

# Nobel PURSUITS

**It's been 10 years since Jes Ward first heard of the PeaceJam program when she was in high school; now she helps run it. In that time she's seen thousands of youth learn that the only thing more inspiring than the lives of Nobel Peace Prize Winners is the chance to follow in their footsteps.**



IVAN SUVANJIEFF MOVED FROM DETROIT to Denver in the early 1980s. A musician and artist, he specialized in punk rock and large black and white abstract paintings.

One weekday afternoon in 1993, he stepped outside his North Denver artist's loft and noticed a group of neighborhood teenagers on the street corner. The local media had dubbed the previous summer the "Summer of Violence" in the Mile High City because of the unusually high amount of gang activity, drive-by shootings, and other youth-on-youth violence. North Denver in particular was notorious as a haven for gangs. But Suvanjiëff continued walking toward the kids on his corner, recognizing several of them as boys he had known since they were in elementary school.

When he approached them and asked why they weren't in school, they replied that they had "a business to run"—dealing drugs. Suvanjiëff thought quickly and began prodding further.

"You have to be pretty smart to run a business," he said. "Who's the president of the United States?" They all answered with a shrug and an "I dunno." One added, "Why should we care? He doesn't represent us, he doesn't care what happens in our barrio. So why should we care about him?"

Suvanjiëff stopped and thought for a moment. "A lot of people feel that way," he said. "At some point in time, everyone has felt like they aren't being represented." Trying to make his point, he mentioned the

apartheid system in South Africa, and the boys became animated. He was surprised to find that they not only knew about the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, they were excited to talk about it. Suvanjiëff allowed himself to wonder, "What would happen if these boys got the opportunity to meet Desmond Tutu? Would they become less apathetic? Could they be inspired enough by his presence to get involved in their own communities?"

These questions stuck with Suvanjiëff for months, but they seemed ridiculous. What Nobel Peace Laureate would have the time or interest in traveling to North Denver to work with teenagers?

Then Suvanjiëff met Dawn Engle, a fellow transplant from Detroit who was the youngest woman ever to serve as chief of staff for a United States senator. She had also spent 13 years working on Free Tibet campaigns, during which time she had gotten to know the Dalai Lama.

Suvanjiëff was in disbelief—"No one from Detroit knows the Dalai Lama," was his first response—but he eventually convinced Engle to arrange an audience with the Dalai Lama to see what that Nobel Peace Laureate might think of coming to work with North Denver's youth. Suvanjiëff had approximately two dollars in his bank account, and Engle, a single mother, was not much better off. But they scraped together enough money to make the trip to Dharamsala, India.

It was worth it. The Dalai Lama was intrigued by Suvanjiëff's idea and promised his participation if the pair could get 10 other Nobel Peace Laureates to agree to be involved as well. From Suvanjiëff's artist's loft, they began cold calling Nobel Peace Laureates around the world. Desmond Tutu granted them a meeting. So did 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum, who fought for the rights of indigenous people in Guatemala, and 1987 winner President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, who engineered a peace agreement among all Central American countries in the 1980s. Engle and Suvanjiëff flew around the world on borrowed money, stayed in shady hotels or airport lobbies, and got a group of 11 Nobel Peace Prize winners to agree to be a part of their project.

But what exactly was this project? It needed a name, and a defined mission. Suvanjiëff, the artist and musician, envisioned youth coming together to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas for improving their local communities. They would each bring a different perspective and then be able to create one large initiative that would impact more and more youth as the program grew. It reminded him of musicians coming together for a jam session, except this would be youth coming together to have a jam session about peace. He called the program PeaceJam, and he and Engle identified its mission as being "to inspire a new generation of peacemak-



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**PeaceJammers with (clockwise from left) Nobel Peace Laureates Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, and the Dalai Lama.**

ers who will transform their local communities, themselves, and the world.”

PeaceJam has since become an international education program built around the participation of leading Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, who work personally with youth to teach peacemaking skills, pass on wisdom, and inspire hope. In 1996, the first PeaceJam Youth Conference took place in Denver, Colorado, with a keynote address by 1976 Nobel Peace Laureate Betty Williams, who helped launch a grassroots peace movement in Northern Ireland. Since then, 200,000 youth have participated in more than 100 conferences and other events through the program. There are now roughly a dozen PeaceJam conferences held around the world each year. PeaceJam’s headquarters is still located in a suburb of Denver, but there are affiliate offices throughout the United States. In 1997, the first PeaceJam conference outside of the United States took place on Robben Island in South Africa with Nobel Peace Laureates Desmond Tutu and Betty Williams. There are now PeaceJam youth programs in India, South Africa, Guatemala, Kenya, Mexico, Argentina, and Costa Rica. Peace Jam is the only organization in the world with 14 Nobel Peace Laureates on its board of directors, each of whom actively participates in the program.

Although the scope of PeaceJam has grown since Ivan Suvanjiieff confronted those teenagers on his North Denver

street corner in 1993, the program’s main goals have stayed true to his original vision. PeaceJam recognizes the enormous dangers and disadvantages facing many teenagers today. But it also recognizes the potential of all youth, no matter who they are and where they’ve been, to turn their lives around and become forces for peace. To help spur these transformations, the program draws upon the ground-breaking work of Nobel Peace Laureates, some of the most inspiring figures on Earth. By bringing these Laureates face-to-face with teenagers from around the world, they not only inspire with their presence and testify to what a single person can accomplish, they also send the message that these kids matter—that they’re capable of living up to the legacy of any Nobel Peace Prize winner. And based on the program’s results, it’s become clear that this message resonates with participants. Evaluation data from PeaceJam participants shows that 93% of those who participate in a PeaceJam Youth Conference leave believing that “one person can make a difference,” and 97% say that because of their experience in PeaceJam, they will be peacemakers for the rest of their lives.

So how exactly does PeaceJam translate Suvanjiieff and Engle’s vision into a concrete program with such positive results? The PeaceJam curriculum is based on a model of education, inspiration, and action. Through schools, community

organizations, and faith-based organizations, groups of teenagers get together with an adult sponsor and work with their closest PeaceJam affiliate office to participate in the program. They begin their involvement in PeaceJam by studying the life and times of the Nobel Peace Laureate who has agreed to come to their region to work with them. Through role-playing exercises, discussion, readings, and keeping journals of their thoughts, students confront challenging questions about the root causes of violence and oppression, and offer their own conclusions on how to stop them. Next, they begin to explore the true meaning of peace—whether, for instance, it means something more than the absence of violence—and consider what it means to be a peacemaker.

The final portion of their studies focuses specifically on the case study of their Nobel Peace Laureate, their issue, and how they went about working to make change. Integral to each case study is the point that the Nobel Laureates were not born as super humans. Instead they were ordinary people who decided that they could not sit idly by and watch injustices inflicted on others. This is the power of the PeaceJam program: It gives young people real-life examples of how individuals truly can make a difference.

But the PeaceJam curriculum is only the first step. The truly inspiring part of the program is the PeaceJam Youth Confer-



1996 Nobel Peace Laureate José Ramos-Horta of East Timor poses with a group of punk rock PeaceJammers from New Mexico.

ence, where participants meet the Nobel Peace Laureate they've been studying for the previous several months. At 8:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning, the groups of students from around a region converge on a university campus to take part in the two-day conference. PeaceJam's founders chose university campuses as the location for conferences because many of the young people who participate in PeaceJam often suffer from self-doubt, and fear they aren't smart enough to attend college, to the point that they never even think of applying. By bringing these youth to a college campus, and connecting them with the college students who act as small group facilitators at the conference, the program aims to show kids that they have what it takes to go to college if they want to.

The cornerstone of the PeaceJam conference is the keynote address by the visiting Nobel Laureate. Over the years, these speeches have reflected the varied experiences of the Laureates and the different lessons of their lives. PeaceJammers have heard Rigoberta Menchú Tum discuss how to heal communities torn apart by racism and violence, drawing upon her own experiences in Guatemala. In one of his addresses, 1996 Nobel Peace Laureate José Ramos-Horta of East Timor discussed the difficulties in creating peace and democracy, and emphasized the importance of determination and endurance when faced with such

seemingly impossible tasks. 1997 Laureate Jody Williams, founder of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, has spoken at several conferences, urging participants to recognize their own ability to promote social change. It is hard to overstate the impact of these speeches. At one conference in Denver, now 96-year-old Peace Laureate Sir Joseph Rotblat spoke for two hours about his decision to quit working on the Manhattan Project in 1944, and his subsequent dedication to ending the proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world. His speech ran straight through lunch, and there was not a whisper to be heard from the participating high school students.

Yet the visiting Nobel Laureate is much more than a keynote speaker. Following the keynote address, youth are given the opportunity to ask questions. It's a forum just for them and the Laureate—no teachers, no press, no interruptions. The message to the youth is that their voices have value, that they are important enough to ask questions of a world leader. Often the Nobel Laureates have noted that the most difficult questions they have ever been asked have come from PeaceJammers. PeaceJam is so committed to making sure that every participant's voice is heard that at the end of the question and answer session, the youth who still haven't had their questions answered go to a private room for lunch and more discussion with the Laureate. For the

rest of the afternoon, youth participate in small group discussions and service projects throughout the community. The evening consists of a celebration, themed according to the Laureate's cultural heritage, and a poetry slam by the PeaceJam participants.

To deepen the connection between the youth participants and the Laureate, day two of the conference starts with the Ceremony of Inspiration. PeaceJam firmly believes that it is important for people to take care of themselves and have ways to find comfort when times get rough, whether through involvement in a religion, spending time with family and friends, playing sports, or listening to music. At the Ceremony of Inspiration, the Nobel Laureate shares what it is that inspires him or her on a daily basis. Afterward, students are invited to come to the stage and share their own sources of inspiration. These sources can be as seemingly minor as an anecdote a participant's grandmother once shared with her, but they all serve to remind the audience that small details kindle the fires of inspiration for each individual, whether a Nobel Laureate or high school student.

But all this inspiration would go nowhere without a plan for action. That's why on Sunday afternoon, students share the stage once more with the guest of honor and make a pledge to create positive change. Each of the student groups that attend the conference, representing different schools

or community groups within their region, creates a PeacePlan to address a problem they see in their communities. The definition of community is up to the group, as is the definition of positive change. Their projects range from planting and maintaining a community garden to addressing fair vs. free trade legislation in their state. In front of 300 of their peers and the Nobel Laureate, groups share the impact that they hope to make with their projects and their plans for implementation. To have the Nobel Laureate bear witness to their project presentation empowers and validates each young person's vision for a better world. At the same time, with each passing year, PeaceJam has seen deepening levels of sophistication in the issues students are choosing to address.

The service projects are implemented throughout the next several months and are reported on at the PeaceJam Slam, a one-day follow-up conference at which the same groups of students report on the good work they have done, and learn which Nobel Laureate will be visiting their site next year. The cycle starts again with another year of uniting young people with some of the world's greatest leaders, inspiring the youth to transform themselves, their communities, and the world.

I was one of those youth who felt transformed by the inspirational power of PeaceJam. I first got involved in the program in 1996, when I was a freshman in high school. I had recently moved in with my grandmother, who was caring for me and my four siblings as my mother struggled with addiction problems. To make matters worse, I had to transfer to a new high school where I knew no one. Separated from my life-long friends, I would pace the halls alone at lunch and between classes.

It was during one of those lonely walks through the halls that a teacher approached me and asked if I would be interested in joining a club. Before long I was a regular at PeaceJam's lunchtime meetings and joined my fellow club members in various service projects. Every Sunday members would visit patients in low-income senior homes—not just for an hour, but for the entire day. Every Friday we gathered to make 100 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, which we delivered to homeless children in Denver. We participated in marches, fasts, campaigns, and projects that brought about positive change in communities across the state.

At my first PeaceJam Youth Conference, Archbishop Desmond Tutu presided. He spoke to us from the heart and addressed us as those who held the future in our hands. He answered our questions honestly, and made sure we told him our names before we nervously addressed him in front of our peers. He was present at every conference activity, including the urban park clean up and the break-dancing at our block party in downtown Denver. He excited within each of us the desire to turn our anger, alienation, and frustration at the state of the world into action to create something better.

Throughout my nine years with PeaceJam, I have seen all aspects of the program and witnessed its impact from the ground up. Every day there are youth like me writing emails, calling, and stopping by to let us know how the program has changed their lives. PeaceJam creates a family of youth committed to taking on the world's problems, and the family grows by leaps and bounds every year.

In 2006, PeaceJam is bringing together 12 of its participating Nobel Peace Laureates and 3,000 youth from around the world to celebrate the program's 10-year anniversary. This will be the largest gathering of Nobel Peace Laureates outside of Oslo, Norway, where the prize is given, and will be held at the University of Denver. Keeping true to the promise of PeaceJam to be a youth-focused program, adults are not eligible to enter the conference unless they are an official sponsor of a group of PeaceJammers in attendance. Delegations from around the United States—as well as India, Guatemala, South Africa, Costa Rica, East Timor, and several other countries where PeaceJam is running—will attend this once-in-a-lifetime event, seeking inspiration from the Dalai Lama, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, President Arias, and others.

After 10 years, PeaceJam has never strayed from the belief that inspiration lies within each individual and just needs to be brought out through encouragement, modeling, and the reminder that every person is capable of great things. As one student wrote after her first PeaceJam experience, "PeaceJam says, 'I know you've got promise and potential.' PeaceJam reaches in and pulls it out of you."

**Jes Ward** has been involved with PeaceJam for nine years—first as a participant, now as the director of PeaceJam's headquarters office, based in Denver.

## Stronger and Smarter

BY RUDY BALLE (as told to Jason Marsh)

I was in a neighborhood gang in Pueblo, Colorado, about two hours outside of Denver. The steel mill closed down in my city, which laid off a lot of workers. Jobs were really scarce, especially for the Chicano community out there. In the depression of the period, people searched for love in all the wrong places. I think a lot of us looked to gangs for what we weren't getting at home. The only way we thought we were going to make it was in the total idea of the violent life—of just carrying a gun and robbing for what was ours and keeping whatever made us happy and riding that to the fullest.

But when I heard Rigoberta Menchú Tum speak at a PeaceJam conference, that told me something else. She looked so little. Then I heard her story of having to put up with her mom and dad being so heinously murdered, and of her having the courage and spiritual strength to continue to do what was right, and to speak up for the justice of the Mayan people in Guatemala. I had thought I needed to be bigger and badder and scarier than everybody else on my street so that I could get some respect. But when I saw this Mayan woman stand up without using any of those tools, she made me realize that I needed to do something smarter. I saw that what my grandmother was asking of me at the time was very reasonable: to leave the gang, to love my family more, and to do something better for other people, not just for my own self-indulgence.

I started going to community college and got a degree in computer graphics and web design. Then I got a job as the director of the Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP) in Denver. I work with young people in my own community around gang issues, and we have weekly support groups. We kind of have an AA for gang members. We just talk about life. We don't talk about how the Crips and the Bloods are doing or how the homies are doing, but how we're doing.

I'm not moving out of the hood. I'm not forgetting about anyone where I live. I love my friends. Some of them might have hurt me, but I still love them. That's what I've learned from Rigoberta Menchú Tum and the other Nobel Laureates: forgive, and continue to work toward healing.