vien Nguyen, pastor of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in New Orleans. Rev. Nguyen is the second recipient of the Eileen Egan Peacemaker Award, named for one of Pax Christi USA's founders and given to recognize an extraordinary witness during times of great crisis or conflict. Rev. Nguyen was recognized for his efforts at rebuilding and organizing his community in New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

"When the Pax Christi USA National Council visited New Orleans to see first-hand the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, over and over again we heard that we needed to meet this incredible priest and his community in New Orleans East," said Judy Coode, former chair of the Pax Christi USA National Council. "Rev. Nguyen's community had a 95% return rate in an area that has seen only 45% of its people return; but more than that, he has continued to fight for the dignity and rights of his people in the face of the injustice which followed the storm."

Rev. Nguyen shared how his community stood up to the Bring Back New Orleans commission, explaining to the commission that they were making decisions which affected the lives of church members and that they deserved to have a place at the table and



REV. VIEN NGUYEN, recipient of the Eileen Egan Peacemaker Award. (photo by John Zokovitch)

in the decision-making process. He went on to share how they continue to fight a new landfill which was placed just over a mile from their church, in their neighborhood, which is mainly African American and Vietnamese American.

"New Orleans East has been dumped on for the past many years because we are a minority community," Rev. Nguyen stated. "They did not think that we would fight this landfill. But they were wrong. We did, and we will continue to fight."

Rev. Nguyen also shared about his community's efforts at development rooted in self-determination, including starting a school, two clinics, and plans to build a senior center and an urban farm.

"To paraphrase the poet Robert Frost, we have accomplished much, but we have miles to go before we rest," said Rev. Nguyen.

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mentally ill. Then when they visit us they say, "Why are they so happy? Why are the kids thriving?"

MJ: My Dad is a businessman, and he kept telling us, "Stop giving it away. You've got to make it bigger, make some money from it." But that's not what Little Friends for Peace is about. The heart of it is simply peace, love, justice.

We follow a path of constant discernment, of being led. I remember all of this prayerfully. It led to Jerry's different jobs: community organizing around housing in St. Paul, placing unaccompanied minors from Cambodia and Vietnam with Lutheran Social Services, the Quixote Center, and before that a DC-Nicaragua friendship organization, Franciscan Mission Service. No trouble staying below the taxable income level with this kind of work! I took care of the kids and ran Little Friends for Peace, teaching peace wherever I could. For a while I was hired as a peace laboratory founder and director at a Catholic school, but when they ran into money problems they told us peace was "not essential" and they had to "give up the experiment." We came under Pax Christi's wing and used their 501(c)(3) until we incorporated on our own two years ago. Jerry decided to earn a nursing degree as something in the back pocket.

That was risky too, wasn't it?

Jerry: It wasn't easy, launching a second career at 50. We are always looking to the Vow to be guided. I truly believe God is still speaking.

MJ: My Franciscan, Pax Christi spirituality is the juice that keeps me centered. We shared some of the ministries of the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls while we were still in Minnesota, and they kept inviting us to join them as Associates. Sister Mary Zerbis got behind Little Friends from the Diocesan Office for Social Justice. She had the vision of bringing our curriculum into religious education programs, and they did adopt it as part of the packet. It provides a practical way to address peace. Then Pax Christi asked for new books based in scripture, so we developed those, the Family Guidebook and the Family

Notebook.

The Franciscan sisters told us they had an East Coast Affiliates group that met seasonally, so we went to join the circle. We couldn't resist their gift of hospitality—that thing Jesus did so well; making a big deal out of everything and everybody. We took the vow here as Franciscan Associates. We try to practice their mission statement: "To live the Gospel joyfully and courageously in continuous conversion, we seek solidarity with persons who are poor. We reverence and preserve all of God's creation. We recognize the need for healing in ourselves and in our world."

Jerry, when did you join Christian Peacemaker Teams, and why?

Jerry: I joined it in 2004 as a way to learn from other peacemakers and experiment. Part of the training was a delegation to a CPT site. I went to Hebron, met some gutsy Palestinian, American and Jewish peacemakers, and was moved. Deeper into the experience, I'm impressed by the difficulty of keeping a peace dynamic within the team. Race comes into it, and gender, and differences of philosophy, like confrontation versus bridge-building. Peacemaking is a self-revealing and humbling challenge. It is not for wimps.

Tell me about your new project.

MJ: The Teacher of Peace Award gave us the push to do something we've been talking about for a long time. We have been feeling the need for a peace center of our own, ever since my family sold the camp I directed as a young teacher. This year we found a place near Upper Marlboro, Maryland that we plan to make into an Oasis of Peace, where we will welcome Washington/Baltimore-area children into the skills of peacemaking close to the earth.

There's a tobacco barn that we can convert for workshops and a peace museum. There are cattle and horses across the road. A two-mile bike ride away is the 5,000-acre Patuxent River Park and migratory bird sanctuary with boats, kayaks, and canoes to rent, a free pontoon boat tour led by a naturalist,

a museum, and lots of trails and campsites. Our son PJ, who bicycled from D.C. to southern Mexico, will maintain the bikes. We're launching a capital campaign, the first time we've ever done anything of that sort. And the kids have been great supporters, in ways that are just amazing us.

You teach respect for people and the earth as a way to transform our addiction to war and fighting. What would the world be like if you achieved your vision?

MJ: It would feel good: more love, less stress, less feeling like you haven't made it or aren't part of something. It would not be attached to violence; violence would not be allowed. Instead of the gun in the back pocket that's so easy to pull out if someone hurts me or offends me, we would all have other tools. We need to eliminate that option and use the gifts of love, sharing, cooperation. We would still have differences; I may still not understand why you act the way you do, but the tools we are attached to would be different. They would be the tools that Little Friends provides, like clear communication, affirmation, and creative conflict resolution.

Jerry: The world would be aware of all of its parts, all functioning together without competition, without isolating the weak. It would be aware of everyone's gifts, knowing that we don't thrive unless we thrive together.

I basically see myself as a peacemaking teacher, sharing what I learn. But I'm most interested in what you're going through, whoever you are. How is your imagination being stirred? What are your dreams? What fires your hope, and fuels your journey?

For more information on Little Friends for Peace, you can visit their website at www.lffp.org. Little Friends offers a variety of resources for peace education and family peacemaking.

If you are interested in hearing more about the Peace Education Oasis, contact Jerry Park, at littlefriendsforpeace@yahoo.com or Tommy Park, Development Director, at tspark@gmail.com or 240-899-8421.