

Wholistic Peace Institute's calming focus

From North Korea to South Africa to Palestine — peace is possible in the world of Gary Spanovich

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

Gary Spanovich is a cheery 65-year-old man, who, from a tidy office in Northeast Portland has been working for the last 15 years toward a simple, yet seemingly impossible goal: prevent people from being violently killed.

Spanovich is the executive director of the Wholistic Peace Institute (WPI), a nonprofit organization affiliated with Concordia University that's seeking to create a less-violent world. Although the goals of the WPI may seem lofty and perhaps quixotic, there is an underlying practicality to its work that makes its vision of world peace seem not all that far-fetched.

The WPI grew out of efforts to organize a conference of five Nobel Peace Prize laureates in Portland in 2001. A main focus of the institute is on Nobel Peace Prize laureates and what lessons from their work can be applied to other conflicts. To that end, it's organized a dozen major events in Oregon, including conferences that have featured past laureates, such as the Dalai Lama, former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez.

"We feel the Nobel Peace laureates are contemporary architects of world peace, so if you can get five or six of them in the same room to debate new ideas, you can advance a dialogue," says Spanovich. "And that's what these conflicts need: new ideas."

World peace may seem like an impossible goal, but Spanovich says that every Nobel peace laureate he's worked with thinks it's possible. The Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded for over 100 years, and its laureates have made the world more peaceful in concrete ways.

Lech Walesa, the Polish labor leader who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 for organizing non-Communist unions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, had the most impact of any peace laureate, according to Spanovich, because his efforts undermined the power structure throughout Soviet bloc countries, accelerating the demise of the Cold War.

Spanovich also points to F.W. de Klerk, a former South Africa president who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela in 1993, as an example of how peace is possible. Seeing that change was on the horizon for South Africa, de Klerk freed Mandela and allowed for a peaceful

transition of power.

"That could have been a horrible, horrible blood bath," says Spanovich. "But he saw the writing on the wall and basically ended apartheid and turned his reign of power over to Mandela."

The WPI also focuses on the situation on the Korean Peninsula and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Spanovich praises the approach of former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 for improving relations with North Korea through his Sunshine Policy. The policy accepted North Korea as a neighbor and significantly reduced the possibility of war between the two countries.

Although Spanovich says that the Sunshine Policy could be applied to other conflicts, it's not universal. For instance with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Spanovich says that the big sticking point is the refusal of Hamas, a militant group that controls the Gaza strip, to give up its arms.

Ray Jubitz, the executive director of the Jubitz Family Foundation, says his organization has helped fund visits by Nobel laureates for about 10 years. He says that bringing these individuals to Oregon helps give the state a reputation for supporting peace, along with other benefits.

"When Gary brings a Nobel (Prize winner) to town, they don't just give a one-off lecture. Gary works them to death," says Jubitz, jokingly.

Another focus of the institute is on schools. The WPI publishes curriculum to help Oregon schools teach about Nobel Peace Laureates. It also gives out grants through the Harold and Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation to support student-led projects seeking to make their communities more tolerant, civil and peaceful places. Additionally, the WPI helps bring Nobel laureates into Oregon schools.

Joel Sebastian, the principal of Tualatin's Athey Creek Middle School, says that bringing in Nobel Peace laureates and other speakers into schools "really sticks with kids."

"I think that kids have a real keen sense of what's right and what's wrong and a real desire to use their voice for what's important," says Sebastian. "So when you have kids at an impressionable age, and they learn how these laureates used their voices to affect justice that's a really meaningful thing."

Originally from Florida, Spanovich spent decades as an urban planner and did humanitarian work in India in the 1990s before helping found the WPI, which has previously been based in Canby and Portland State University.

Spanovich views his work with the WPI through the eyes of an urban planner, taking calculative deliberate steps that will produce results in the long term. In 2010, the WPI helped broker an agreement between Portland's Concordia University and the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology in North Korea that could produce exchange programs with students and faculty, as well as other collaborations.

"It's a long term effort to work with the North Korean students who are basically the elite in that country," says Spanovich. He hopes that the project provides North Korea's future leaders with a positive cultural exchange with the U.S., which will pay off decades from now.

Spanovich says that the "wholistic" approach of his organization is based on the idea that humans have mental, physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions and that any solution to a problem needs to take all of them into account.

With so much conflict in the world, Spanovich, a practicing Catholic who has developed a form of Christian meditation that he has taught and practices every day, says that it is the spiritual dimension of his work that keeps him from getting discouraged.

There's one simple lesson in his faith that is also shared by the Dalai Lama that he says is key to peace: Conflict will end when one side is willing to accept the last blow.

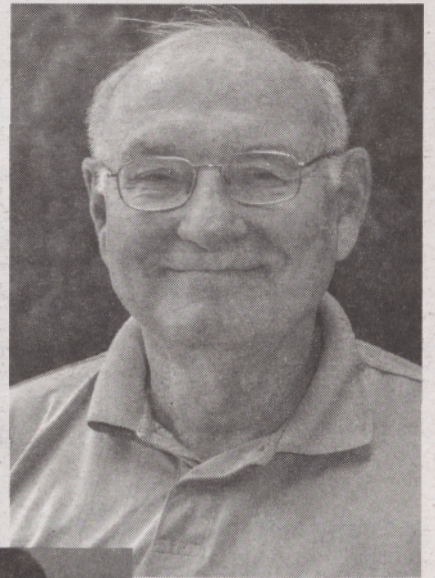


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At top, Gary Spanovich, the founder of the Wholistic Peace Institute in Portland. At left, Nobel Prize laureates The Dalai Lama, former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung, and former South Africa president F.W. de Klerk, all of whom Spanovich has hosted in Portland for WPI events.

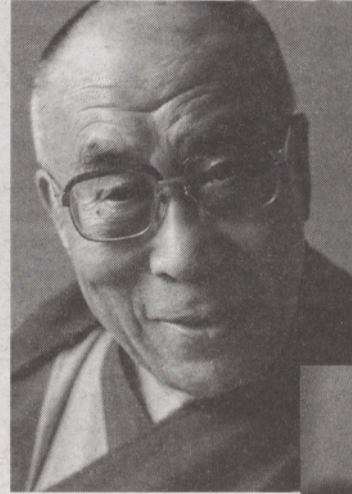


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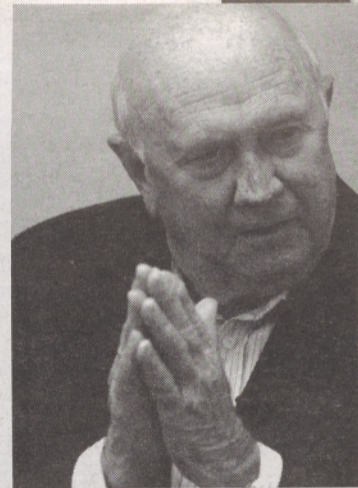
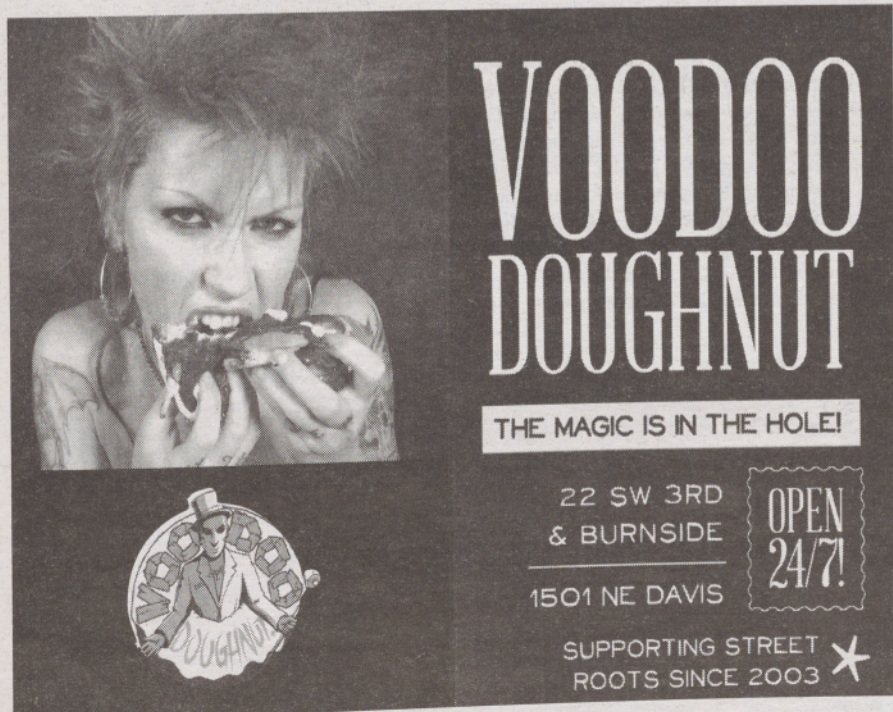


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