

Peaceful Schools International: A History

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Introduction

Peaceful Schools International is a small NGO by most measures, founded in Nova Scotia, Canada. Yet its work has had a profound effect on the lives of thousands of children and teachers throughout the world. Now marking the 10th anniversary of its founding, its continuing growth is a testament to the way in which one person, following through on a single idea, can generate a momentum which turns their efforts into something much bigger.

Foundation and background

Peaceful Schools International (PSI) was founded by Hetty van Gurp in 2001. However, the roots of the organization go back much further. It all started with a decision Hetty made, back in 1991, to dedicate herself to helping schools find ways to become more peaceful, tolerant and safe. The decision was one rooted in personal tragedy; at the time, she was coping with the death of her 14 year old son Ben, who had died in February of that year as a result of an act of bullying by another student at his school. In fact, Hetty remembers the very moment the idea for the PSI model took shape in her head: one day, only a few weeks after the incident, she was walking and talking with a friend who also worked at the school where she taught. She looked up at the school's flagpole, which was empty at the time, and reflected aloud on how great it would be if one day schools could earn the right to fly a flag, declaring that they were places of peace.

Back then, Hetty already had the experience to believe that this was an achievable and worthwhile goal. Before becoming a teacher in the Halifax Regional School Board, Hetty had lived and taught in the United States. The rather unique "Unity School" in Delray Beach, Florida, where her sons were enrolled and where she herself worked for a time, included a program called "Lessons in Living" – a series of classes which were specifically dedicated to helping students learn, among other things, effective ways of dealing with their conflicts and of understanding and managing their own emotions. Hetty remembered how positive the atmosphere at the school had been, and how much her son Ben had enjoyed and benefitted from the Lessons in Living program. She thought about how his death might have been avoided

if his school in Canada had featured such an approach as an integral part of the curriculum, as was the case at Unity School.

As she began to look for ways of following through on her desire to channel her personal grief into something positive, Hetty drew directly on some of the materials and techniques she had picked up at Unity School, travelling down to Delray Beach shortly after Ben's death to meet with some of the Lessons in Living teachers. The basic philosophy of the school centred around the idea of instilling a sense of individual worth and dignity in each child, and emphasizing the importance of having respect for others regardless of their differences. The school's students learned that conflict was a natural part of life, and when individual students became involved in a conflict, they learned techniques for managing it constructively, through communicative methods, rather than simply being punished. One of the practices Hetty found particularly appealing was the use of the "I" method, where students expressed their anger or frustration with others in terms of how it affected them and how it made them feel, rather than resorting to name-calling or hurling accusations at their peer.

Hetty began to integrate the Unity School techniques with lessons she had gleaned from her own experiences, adding in some peer mediation principles she learned during a conference on conflict resolution in Miami that year. She brought these ideas into her classroom through a program she called "Hands are for Helping," readily sharing her ideas with other teachers in the school as she developed the project. It didn't take long for enthusiasm to spread, and within a year, promoting peace education and peer mediation had become a special focus not only for Hetty's entire school, but also for three other schools in the area.

In the fall of 1992, Hetty organized a weekend training camp for student peer mediators from each of the four schools. The students were from various age groups, and had been chosen by their peers for being especially responsible and empathetic. The intention was that the mediators would return to their schools and help resolve conflicts which arose on the playgrounds during school recesses. Feedback from both students and teachers in the following months was extremely positive, and the peer mediation system was soon adopted by a number of other schools in the Halifax area. This practice has remained a core aspect of Hetty's philosophy over the years, and is a fundamental principle among PSI member schools.

The peace education initiative Hetty had introduced in her own classroom continued to attract the attention of other educators over the next few years. Schools would often learn of her approach through word of mouth and media coverage, and express interest in finding out more. Hetty began regularly travelling throughout Nova Scotia and further afield, giving talks and workshops on her methods for the benefit of educators. In 1994, she published her first

book on the subject. Titled “Peace in the Classroom,” it was intended as a practical lesson guide for teachers, and was well-received in the education community. Hetty’s work continued to attract particular interest in the Halifax area, where some schools known for having persistent problems with racial tensions and schoolyard violence began experimenting with some her techniques. In 1996, Hetty – by now a school principal – gained public recognition for her work with peace education when she was awarded the Halifax YMCA Peace Medal.

The following year, Hetty joined forces with the Lester B. Pearson Peacekeeping Centre (PPC), recently established in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia, when the centre offered to conduct a training session at its base. The course would enable students, teachers and parent volunteers to explore some of the mediation and conflict management techniques then being used by professional peacekeepers in international conflicts. Although the session was originally conceived as a one-off event, it was to evolve into a long and productive partnership between Hetty and the PPC.

By the mid-1990s, Hetty’s work with peace education was gaining so much momentum that she began to revisit her initial idea of forming some sort of more formalized network for schools that were interested. She decided to create the “League of Peaceful Schools” (LPS) – a body that would continue to build on the work she was already doing, and which would provide recognition for member schools who had committed to fulfilling a set of general criteria with regard to fostering an environment of peace. Recognition would be given in the form of a flag and a certificate, as per Hetty’s original vision. In a modest way, her model was also inspired by the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)), which was working closely with the PPC at the time.

The LPS idea was well-received by the Halifax Regional School board, and the PPC was also interested in becoming involved based on their past collaboration with Hetty. Together with the local grocery chain Sobeys, they agreed to support the League with training, resources and publicity. The League became official in the fall of 1998, when the HRSB provided funding so Hetty could work on the initiative full time. Within a year, over a hundred schools throughout the province were members, and the numbers continued to grow during the following year.

After spending two years getting the League off the ground, Hetty decided to take a year off from her work in Halifax. She wanted to share some of her techniques further afield, and was curious to see how the model she had developed worked in other contexts. In the year 2000 she went on a CIDA internship, funded by the Canada-Japan Peacebuilding Fund, which placed her with a Japanese NGO called Association for Aid and Relief (AAR). The organization worked in post-conflict areas, and although it was primarily focused on the eradication of landmines,

AAR was also interested in making peace education a part of its mandate. Hetty worked in support of this effort, travelling to AAR offices in Cambodia, Serbia and Macedonia and meeting with educators, in some cases establishing longstanding working relationships. She particularly enjoyed her time in Serbia, and promised the teachers she worked with there that she would keep in touch.

The experiences Hetty had during her year abroad gave her an awareness of how hungry educators in other parts of the world were for the methods she was advocating. This was particularly true of countries whose educational systems had very limited resources, and whose recent experiences with civil conflict meant that violence had played a central role in the lives of their children. Hetty returned to Canada with a strong conviction that the model she had developed for the League of Peaceful Schools could be applied to a more internationally focused organization. The PPC was eager to get behind her project, and offered to provide her with an office to work from in its Cornwallis Headquarters. And so, in early 2001, the League of Peaceful Schools became Peaceful Schools International (PSI).

Peaceful Schools International: The Early Years

Although Hetty and her work had by now become quite well known in many education circles, she recognized that PSI was going to require a more formal structure if it was to respond to the needs of schools both from across Canada and internationally. With this in mind, the organization's first board of directors was appointed. An inaugural board meeting was held on August 6th, 2001, during which Hetty confirmed that PSI had been incorporated as a society by the province, and a formal list of administrative rules and regulations was approved for the governance of the new organization.

PSI's initial brochure wasn't fancy, but its content was far from thrown-together, having been developed and refined during the ten years Hetty had spent promoting peace education in various contexts. The list of membership criteria, for example, similar to those used by LPS, had been arrived at based on an activity Hetty had conducted in countless schools and workshops over the years. The activity involved asking participants (usually teachers) to imagine that they were working at an idyllic school, and then to describe it. Hetty extracted the central recurring themes from the hundreds of responses she got. The list included points such as:

- collaborative decision-making (involving students, parents and teachers)
- an environment in which differences were respected and students learned how to cooperate with one another

- effective systems of conflict resolution facilitated by the students themselves
- involvement with the community's social development.

PSI had several ambitions, as outlined in its stated goals. It wanted to provide a means of networking among member schools, and to create a forum for the exchange of innovative ideas and programs pertaining to peace education. It also aimed to encourage student-centred conflict resolution strategies, to reduce violence and punitive discipline measures, and support at-risk students. Finally, it was dedicated to promoting understanding and appreciation of diversity among students and teachers. In many respects, PSI's mandate complemented that of the PPC, from which it initially received the bulk of its funding.

As with LPS, a central part of Hetty's motivation for forming PSI was the notion that schools attempting to create a positive environment for their students needed both formal recognition and support in the form of ideas and resources. Also critical was the idea that member school requirements were deliberately non-prescriptive. "One of the criteria is that some form of peace education be happening in the school, for example", explains Hetty. "But we don't say 'you have to use this program' or 'do it this way' ...it's entirely up to the school. Even though the guidelines are there, how the school deals with them is completely unique." It was felt by Hetty and her colleagues that this kind of flexibility was crucial, given that participating schools would be extremely diverse, representing a wide variety of cultural contexts, individual experiences and available resources. In addition, enabling schools to decide for themselves how best to tackle the various guidelines allowed both students and teachers to put forward their own creative ideas, which could then be disseminate among other member schools.

Needless to say, PSI had a busy first year. By the time the board reconvened for its first Annual General Meeting on June 21st 2002, Hetty had – in addition to all her administrative duties – conducted four training sessions for regional coordinators, attended by educators from around the world. The sessions were designed to impart the basic principles of PSI and to enable participants to provide support for schools in their own areas interested in becoming members. By 2002 these sessions had helped PSI attract member schools in various provinces and states in Canada and the US, as well as in Russia, England, Northern Ireland and Japan, with additional planned member schools in Serbia and Macedonia. As part of her efforts in this area, Hetty wrote and published the first edition of PSI's "Handbook for Regional Coordinators," which outlined the organization's basic principles and approaches, and offered advice and activities to help coordinators bring the program into their local schools.

In addition to the regional training sessions, Hetty began publishing *Peace Talks International*, a quarterly newsletter intended for circulation among PSI member schools. The publication

contained stories from individual member schools, news on the organization itself, and suggestions for peace-related activities which could be used in schools. *Peace Talks International* continues to be a regular feature for PSI members to this day. When not involved with these endeavours, Hetty spent a lot of her time establishing contacts, both within Canada and abroad, laying the groundwork for future projects, and applying for funding. At the end of 2001, she was awarded a Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in recognition of her work.

That first year also saw Hetty and PSI becoming involved with a film project. Local filmmaker Teresa MacInnes, who had initially set out to make a documentary about bullying, had decided to turn the project into a series of films entitled "Children, Peace and Education." The series would be released by MacInnes's own production company, Triad Films, in partnership with the National Film Board of Canada. In the third film of the series, "Teaching Peace in a Time of War" (officially released in 2004), MacInnes planned to focus exclusively on Hetty and her work with PSI. Hetty also agreed to act as a consultant for the other two films in the series, "Learning Peace" and "Waging Peace," which profiled individual schools in Nova Scotia (both PSI members) in their efforts to create positive and peaceful learning environments. The relationship with MacInnes turned out to be a lasting one, and MacInnes and her production team would eventually produce two further documentaries about PSI depicting its work in Serbia and Northern Ireland. The initial films were all aired on national television throughout Canada, and made available for purchase through the National Film Board. This proved extremely helpful in raising awareness of PSI and its work. Hetty continues to use the films in speeches and workshops, and both Learning Peace and Waging Peace are now featured as part of a PSI "toolkit" which is available for educators to buy through the PSI website (<http://peacefulschoolsinternational.org/>).

By the end of the following year, PSI had gained official recognition as a registered Canadian charity, and had also established an International Advisory Board, whose membership included the Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, to assist with its work abroad as needed. Aside from the continuation of the organization's regular activities – training sessions, presentations, publication of the quarterly newsletter, communication with the media – Hetty also found time to create some new resources. She developed a new "School Membership Guide" to replace the regional coordinator training handbook, and produced a "Children's Peace Treaty" poster which could be used in classrooms. In addition, she wrote two new books which were published by Portage and Main Press in Winnipeg; both of them drew on her experiences as an educator, and outlined some of her philosophies and practical advice on peace education and peer mediation. One of the books, "The Peaceful School: Models that Work," was provided for free to schools who became PSI members.

It was during this early period of PSI's evolution that Hetty began circulating a "monthly activity" idea as part of her on-going communication with member schools. Some of these were activities she had kept on hand from her teaching days in Florida and Nova Scotia, while others arose from her on-going research or from suggestions made by member schools. Two of the monthly activities proved particularly popular, and were repeated in subsequent years by many of the schools. One was "mix-it-up day", where students were asked to sit with people they didn't normally sit with in the cafeteria during lunch. The idea was to break down some of the barriers that existed between different social groups in schools; when students communicated with peers they normally avoided or ignored, they were less likely to feel intimidated by those people or judge them unfairly. The second activity was "gossip-free day", where everyone in the school was asked to avoid talking about other people behind their backs as a conversational topic. This helped draw people's attention to just how often they engaged in such behaviour. As Hetty recalled, it was just as much a challenge for teachers to stick to the ban as it was for the students.

In recognition of her work with PSI, Hetty received yet another gesture of recognition: on Sept. 18, 2003, she was awarded the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization Commemorative Badge by the Russian National Committee, as a result of her "outstanding contribution in the development of peace education". The award was presented as part of the celebration of the 55th anniversary of UNTSO, and was accepted on Hetty's behalf by a member of the Canadian embassy in Moscow.

PSI: Growth and Development

As it entered its third year, PSI was becoming increasingly active on the international front. Hetty was establishing projects and networks in places where peace at school was not only a matter of trying to eliminate bullying, but also working to overcome cultural divides and the influence of violence at the societal level. One such initiative was taking place in Northern Ireland – a country enjoying a tentative peace after the signing of the 1997 Good Friday Agreement, but still marked by endemic mistrust between certain Catholic and Protestant factions, and occasional acts of sectarian violence. The country made international headlines in the spring and summer of 2001 when a territorial dispute over a particular road in Belfast, located near a Catholic primary school, led to protests against the use of the road by the school's children. The papers showed pictures of tearful young schoolgirls being escorted by riot police through shouting crowds of protestors. These images caught Hetty's attention, and she made contact with the school involved, as well as others in the area, inviting them to send representatives to one of her regional coordinator workshops. They would also have the chance

to visit some PSI member schools in Nova Scotia. The Northern Irish visitors were initially somewhat sceptical that PSI's techniques would have much of an impact in communities as marked by violence as theirs; but they soon came around to the notion that peaceful schools can contribute to the building of peaceful societies.

The connection between PSI and Northern Ireland quickly began to gather momentum. In 2002 Hetty and a group of volunteers from PSI travelled to Belfast to meet with various educators, students and government officials, discussing what role they could play in fostering the development of peace education programs in the area. The following year, PSI was able to secure funding to put on a two-day conference in Belfast, titled "Peaceful Schools: Everyone's Responsibility". A team of 10 educators representing PSI conducted a series of workshops for both students and teachers. Among the children attending the conference were students from Holy Cross Primary School – the Catholic school which had been at the centre of the 2001 protests.

Another noteworthy PSI endeavour was unfolding in Serbia, where Hetty was following through on a promise she had made, before founding PSI, to find a way to work with some of the people she had met during her travels. In collaboration with the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), and with funding from CIDA, PSI developed a project called "Peace Education in Serbia". As with the Northern Ireland collaboration, this initiative began with a visit to Canada by a group of Serbian educators. Hetty and a colleague also travelled to Serbia on an introductory mission, meeting with local educators, Department of Education officials and local NGOs. Following from this, PSI began creating a publication designed specifically for the Serbian school system, titled "Seeds of Peace: Peace Education in Serbia." The document outlined a number of pedagogical principles and practices for teachers, and made some suggestions for incorporating peace education into the curriculum.

In December of 2003 Hetty travelled back to Serbia, along with PSI ambassador Rick Lewis of Florida (a friend from the Unity School years). Their objective was to see how their ideas were being put into practice, as well as to deliver some workshops. During their visit, Hetty and Rick were able to attend a three-day conference for Serb teachers, attended by over 200 people, which had been organized and funded by Hetty's Serbian associates as a result of their participation in the "Peace Education in Serbia" project. Both of Hetty's trips to Serbia, as well as the Serbians' visit to Canada, were documented by the film crew of Teresa MacInnes, and became the focus of the NFB/Triad film "Teaching Peace in a Time of War".

Enthusiasm for the peace education project was high among the Serbian participants, and their involvement with PSI continued to expand. Consequently, in addition to implementing PSI's

principles within their own education system, they also represented a major presence in one of PSI's Canadian projects. 12 students from Serbia were chosen to travel to Nova Scotia in the summer of 2003 to attend "Way to Peace" – PSI's first annual peace education summer camp. Held over a two-week period in the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre in Cornwallis, the camp helped the students aged 11 to 14 to learn leadership skills, negotiation and mediation methods, and inter-cultural understanding. The students also visited a number of local attractions and historic sites. There were 16 students from Canada in addition to the Serbian delegation, so there was plenty of opportunity for the forming of friendships which transcended nationality and language. The camp was regarded as extremely successful by all involved, and continues to be held every year.

By 2004, Hetty's work with Teresa MacInnes was beginning to pay off, helping to raise the profile of PSI across Canada. "Teaching Peace in a Time of War" had its first official premiere on March 20th at the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre's Cornwallis headquarters. The gala evening was attended by both educators and members of the local community, and featured a silent auction to raise money for Serbian students to attend the following year's Way to Peace summer camp. The film was subsequently shown on Canadian network television, and made available for purchase on DVD. Later in the year, Hetty and director Teresa MacInnes embarked on a promotional tour, visiting educational forums in several cities in Canada to bring attention to both the film and the newly completed Peace@School Toolkit for schools and teachers.

MacInness's film seemed to make a real connection with those who saw it, so much so that it helped give rise to a whole new peace education venture when a group of high school student attended a screening at a Halifax film festival. The group was interested to learn about Serbia's troubled recent history and the work done by Hetty and PSI. When they heard of an upcoming PSI conference being planned for Belgrade in 2005, they decided, together with their teacher, that they wanted to attend. The idea attracted attention; the group expanded to include students from other schools, and adopted the name "Students for Teaching Peace". In the end, 32 students and 10 adults made the trip to Belgrade, accompanied by Hetty. They met with the Serbian students they had seen in the documentary, visited local schools, shot footage for their own school film projects, and completed their journey by attending the conference itself. Also in attendance, documenting it all for posterity, was the film team of Teresa MacInnes, who made the experiences of the young travellers from Nova Scotia the basis of another documentary film titled "Hope for the Future." The trip was a transformative experience for the students, and the group embarked on a similar endeavour the following year in Northern Ireland.

PSI membership continued to grow at a steady rate over the next few years, despite concerns the \$150 membership fee would act as a deterrent for some schools (especially those in poorer areas). The fee was a matter of concern for the PSI board, who were reluctant to discourage any school from accessing PSI's resources, but needed some way to cover costs. "The \$150 barely covers what we send to the school," said Hetty, but added "we've never said no to a school that's applied and obviously can't pay. It's one of the reasons we've never really made any money!"

As this issue highlights, however, funding in general was proving to be a growing challenge for the organization. PSI had no regular dependable income, other than an annual \$1000 donation from the PPC towards printing costs – but this was discontinued when PSI moved out of its PPC office in 2006, partly as a result of the PPC's own decision to move the bulk of its operations to Ottawa. Hetty would conduct PSI's work from her home until 2009, when PSI moved to a new office in Halifax. PSI received some income from the various project grants it applied for, but aside from this the entire organization was now being staffed on a volunteer basis – a situation that was not seen as sustainable in the long term. The funding question is still a topic of discussion at every board meeting, especially given the need to pay a salary for a new executive director now that Hetty has retired. "When you add up all those 'project management fees' [associated with grants], it might add up to a salary," said Hetty; "but it's so much work – applying, and waiting." For the PSI board, the search continues for a way to cover its costs through a funding source that is sustainable, certain, and long-term.

On a more positive note, the organization has continued to receive extremely positive feedback from its growing family of member schools throughout its entire first decade. One group of schools in particular has demonstrated just how impressively the PSI model can take off, given the right circumstances. The Lester B. Pearson School Board (LBPSB) in Dorval, Quebec first made contact with PSI in 2003, and immediately made a commitment to introduce the program into all of its schools. The board even hired a part-time coordinator to make that happen. Soon after, the LBPSB invited Hetty to travel to Dorval to give a three-day workshop, which was attended by staff members from every school in the board. As a result of this coordinated and focused effort, almost half of the board's 57 schools had met the PSI membership criteria by 2006, and the initiative gathered so much momentum that a second PSI coordinator was hired by the board. For PSI, the LBPSB experience was an illustration of how much was possible when a sense of commitment to peace education and a peaceful school environment was shared at all levels of a school's administration. Not only did the board-level commitment by the LBPSB allow for the funding of a staff member specifically dedicated to the cause, but it also ensured that excitement and enthusiasm for PSI's principles and practices could be maintained and

spread across schools through board communications, meetings, local media and word of mouth.

2007 saw yet another international initiative beginning to take shape, this time in Sierra Leone – a country just starting to recover from a brutal, decade-long civil war. As with many other PSI projects, the Sierra Leone connection grew out of a personal friendship of Hetty's which went back several years. Hetty first met Thomas Turay and his wife Mary back in 1998, when she was still a school principle. The Turays were originally from Sierra Leone, and had operated a centre for development and peace education ("CDPeace") in their village before the conflict began. The centre, which provided a wide range of services (including education, women's support and health), was destroyed during the war; the Turays escaped to Canada, and Thomas began pursuing his PhD. When they met, Thomas told Hetty that he dreamed of one day going back and rebuilding CDPeace, and Hetty replied that she hoped she'd be able to help him make it happen. Now, years later, the Turays decided the time had come. When they returned to their village in Sierra Leone, PSI – with support from its member schools, as well as local individuals, community groups and businesses – was able to provide school supplies, teaching resources, and funds for physical infrastructure to 11 schools in the area where the new CDPeace centre was located. Hetty's sister Carolyn Van Gorp, also an educator, travelled over as a volunteer to support the project, providing teacher training and promoting the basic principles of peace education.

The following year, PSI was successful in obtaining a grant from CIDA which would fund the Sierra Leone project for another two years. This allowed PSI to continue providing its services and resources to Sierra Leonean schools, and to offer some assistance with the other activities of the centre. One of its focuses was to set up a school twinning program, in which students in Canada could exchange letters with students in Sierra Leone. As Hetty and her colleagues discovered, learn about one another's similarities was just as interesting for the children as learning about their differences.

The Sierra Leone project also attracted the involvement of Clare Levin, a Carleton University graduate student, who completed an internship with PSI as part of her thesis research. Levin remained closely involved with PSI, first as a board member and subsequently taking on the role of Executive Director when Hetty eventually announced her retirement. She remains an active participant in the on-going development of the organization.

As she endeavoured to do with all of PSI's international projects, Hetty eventually travelled to Sierra Leone in order to gain some first-hand experience with the situation on the ground. For three weeks in early 2009, she visited schools, helped lead workshops with Carolyn, and met

with government officials. “It was really important to me, whether it was Serbia, Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone or Pakistan, to go and be there in person,” she said. “It would have been really hard to operate at this end in a productive and supportive way; not really knowing what it was like...and you can’t know what a place is like unless you go there.”

One of the issues the PSI team found themselves addressing in the schools they worked with in Sierra Leone was the common use of corporal punishment. By the time the project was over, however, they felt they had succeeded in reducing the teachers’ dependence on this method of maintaining control. “They were brought up with it in their school days, and it’s all they ever knew,” said Hetty. “We did a few activities that made it very clear that corporal punishment is not really a solution, and I could see that for many of the teachers there, it was a real ‘aha!’ experience. Some of them just stood up on their own and kind of publicly declared that they would never again hit a child...that was the general feeling in the workshops.” It helped PSI’s cause that the Sierra Leonean government had recently passed a law prohibiting corporal punishment throughout the country, although few people seemed to be aware of this until the PSI team used it to help argue their case. As with Northern Ireland and Serbia, this was an illustration of how making schools more peaceful places meant different things in different cultures and settings, and yet another example of why it was so important for PSI’s central guidelines to be non-prescriptive and member-driven.

PSI: Recent History

While membership has continued to increase steadily over the past few years, PSI has also grown as an organization in other ways. The resources it offers to member schools, for example, have been considerably expanded. In 2007 Hetty published a compilation of some of her monthly activities, titled “Creating Caring Schools: Peace-Promoting Activities for All Seasons.” Two years later, together with Rick Lewis, she co-authored the “Sam” series of books: “Sam and the Goodwill Sandwich”, “Sam Speaks Up” and “Sam Takes a Stand”. The stories were designed to help children learn positive ways to deal with their problems. They are now available as PDF downloads on the PSI website, along with a guide for parents and teachers. Additionally, Peace Talks International – now circulated electronically – has become a bi-monthly feature for member schools, and has been joined by Peace Talks Junior, a supplementary newsletter aimed specifically at students. The PSI website has been expanded and enhanced and now features an e-newsletter available to the general public, entitled Peace Signs. There is also a discussion forum and an online store, where the Peace@School toolkit is available for purchase alongside Hetty’s own books and DVDs of the MacInnes documentary films. Theresa MacInnes and her partner Kent Nason finished the most recent of these films in

2007. Titled “The Troubles Within”, it documents a “Students for Teaching Peace” trip to Northern Ireland. PSI continues to host its annual “Way to Peace” summer camp, and of course Hetty and other PSI volunteers are in continuous demand as guest speakers for peace education conferences and workshops both in Canada and abroad.

Although funding for its projects in Serbia and Sierra Leone has ended, PSI maintains a relationship with its contacts in these areas in a number of ways – through regular correspondence with its member schools, the occasional visit for a workshop or lecture, and in the case of Sierra Leone, through the school twinning program. PSI also continues to work closely with its schools in Northern Ireland, where Rick Lewis travels on a yearly basis (sometimes accompanied by Hetty) to conduct conflict resolution workshops. In most cases their work has focused on individual schools, so that the children are learning how to manage their conflicts within their own communities, without being asked to bridge sectarian divides at the same time. In some cases, however, there have been activities where Catholic and Protestant children were brought together, and Hetty has noticed that while in the past such attempts resulted in a high level of tension and discomfort, with the children unused to being thrown together, recently there have been signs of improvement. “When I was there last year, Rick did some training at a Catholic school, and they invited the girls from the Protestant school over, and it was completely different,” she recalled. “There was no tension...I don’t know what to attribute that to, maybe those two schools have done other things together...but it worked out very well. Things change.”

PSI has found some strong support for its work in Northern Ireland. One of its main partners there is a children’s charity, which recently obtained funding to enable the continued growth of PSI’s programs throughout the country – including money to hire a Regional Coordinator. Another Northern Ireland-based partner initiative was started in 2005 by PSI board member Bridget Brownlow, who is also a Conflict Resolution Advisor at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax. Every year during the winter term, Brownlow travels to Belfast with a group of St. Mary’s students, and the group works with children and teachers in local schools to explore the ideas and practicalities of peace and conflict resolution.

The most recent of PSI’s international projects is situated in the Karachi region of Pakistan, where an educator named Nadeem Ghazi made contact after learning about PSI online. Although working with very limited resources – and in some cases actual resistance from members of the local community – Nadeem has been extremely enthusiastic about implementing PSI’s principles in the schools in his area. “He just kept writing and writing,” said Hetty. “He was sending me full reports on how he implemented the monthly activities...for two years he acted in the capacity of Regional Coordinator, without any kind of resources or

compensation, just because he wanted to.” Several schools in Nadeem’s area have now become PSI members, and Nadeem has facilitated a number of workshops for educators. He has also set up an online album where he posts photos from workshops and school activities, and has created a special section in the PSI discussion forum where he frequently posts messages and reports. Nadeem remains undaunted even in the face of threats from those opposed to the incorporation of Western influences into the schools – the first time PSI has ever encountered such an issue. “I said to him, ‘Nadeem, I don’t know, if your life is at risk, if this is worth doing’,” said Hetty. “But he said he didn’t care, that this is his life, and he would never give it up. He’s completely driven.” PSI is currently applying for funding to support Nadeem’s work in Pakistan.

Looking Forward

As it marks the ten year anniversary of its founding, PSI can look back with pride on its many accomplishments. However, the focus for those in charge of the organization is primarily on the future, and the challenges they are faced with as they move forward. Over the past couple of years, PSI has developed a new strategic plan. The goals and objectives it articulates reflect its current involvements and capabilities, as well as the lessons it has learned in the past. The plan consists of four broad areas of focus, which are stated as follows:

1. Peace education is part of the core curriculum in all educational institutions that are members of PSI.
2. PSI member schools foster a secure, welcoming and respectful culture in a school environment where all forms of violence are unacceptable.
3. PSI provides practical and effective peace education resources that are used by its member schools and by others.
4. There is a greater awareness of PSI and its goals.

As part of its effort to ensure that peace education remains an important part of the curriculum among its members, PSI has recognized the need to step up its communication with the educators and administrators it deals with – particularly in terms of encouraging feedback from member schools. Until now, Hetty acknowledges, the degree of communication with schools has been fairly sporadic. “Every month you’d send out a monthly idea to the schools,” she said. “And you don’t always know, do they use these ideas?” Some schools – such as those in Pakistan – are quite proactive about sending in photos and reports, which usually find their way into the newsletters. Others are rarely heard from – which doesn’t necessarily mean they aren’t using the ideas, stresses Hetty. In May of 2009 she went to visit a school in Ontario, and was given a power point presentation showing how the school had put a year’s worth of activities

into practice – something she never would have known had she not happened to go there. Currently the organization is working on a simple survey which can be sent out to schools, in an effort to ensure some minimum level of feedback is systematically obtained. Nevertheless, there is a recognition that even this might be difficult to execute in some circumstances. “Having been in a school, I understand it,” says Hetty. “The last thing any educator wants to see is yet another survey.” The issue of how to solicit feedback without increasing the workload for busy teachers is one the board continues to discuss regularly.

Another area PSI is currently addressing is the need for more formal research into the impact it is having in schools, and the value of peace education in general. One such project is already underway: John LeBlanc, an associate professor at Dalhousie University in the Departments of Pediatrics, Psychiatry, and Community Health & Epidemiology, is currently involved in a study attempting to evaluate the effects of school-based violence prevention programs. The study is not exclusive to PSI schools, but some of the participating schools are member schools. It is hoped that similar research could perhaps be conducted to compare outcomes among PSI schools in different countries. Armed with such evidence, the organization may increase its ability to attract funding, and to ensure its practices are adopted more widely. In fact, persuading the Province of Nova Scotia to make peace education mandatory in all its schools is another of PSI’s current endeavours. Although it will no doubt take time for this idea to travel through all the proper political and administrative channels, the organization has so far been encouraged by the positive response it has received.

In Conclusion

Peaceful Schools International, like many grassroots-level social organizations, started with one person’s desire to make a difference with regard to an issue close to her heart. Its many accomplishments over the first decade of its existence demonstrate the scope of what is possible when one starts off with a strong motivation and the determination to follow through on an instinct. Having begun as a small set of ideas introduced into a single classroom, PSI’s programs have now spread across continents. And where once the organization was largely overseen by the efforts of Hetty Van Gurp alone, it is now in the hands of an expanding circle of enthusiastic members who have become involved over the years in many different ways. There is no doubt that PSI will face serious challenges over the next few years; yet if its past is any indication, there is good reason to anticipate that significant further accomplishments are in store for the future.