

MARStar

Spring
2010

Newsletter of the Middle Atlantic Region, American Friends Service Committee

“Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe..” – FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Conversations about race and equity

BY BROOKE McDONALD



Students from Baltimore's Civitas School visit the White House

Our world views, as well as opportunities that are available, depend on our background. Definitions of peace, education and equality change according to the experiences of those defining the words. One factor that affects the way we live and relate to each other is race.

Although it is not always a primary focus, the American Friends Service Committee's commitment to the dignity and worth of each person frequently fosters work on the complicated issues of racism and inequity. Dialogues give us a starting place to gather correct information and empower people to work together.

In West Virginia, a collaborative effort by the Partnership of African American Churches, the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy and AFSC's West Virginia Economic Justice Program produced a substantive and comprehensive report titled "Legacy of Inequality: Racial and Economic Disparities in West Virginia." (The full report is available at <http://www.afsc.org/charleston/>). Findings confirm that deep disparities between the races exist across a broad range of variables, including income, poverty, education, health and incarceration. And yet, the purpose of the report is to form a foundation for community empowerment.

Reverend James Patterson comments, "The report briefly chronicles the experience of African Americans in West Virginia. It presents a data analysis of the inequities that have always been and continue to be central to that experience... It is hoped that the readers of this report will take this opportunity to engage in those actions that will write a new chapter in the legacy of people of color in the State of West Virginia."

The issues raised by statistics in the "Legacy of Inequality" report in West Virginia are echoed in the lived experiences of young people in Baltimore's Civitas School.

AFSC staff member Mia Jones recently used a Frederick Douglass quote to generate discussion with the Civitas students: "Where justice is denied, where

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A message from the Interim Regional Director

Dear Friends,

Most of you by now have heard the sad news from West Virginia of the methane explosion in the Upper Big Branch Mine in Montcoal that has left 29 miners dead.

MAR and AFSC have a long and deep history with families in the mining areas of West Virginia, dating back to the 1920s. When a fire killed two miners at Massey Energy's Aracoma Mine in 2006, Beth Spence, AFSC's coalfield specialist, served on the governor's investigatory committee, which found grave deficiencies in safety standards of Massey Energy and which subsequently led to sweeping new federal mine safety legislation. In the wake of this most recent tragedy,

safety standards at Massey Energy are once more being questioned. Our staff in West Virginia have attended a memorial service for the fallen miners at the State Capitol and Beth has once again been asked to join the investigatory team and play a part in providing support for the families and in renewing our commitment to coal mine safety.

We join the nation in grieving the loss of the miners and extend our deepest condolences to their families.

On a personal note, I arrived in Baltimore on January 14 after having driven over 3,000 miles from Seattle. The community of staff, volunteers, Quakers, collaborators and youths with whom I have become acquainted are some of the most caring people I have ever met. In Washington, DC, in Pittsburgh, in West Virginia, and in communities, prisons and schools in Maryland, MAR staff and volunteers help provide organized support, share critical skills and work together with diverse groups of people, building alliances and capacity to improve lives and address injustices and war.

We need your support to win the quest for justice and peace. If you are able to make a contribution of any size, please do so by using the enclosed envelope. Your gifts will be



The WV Coal Miner Statue

much appreciated and well used.

I also would like to encourage you to give us feedback on the MARStar newsletter by calling our editor and Interim Associate Director Brooke McDonald @ 410 232-4200 Ext. 225 or email bmcdonald@afsc.org.

I look forward to meeting many of you. Please come and visit us if you are in the area.

Respectfully,

Nina

Nina Laboy

Interim Regional Director
AFSC Middle Atlantic Region

The MARStar

published by the
Middle Atlantic Region,
American Friends
Service
Committee

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Join us in celebrating peace

Join us for a FREE one-day series of workshops, discussions, and performances which will provide participants with a better understanding of the peace initiatives in the Middle Atlantic Region. The gathering will provide an interactive space, and you will be able to both learn and contribute to peace initiatives. We hope to engage young people in the Greater Baltimore Region, but all are welcome. Workshops will be presented by AFSC program staff.

When: Friday, May 21, 2010 from 9am until 10pm
(we will have morning, afternoon, and evening sessions)

Where: Stony Run Friends Meeting House
5116 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21210

How to Sign Up: Contact Mia Jones at
mjones@afsc.org or 410-323-4200 X225

Talking about race and equity

poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”

Mia posed a question to the young people, who all are training to become peer mediators: “What makes you feel safe and what causes people to be violent?” At first students responded with things like anger and frustration but Mia probed further and asked: “Why do you think that Baltimore City has more violence than other places?”

Student Katia Moses responded, “Because there are black people here and there was oppression 400 years ago with slavery – because of bad stuff that happened then, we are still in a bad situation.” Daquan West added, “Stress causes violence.” Talaytha Carter said, “When you are poor, you are more likely to steal to get something or hit people because you are frustrated.”

This is not the only classroom situation in the Middle Atlantic Region where AFSC staff members probe young people to discuss prejudice and inequity.

The D.C. Peace and Economic Justice Program’s Human Rights Learning Curriculum includes a session in which participants watch a clip from the Youth for Human Rights video, which depicts a young African American girl walking through a History of Slavery museum. At the end she turns to her teacher, who is white, and asks, “Does slavery still exist?” The teacher has no answer.

This clip elicits a variety of responses. At Cardozo Senior High School, where 73 percent of the population is black and 24 percent is Hispanic, the discussion flows easily. Students share their own experiences: “I was walking the other day and...” But when students at Woodrow Wilson Senior High School, which is much more racially diverse, watch the same video, the young people look around at each other uncomfortably. AFSC staff member Jean-Louis Peta Ikambana is using the framework of universal human rights to create a safe space for dialogue about race.

In Pittsburgh, the Empowering Voices for Peace and Justice Program has been developing a new Racial Equity through Human Rights project. The goal is to help youths understand and confront racial injustice in their community through a human rights platform that approaches the issue from a positive place, acting to protect human rights for all. The recent brutal beating by white police of a young African American student from the Creative and Performing Arts High School, and the rising racial tensions that have ensued, highlight the need to educate young people.

Similarly, the Appalachian Center for Equality



Ron, left, and Reggie Jones, shown with their grandmother, described terrifying acts against their family in “We Can Come Together.”

recently produced “We Can Come Together: A Conversation about Race.” The thoughtful and provoking video documents examples of racism in Logan, West Virginia. The video provides a tool for schools, civic groups, libraries and other organizations to change the conversation about race by teaching tolerance— primarily to young people who are willing to learn and change.

Meanwhile, in Maryland prisons, AFSC staff members find a situation strangely similar to that in D.C. schools. In Hagerstown, where there is a stark contrast between an almost entirely black prison population and an almost entirely white group of correctional officers, prisoners talk about racism and describe “a very hostile environment.” But in Jessup, where the mixed prison conflict resolution group includes black, white and Latino participants, the conversation is not as open. Inside correction facility walls the vast majority of prisoners are of African descent, which creates a different dynamic and perceived power structure. And yet the same trepidation about discussing these dynamics exists inside correctional facilities as it does on the outside.

Race is a more taboo topic for honest discussion across all ages and ethnic groups than almost any other subject that one can imagine. Addressing inequality, starting with honest conversations, is a natural outgrowth of the American Friends Service Committee’s historic commitment to the dignity and worth of each human person. Dedication to racial equity is the thread that ties together people and communities and programs throughout the Middle Atlantic Region.



American Friends
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Students from Sandy Spring Friends School attend a jobs rally during a trip to West Virginia in March. (photo courtesy Rand Wilson)

Left, Steven Neal, Jr., a student at Friendship Collegiate Academy and participant in the D.C. Peace and Justice Program's Human Rights Learning Project, wins the Lee Stern Peacemaker Award. Said Steven, "I was the typical student who thought I knew everything until I joined the Leadership and Criminal Justice Program and the Human Rights Learning. I realized I can put my energy to helping others just like me, and now I am an advocate for youth non-violence and human rights."