



# Bringing Peace

SHERRY WEINSTEIN

“A lot of the ladies in this jail have been abused in their lifetime. They have their painful personal stories, but they recognize that they have something special within themselves,” says Linda Fox-Novak about the women incarcerated in the Montgomery County Correctional Facility (MCCF) in Clarksburg, Maryland.

Linda is a volunteer of the Peace Education Program (PEP), a series of interactive workshops based on excerpts from the international addresses of Prem Rawat, a man who has been speaking about personal peace as the basis for world peace for four decades and been honored as an ambassador of peace worldwide. These workshops, created by The Prem Rawat Foundation (TPRF), a 501(c)(3) charity, are offered at no charge.

Usually PEP multimedia workshops, which consist of 10 themes that explore inner resources such as personal peace, inner strength, hope, and choice, run for 10 weeks, but at MCCF the classes are ongoing. Some inmates are there for three to four months; some are serving sentences of up to two years.

Linda has been facilitating PEP for two years at MCCF, where there are 30 to 40 female inmates as opposed to 300 to 400 male inmates. Because the women comprise only 10 percent of the population, there was no PEP program for them at first. PEP workshops for men in English and Spanish were held in classrooms. The only available space for women was a triple-locked conference room used by counselors and attorneys that can hold 10 to 12 women but has accommodated up to 16 when necessary.

After passing through two triple-locked secure areas, the women enter the secured conference room that serves as their classroom. It is at the guard’s discretion whether the doors will open and one may pass through. After entering each of the secured areas, Linda says,

## MCCF Expressions

“These classes mean a lot to me. I have learned a lot about myself. Peace within yourself is a great value everyone should know. I have learned to be happy, because that’s what I want in my mind, heart, and soul.”

—KADIJA T.

“We do a couple of cleansing breaths—inhalation and exhalation twice before going in the room—and I tell the ladies to just let go of all that is negative in your life. Time for clarity.”

For the many women who have attended these workshops in the past two years, it is like another door opening in their lives.

### Unique Challenges of Women

“The women have their unique needs and challenges,” Linda says, as she recounts the story of her first months with them. Briefed by Chris Taney, another volunteer who has been facilitating the MCCF men’s English PEP class for the past three years, Linda was not prepared for the amount of “chatting” the women did at the beginning of each class. Unlike the men’s classes, it became apparent to her that women are nurturers, and a few minutes to share this need with the others or ask how someone was, seemed a natural fit. They could feel the acceptance and peace in the room.

Relationships with the guards and staff at MCCF have also developed naturally. “There is such a wonderful working relationship with everyone, a real team effort,” she says. “It’s like we are part of the fabric of the institution.”

Facility officials have noted the results of PEP, and the former MCCF Deputy Warden Suzy Malagari invited PEP volunteer Chris Taney to reach more people at the jail through the Choices for Change program.

In a letter to Prem Rawat, Malagari wrote: “The Peace Education Program has had a genuine impact on the men and women in our facility. Those who have made the effort to attend and listen have benefitted from what you offer.

“After having seen the potential of what is being offered, my staff and I have greatly expanded the access that the volunteers have to the inmates in the general population. There are numerous individuals here, staff and inmates, who have not yet recognized that they

“I’ve learned many things in a small amount of time, such as looking at my inner self. I have a lot more patience and self-control. I have learned not to get angry as fast as I used to.”

—CRYSTAL L.

have certain gifts and abilities resting inside of themselves that they can channel into positive directions. Your efforts help us to help them discover the strength and gifts that they have inside.”

Another person who appreciates the program is Monir Khanjani, LCSW-C, NBCCCH, Therapist II of the Health and Human Services, Behavioral Health & Crisis Services in Jail Addiction Services (JAS). She said, “Last year Linda invited me to Prem Rawat’s visit at the Warner Theatre in Washington, D.C. I had seen a video of the empowering message that Prem Rawat has been bringing to the inmates in prisons, so I was excited for the opportunity to listen to him in person.

“His message of inner peace regardless of our outer conditions was wonderful, and his lovely sense of humor brought joy to the audience. It is encouraging and heartwarming to know there are such wonderful souls in the world who are such a source of inspiration to bring about inner peace and eventually world peace for all.”

For Linda Fox-Novak, it is a “source of constant joy to bring this message. I have witnessed, time and again, the transformative nature that self-awareness brings,” she says. “As a retired paralegal and court reporter, which I had done for 25 years, I am familiar with the legal system. I felt compelled to reach out to those who needed this.”

Linda’s involvement started two years ago when she saw a video of a captain from the Dominguez State Jail in San Antonio, Texas, speaking about the transforming effect of the PEP class. “So I asked to bring it to MCCF,” she said. “I could relate to the women in jail because I had been knocked around in my life, and I have realized that happiness has to start on the inside.

“I am so endeared to the ladies at the jail. Despite the pain that comes and goes into our lives, they are touched by the message of peace.”

### Grateful to Be Alive

PEP is also being offered at eight other correctional facilities in the United States, including the Lowell Correctional Institute for women in Gainesville, Florida. Patricia D. Kromer, who facilitates PEP there, describes the facility’s first program.

“The young ladies aged 18 to 25 years old had been marching around the entire prison grounds for hours as a Boot Camp routine, and the PEP team witnessed them

“ I love the Peace class so much that I feel sad when it is over. I ask probing questions and feel quenched after each class. I have decided that I want to be a volunteer of the PEP to bring it to others. This Peace class has molded me into a peaceful and caring individual. ”

— MEG C.

“ I have learned in the PEP class that there are 25,550 days of life for many people. I think the meaning of this is to enjoy our lives while we are still on this earth. Since I have been here I have found peace. I listen to my heart instead of my mind. This class is the only place I could find peace. ”

— TIFFANY B.

approaching the entrance gates as our program was about to begin,” Kromer says.

“As the project manager I expected them to be exhausted and not very engaged for our workshop. How pleasantly surprised we were to hear one of the first reflections: ‘What I got out of listening was, if I wasn’t alive I wouldn’t even have the privilege of feeling so tired.’”

Kromer adds that many of the reflections were particularly insightful and proved that these young women were not only attentive, but engaged and interactive throughout the presented workshop themes.

“On April 2, 2013, we had a meeting with six key coordinators at the facility,” Kromer said. “We began promptly at 2 p.m. in a conference room equipped with

a flat-screen television. We started right off showing a video of PEP after the brief introductions.

“There was no need to explain or do anything other than gather details on the logistics of starting the PEP curriculum, which was to begin on the first Thursday in June. The officials did their homework and memos were sent out to the field staff. It was impressive to feel embraced so readily. They entertained the prospect of running PEP in three different locations simultaneously, but we opted to start with this facility.

“I am very grateful to have the privilege of being involved with such an incredible team and for having the opportunity to share this with young women eager and willing to comprehend this course. The joy is truly overwhelming.”

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## Corrections Officials Weigh In

Many corrections officials have written letters praising the Peace Education Program. Stephen J. Steurer, Executive Director of the Correctional Education Association, wrote, "I first started working with members of TPRF in 2007. I have been very pleased to see their Peace Education Programs implemented in many prisons and jails in the United States and around the world.

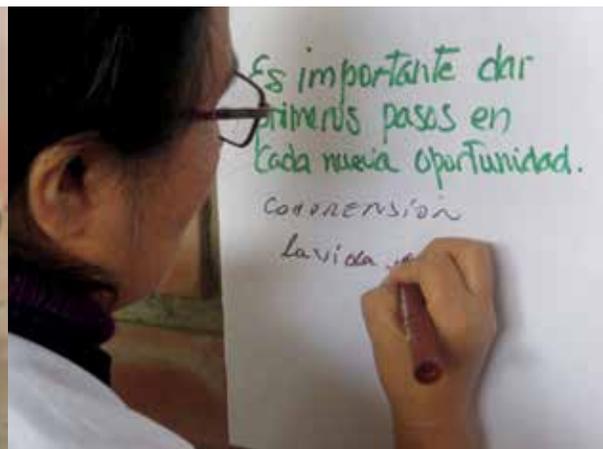
"The Peace Education curriculum that TPRF has created is high quality, simple to understand, and non-denominational. The benefit that a person can gain from these classes is independent of their religious beliefs. I

"Thank you, thank you, thank you for these choices and new inner options."

"I am leaving the prison. I dream every night of making a better life. Sometimes care counts more than words."

## La Paz, Bolivia: A Real Change

The National Director of the Penitentiary System in Bolivia, Dr. Ramiro Llanos Moscoso, has expressed his satisfaction and thankfulness for TPRF's efforts saying, "It is a message that reaches directly to the heart of the human being resulting in a real change."



recommend this program to you as an effective means to help increase the harmony within individuals and the community in which you serve. This letter is simply my personal endorsement of the fine work that TPRF does."

## PEP Around the World

PEP is being presented in 28 countries, with more than 155 workshops reaching 9,000 inmates each month. This includes women in prison in Ezeiza, Argentina; La Paz, Bolivia; Sao Paulo, Brazil; Bogota, Colombia; Lima, Peru; Odemira, Portugal; Madrid, Spain; Johannesburg, South Africa; and many facilities throughout India and Nepal.

## Sao Paulo, Brazil: New Options

According to Director Felipe Oliveira Lisboa Goes from CPP de São Miguel Paulista, Brazil, PEP was responsible for reducing the level of violence inside the prison. He has recommended PEP to other prisons, which will be starting the program soon. Several incarcerated women have described their new understanding in these words:

"A human being has the capacity to think, but as human beings we become the victim of ourselves. Today I understood that I never made a choice. Everything I did was by impulse. Thank you for giving me this unforgettable understanding."

Fatima Hinojosa, volunteer at La Paz Prison for women in Bolivia who has been bringing this message to inmates for a year now, made this observation about the PEP participants: "Above all they start to realize this inner discovery resulting in a gain of their self-esteem as well as a positive interaction with fellow inmates. They realize the significance of being alive and the power of inner appreciation they possess."

"The inmates are always very thankful to the volunteers who facilitate the workshops. As they say, 'We have such a need to connect ourselves to our inner peace.' We often receive requests from inmates for videos to be sent [to] their families because they feel their families should also have a chance to find out about this peace."

## Lima, Peru: The Desire to Live

The volunteer PEP contact in Peru, Patricia Lopez, tells the story of the PEP experience there.

"We started in February 2011 at the Annex Women's Prison Chorrillos. At the beginning we had the support of the director of the prison, who had heard this message of peace a long time ago. Shortly after, the director became the director of another women's prison, Virgin of Fatima. So in Annex Chorrillos, we had to start from scratch with a new director and new authorities.

"At the beginning, we didn't have much assistance or support from the authorities. Because we knew how

“ I’ve learned that you can’t let anyone tell you that you’re stupid, worthless, dumb. Know that you are worthy, smart, and can do anything you put your mind to. When your heart is at peace, your life is in peace. Be all right with who you are. Learn to love yourself.”

— ZENOBIA A.

“ This class gives me a chance to see the other side of life the way it should be. I’ve learned that you can do anything that you put your mind to and become that person that you knew you were all this time.”

— RHIANNON S.

wonderful this program is and how committed we were to it, we began to publicize the benefits of the Peace Education Program through many working meetings with the authorities, showing them videos and printed material from TPRF’s website. This was a joint effort, every day, on both sides.

“To date, we have a strong and very successful relationship. We have been working together jointly, and now we have all the support of the authorities of the prison of Chorrillos Annex. We have all their confidence, and they invite us and count on us to be there for all the holidays and activities during the year.

“In both women’s prisons, we are appreciated and well known. We feel at home, and we have full support of the authorities and move forward working together.

“In both prisons, they have asked us to work with two units. In Annex Chorrillos, a maximum-security prison, they have asked us specifically to address a very special unit of inmates—terrorists. We started a new PEP on a Tuesday, and 30 inmates attended. On Friday, another 40 inmates attended.

“Tomorrow will be the Day of Peace in the Annex Chorrillos prison, and we will present a video of the message of peace to all the 450 inmates in the main auditorium. They have also asked us [to] participate throughout the week in celebration for the Day of Peace.

“The changes that have happened in the inmates are really amazing. I am the witness of how this program can change the lives of people and show them that even though there are many difficulties in life, there is peace and hope. The girls smile and enjoy participating in the workshops, and we enjoy even more witnessing the transformation of their lives. One woman commented: ‘I have been in this prison for two weeks, and since I got here I have not stopped crying. Today to hear this message has been a big shock. I want to participate in this class. I need this in my life.’

“ What I learn in the PEP class trickles into the community when I leave the classroom and has a rippling effect. My hope is that the message of peace spreads. The class is empowering women, saving lives, and helping one another.”

— JANICE P.

“Soledad Villagomez is an inmate and the most enthusiastic PEP student in the Chorrillos Annex. It has changed her life, she tells us, so that now she feels the joy and peace within, and she is so grate-

ful. She has connected us with her municipality, with her child’s school, and with her family, and asked if she can help us to present the PEP in other penitentiaries once she leaves the prison.

“She is so happy, so motivated with the program, that she has written letters to the inmates of prisons of Virgin of Fatima and San Jorge, inviting them to join and participate in the program, saying that her life is now so different from how it was before. She found the desire to live, the hope and peace that Prem Rawat is talking about. In addition, she helps her friends and encourages them to participate in the PEP. We have received many letters from her and her family, grateful for the change in her. She has written a booklet, detailing each class that was held, as she reflected on each topic.

“Currently, we present the PEP in Annex Chorrillos twice a week, Tuesday and Friday with an attendance of 30 and 40 respectively. Virgin of Fatima has an attendance of 40 inmates in Cusco. Other prisons that we are presenting PEP are for men: San Jorge with 120 inmates per week; Prison Picsi of Chiclayo with 70 inmates; and Ayacucho Prison with 70 inmates.”

Ana Urraca, Director of Chorrillos Annex Prison in Peru, says: “The topics have been of vital importance for all of us, because in some way, we find the peace that we need and the meaning starts with ourselves. This inner peace allows you to be nicer, to exhibit your values in a more transparent way as to be able to project it towards other people. Inasmuch as we can do that, we will have a more peaceful society, and we will be able to interact within the frame of those values necessary in order to have a better life.”

A social worker in another Peruvian prison says, “With this system, in which we work in penitentiaries with people whose freedom has been taken away, it is a great advantage to be able to have these workshops. For



the inmates, another window opens up, whereby they might find some sort of freedom, which every human being needs to be able to live. They can recognize that as humans they have made mistakes but can also see that they are endowed with qualities to keep going on with their lives, and can be useful individuals."

### South Africa: Making a Difference

Recently a group of women completed PEP at the Female Correctional Facility in Johannesburg, South Africa. Here are some of their comments:

"This PEP is about making a choice. I need to choose hope and peace in my life. I learnt who I am. I need to forgive and forget."

"I learnt about myself from this course. It has also taught me to be tolerant with others and help one another. I want to come again for this course."

"PEP taught me to have peace within myself. Now I can manage my anger."

"I will always remember my inner strength is with me."

"I learnt that nobody can take my dignity away."

TPRF received a letter from Mr. Tivani Makasane, the head of Zonderwater Prison in Gauteng, South Africa, who wrote, "I am humbled to write this letter to your kind Institution to appreciate and acknowledge the knowledge and the information which is imparted to the officials and the offenders of Zonderwater Correctional Centre B.

"This program has enlightened and empowered a lot of offenders to have peace within them and it also taught them to forgive other people. Some of them before the inception of the program were always having conflict and anger within. After they attended the program, they started to have peace.

"I am very confident that, should this program be rolled out in the majority of prisons nationally and

internationally, there will be a peaceful prison environment, which has the potential to reduce recidivism and have law-abiding citizens upon release and facilitate the process of re-integration into the society.

"I hope and pray that the Almighty provides Mr. Rawat and his committed and dedicated team of volunteers to keep up and continue with the excellent work of making a difference in other people's lives."

### Program Expansion

In addition to correctional facilities, PEP has expanded into many other areas, including adult education, civic centers, colleges and universities, community-based programs, health and wellness facilities, parolees, rehabilitation centers, senior centers, and a pilot program now underway with military veterans.

Dr. Michael Gilbert, Professor of Criminal Justice Department at the University of Texas, San Antonio, is interested in studying the program to provide measurable results.

After meeting some inmates and former inmates who have participated in the workshops, Dr. Gilbert said, "We think something very positive is happening here. Offenders seem to find clarity. They seem to find understanding of themselves and a personal sense of inner peace, all of which may be needed for them to break destructive cycles and behavior patterns that have led them time and time again to jail and prison." ■

**Sherry Weinstein** has worked with The Prem Rawat Foundation for the past 12 years. As Director of the Peace Education Program since 2011, she helped create the new PEP curriculum. In addition, she manages teams of volunteers who bring PEP into prisons in North and South America, Europe, Asia, the Pacific, and Africa. For more information, e-mail [peaceeducationprogram@tprf.org](mailto:peaceeducationprogram@tprf.org) or call 310-392-5700.