

Interview with Joshua Saleem
Peace Education Director, AFSC St. Louis
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(Joshua Saleem, center, began work with AFSC this spring to create a peace education program in St. Louis modeled after similar AFSC work with youth in Los Angeles —shown above—and elsewhere. In this interview with regional staffer Jon Krieg, Joshua shares what he's learned, his vision for AFSC's work in St. Louis, and why he's involved.)

JON – Please tell me about your recent visit to Los Angeles and your tour of AFSC work there.

JOHSUA – I have been talking with AFSC staff in Los Angeles about what methods they use, what works and what doesn't. It was a great experience to be with the kids and see the program in action, to interact with the schools and teachers, and to have my questions answered in person.

I visited three different schools where AFSC is involved. The first school, Academic Leadership Community School, offers non-profit groups a chance to come into the school during the last period in order to talk about social justice and community issues. I was able to sit with the kids as they worked on an action.

The two issues they were working on were police brutality and the recent Arizona ban on Hispanic studies. The kids worked on posters and pamphlets to pass out about these issues and on organizing a protest. It was cool to see how the kids took on the work as their own. AFSC staff Crystal Gonzalez serves as a facilitator. The kids had great involvement and were very knowledgeable about and engaged with the issues.

Another really impressive school where AFSC works is All Peoples. There, the kids were so excited by their peace garden, which they had been involved with from the very beginning planning through fruition. The kids were more than happy to talk with me about the different fruit and vegetables they had grown themselves and which they were using at their school. They had two groups of kids – one which watered the plants and maintained the garden, and another which used food from the garden to make snacks for the whole class.

This civic engagement in action is very powerful for the kids. They're learning hands-on. One girl is now growing a garden at home. I'm looking forward to incorporating this model of civic engagement and public achievement in St. Louis.

JON – How do you see translating AFSC's work in Los Angeles to St. Louis?

JOSHUA – One thing I'm going to borrow from the L.A. program is their "head, heart and hand" model to empower students to be positive agents of change. In St. Louis, we'll first engage hearts through AFSC's Help Increase the Peace (HIP) curriculum – this involves nonviolence and conflict resolution training to help build relationships with the kids as a group. It focuses on their self-esteem, cooperation, their ability to dialogue with and listen to others, and how to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Once a rapport is built within the group, the kids will engage their heads by taking a critical look at their schools and community – mapping out what's good and what's negative or not beneficial. My guess is that trash and the need to clean up their community may be one issue. Another is the abundance of vacant lots and abandoned homes. Others might be the lack of grocery stores and the prevalence of liquor stores, the lack of jobs and employment prospects.

The kids will look at why their community has these needs. How did it come to be this way? What's the role and history of racism in St. Louis? We'll connect these questions to the widening income gap, other economic justice issues and militarism. Why do we spend so much on the military but not on education? So in this way, we'll engage their heads.

In AFSC's civic engagement model, it's not just enough to see what's wrong; what will the kids develop to work on these issues? AFSC's role is to facilitate. How will we increase jobs?

How can we get community and resource leaders to come together? The kids will decide what they want to work on. A peace garden would be an option for addressing the lack of grocery stores.

I was moved by a quotation which Michael McConnell, the new Regional Director for the new Midwest Region, recently shared from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” So through this program we’ll bandage the wounds of violence by developing the kids’ ability to resolve personal conflicts peacefully. Then we’ll drive a spoke into the wheel of injustice by educating them on systemic injustices and having them engage in a project that will positively impact their community.

JON – We hear a lot about the problems which young people face in our communities. What are some strengths they have?

JOSHUA – The schools themselves are often a positive. We talk about the lack of quality education, but there can be a real sense of community and a culture of family in our schools. That’s one reason schools are so receptive to partnering with AFSC. It’s very positive to have administrators and teachers who care and who want to see the community improve.

Another strength is the resiliency of the kids themselves. Growing up in these communities they are immersed in risk factors, yet these are some of the brightest, most energetic, and talented kids you’ll ever meet. So the kids themselves are a huge strength in the community.

JON – How many schools will AFSC work with in St. Louis?

JOSHUA – We’ve identified four schools which are open to our program starting next fall. One is a new, small charter school in the city. This is a good charter school which takes kids who’ve dropped out or have been kicked out of other schools. Some may have had teen pregnancies or been wrapped up in the juvenile justice system, so they’re older kids.

Another is a magnet school which is excited about AFSC’s program. They have a strong culture of pulling for their kids’ success and engaging partners to help build that success. Since their curriculum is based on legal studies, we might explore the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a way to talk about larger issues.

What rights do we have as a community, for example?

There's an inner suburban high school which faces many of the same problems as the city schools, such as gun violence and HIV. Last year they had a security person put a student in critical condition following an altercation. There's a real opportunity there to build a culture of peace.

The fourth school we're looking at has an issue with gangs and a wide income disparity among its students. Some kids live in \$500,000 homes while others live in Section 8 housing. There would be a good opportunity to consider income inequality and its origins.

We've had good conversations with all these schools, and AFSC's Program Committee in St. Louis will decide what's doable and what's best for our program. We'll then decide how many to start with in the fall.

JON – What's your background? Why do you do this work?

JOSHUA – I grew up in St. Louis. In my family, it was always emphasized that whatever talents or gifts you've been given, they're for the common good of your community and world. You need to share.

Right out of high school, I realized that the graduation rate in St. Louis is only 60%. I had gone to a private, Catholic high school. I realized that my path could have been very different. I feel a calling to serve my community and to share with kids the tools and skills I've been given. I want my skills to benefit them and I want to see them succeed.

The negative perception of St. Louis is not going to change with some outside organization trying to impose its values. Our future is in the hands, hearts and heads of young people here. AFSC's role is to empower them to do the hard work of making their immediate circle one of peace, and then extending that circle to their neighborhoods and schools so that there's a community of peace there, as well.

In my previous position, our organization targeted those young kids who are most vulnerable, those who'd fallen through the cracks, fallen behind, or had a history of behavioral issues. It's easy to make an impact on kids who have a lot of resources and whose families are intact. I have a heart for helping the most vulnerable kids and seeing them change.

JON – How do AFSC and Quaker values fit?

JOSHUA – I've had a chance to study the Quaker testimonies and see AFSC's values of justice, peace and equality to be very powerful for the community. I love the chance to incorporate those values in the curriculum we're laying out for the kids.