

“Around the World with TPRF”

Podcast Transcript

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Welcome to “Around the World with TPRF,” a podcast featuring news and views from The Prem Rawat Foundation, working to build a world at peace, one person at a time.

Jake: I’m Jake Frankel, Executive Editor for The Prem Rawat Foundation, and your host for this inaugural podcast. We hope you find it inspiring and informative as we go “Around the World with TPRF” to explore life’s challenges and hear from volunteers about how our initiatives are making a powerful difference.

(00:37) We start in Australia, where since 2009, prisoner numbers have been growing at a faster rate than almost all other developed countries. According to the Institute of Public Affairs, Australian prisons are also among the most expensive in the world, costing taxpayers an average of about \$110,000 a year per prisoner. Throwing more money and people into cells isn’t reducing recidivism or helping make people feel safer: 58% of inmates are repeat offenders.

Thankfully, a group of forward-thinking corrections officers in the state of Queensland has responded to those alarming realities by embracing new rehabilitation programs, and they are finding great success with the Peace Education Program.

A new issue of *Corrections News*, the official trade magazine of Queensland Corrective Services, celebrates the program, noting that (quote), “Teaching inner peace, strength, choice, and appreciation are achieving real results for some of Queensland’s most violent prisoners” (end quote). Since March of 2017, rates of inmate violence at Wolston Correctional Center have dropped from 30% to 2% for participants in the program.

Because of those undeniable results, officials are in the process of rolling out the program to all 14 correctional facilities in Queensland.

Catherine Gavigan, a volunteer charged with supporting that effort, tells us more about this development from her home in Queensland.

Catherine: Hi. My name is Catherine Gavigan, and I am the PEP support person for Queensland Corrections. So I have had the privilege of being involved in the development side of the program and also the implementation side. So throughout 2017, I was involved in facilitating the PEP briefings for Queensland Corrections alongside Lynne McNairn, the Violence Prevention Coordinator at Wolston Correctional Facility.

I think it’s probably useful to start by giving you some background on Queensland Corrections Violence Prevention Strategy. In December 2016, as part of the Queensland Corrections Violence Prevention Strategy, Violence Prevention Coordinators were appointed in all secured facilities in Queensland.

With the prisoner numbers continuing to increase, it was important to act to ensure that this increase didn't result in increased risks for staff, other prisoners and visitors, and hence the strategy unfolded. And where PEP emerged was that one of the newly-appointed Violence Prevention Coordinators was looking for initiatives to address the issues of violence within her correctional facility.

She felt that new approaches needed to be sourced. She was introduced to PEP by a colleague at Wolston, felt that she could give PEP a trial, and started the program in March 2017 with 48 men. Ten weeks later, the results spoke for themselves. Of the 39 men who completed PEP over the first 10 weeks, only two were involved in an incident within the prison environment during that time. So, a really good result from the beginning.

My experience is that most people working in corrections are actively looking for solutions to ongoing issues. So when they saw the results of PEP, saw what PEP was achieving, they were very supportive and encouraging.

I have been attending PEP sessions regularly at Wolston for over a year now, so I have personally seen the changes. Over 80 men are attending PEP every Friday at Wolston. Feedback is suggesting that the level of involvement is having a significant effect on the overall prison culture. And men have personally expressed to me such things as, "I can now forgive myself." "I'm beginning to understand why I ended up in here." "I feel I know now what to do so I don't end up in here again."

The rollout is going well. We have 14 correctional facilities in Queensland. Five of those are on their second PEP, two are just starting, so we're nearly halfway there with the rollout.

In the Queensland Corrections rollout, we've never had volunteers to do the program. Right from the beginning, the initiative was taken up by the Violence Prevention Coordinators, and they have been the ones who are running the program in all facilities across Queensland. And to me, this is the most sustainable option, because when you've got buy-in from the officials, and they're able to see the results every day that they deliver the program, then you can probably speak to yourself, "Okay, this is going to be ongoing."

So, in my view, the implementation of PEP across correctional facilities, let alone all the other community organizations in the South Pacific, is just beginning.

06:10

Jake: Thanks Catherine. In support of what's happening in Queensland, TPRF Founder Prem Rawat recently visited Wolston Prison to speak to participants in the Peace Education Program, answer their questions, and receive their feedback. Here's what one of those inmates participating in the program had to say to Prem at their meeting, as well as Prem's response.

Participant: Six months ago, "peace" was a word we occasionally heard on TV. Most of us would have struggled to give an accurate definition of the word.... The idea of peace in our lives

was a nonexistent thought. Now, for most of us here, peace is no longer a dream; it is becoming a reality, a thirst we have to quench.

Most of us here have commenced a journey of having peace and contentment and freedom in our lives. This has only been possible through your Peace Education Program. I know for myself, listening to your words has become my new drug of choice. Once again, I'd like to thank you for the Peace Education Program, and being here today.

And, finally, to the skeptics who believe peace and contentment isn't possible, believe me when I say, "This shit's real."

Prem Rawat: *Well, I, I tell you, I'm so, I mean, I'm—I'm so touched.*

It is *so good* to, to *see* those people who just want to rise above it. Because you can! It's possible.

(07:48) **Jake:** One of the most striking things about the Peace Education Program is that it is benefiting people from all walks of life and is helping them face any number of different challenges.

And one of the most difficult challenges that any of us could face is a life threatening illness like cancer.

Cancer strikes more than 14 million people around the world each year, and the United States, where I live, has the sixth highest cancer rate in the world. Nearly 40 percent of us will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in our lives, according to the National Cancer Institute, and many more of us have loved ones who are forced to deal with this terrible disease.

There are no easy answers for how to handle cancer and all the problems that come with it, but I recently had an inspiring talk with Sally Weaver, a cancer survivor, and Mary Jo Fortin, about how peace education is helping people at the Westlake Cancer Support Center in California.

(08:48) **Sally:** My name is Sally Weaver, and I live in Thousand Oaks, California. Both Mary Jo and I approached the cancer community about four years ago.

Mary Jo: I'm just so touched because the people that come, like the attendees or anyone whose life has been affected by cancer, they can be a patient, a survivor, someone who's a caretaker, or maybe friends, family, a loved one.

Jake: Tell us a little bit more about who has been attending PEP at this clinic.

Mary Jo: Right now, we have a couple of survivors...

Sally: We've had many cancer patients that are in treatment come, and many of those patients, it's kind of nice where we have the program because it's in a room where there's couches as well so if they need to stretch out and watch the program laying down, that's fine, and it's a very comfortable setting for them. So I think that that's important too is to just... we do have a very diverse group, don't we, Mary Jo?

Mary Jo: Yeah, we do. And they make it really comfortable, you know, with couches, pillows, comfy chairs. They even have blankets because some people get cold easily. This is a wonderful place, I think, to present this because people lose hope when they're in pain or suffering a lot or they think they're going to die, and that's a hard thing to face if you don't know yourself. And even when you do know yourself, it's easy to lose hope. And I've watched them how this helps them so much to find those resources inside and bring some clarity to their life, that life can be still beautiful.

Sally: One thing is that the staff and the program directors, I think that they're very happy with us there, because we're consistent, and people come to the program even if it's not like a whole big huge group of people, but it's consistent. And we provide something that makes a difference, and I think they have a lot of gratitude for us.

Jake: It's very clear from some of the participant's comments that they definitely do have a lot of gratitude for what you are doing. Here's just a few samples of what some of them have said on their feedback forms.

Mary Jo: "The PEP workshop has brought me more clarity to make better choices. It has given me the strength to continue on."

"The PEP program will not cure my cancer. We are all dealing with death. It has helped me to feel enlightened."

"I see that I must enjoy my life...every bit that is left."

Jake: Thank you Sally and Mary Jo.

(11:52) **Jake:** Another group of people in desperate need of rehabilitation and renewal are those impacted by violence and war. And unfortunately, there's been more and more of them in recent times, as the world has been getting incrementally less peaceful every year since 2007, according to a study by the Institute for Economics and Peace.

Just 11 countries on earth are not involved in an armed conflict in one way or another. A recent study from the UN Refugee Agency found that an unprecedented 65.6 million people were displaced by conflicts in 2016 alone. Every minute of every day, an average of 20 people lose their homes to fighting.

For the world to be a more peaceful place, it's critical that war victims are given opportunities to heal and break these cycles of bitterness. And in more and more countries, the Peace Education Program is becoming part of the solution. In Sri Lanka and Colombia, governments have incorporated the program into large-scale reconciliation efforts for ex-combatants and students alike. And the program is also starting to reach students and soldiers in the deeply divided West African nation of Côte d'Ivoire, hopefully cultivating more peaceful perspectives.

I recently talked to Francis Ahore about just a few of the things that are happening with the program there.

Well, Francis, can you just start by giving us an overview and a little bit of a brief history about the PEP at the junior high school?

(13:37) **Francis:** Well, actually we thought that it would be good to extend the Peace Education Program to junior and senior high school. So after the first one was PEP in June 2016 at a senior high school in Ghana here. It's a little bit outside Accra. It was very successful.

So 2017, we had a first experiment and we're very supportive of one of the Regional Director of Education in the Center Region in Ghana here. He gave us authorization to go to all the junior and senior high schools in his district. So as a first start, we started with four junior high schools. There are also 32 students who have completed the 10 workshops.

Jake: And what kind of responses are these students having to the Peace Education Program? How is it impacting their lives?

Francis: From the live expression that I've got from them the day of the acknowledgement, the event that we had, it was clear that they got it, they see that peace and even in terms of... their behavior in school or at home it has changed. They get this. It's impacting their life.

We have one correctional facility for this junior between 12 to say 16, 17 boys, and this one has been going on for maybe a year or two in one of the prisons, and one of the boys who was about to commit suicide have changed completely his project. So it has same kind of impact.

I feel it's what is happening. There is more kind of being human, being a... students are more respectful, teachers are more human towards the students, so the relationships between these two people are getting better.

Jake: Francis, I understand you are also offering the Peace Education Program in the nation of Cote d'Ivoire at military camps to help reconciliation efforts and prevent more violence. What is the current military situation in that country?

Francis: The situation is like anything can happen. After all these years of civil war, you have all of these two camps, you know some people want to take revenge. You never know what can happen. You're always getting these alerts, "Be careful," this, this, this.

Jake: So where are these camps where PEP is going to be offered?

Francis: It's in a town called Bouake. Bouake is the second capital of Cote d'Ivoire. I'm sure in your database you saw we had 15, November of 2015, we had an event where I've been able to present the Peace Education Program to the city, the city administrators, we had school teachers, we had the headmasters, and then we had students from the university because 15 November is a Peace Day in Cote d'Ivoire. There's a lot of camps there because it's the city between Burkina Faso and then the main economic capital Abidjan. So we hope to have this going on there.

Jake: Thanks Francis, we look forward to hearing more about how these efforts evolve.

(17:28) **Jake:** In addition to the Peace Education Program, TPRF aims to help people live dignified and prosperous lives through the Food for People Program, which is helping more and more people access clean water and food in destitute areas of Ghana, India and Nepal.

The program tries to give people the tools they need to lift themselves out of poverty, and in the remote mountains of Nepal, TPRF recently provided thousands of children with an empowering new tool: computer labs and critical trainings in many of the schools served by the food kitchen.

Made possible by TPRF supporters through a \$40,000 grant, the computers are going to give the kids unprecedented access to information and job opportunities that they couldn't have dreamed of before.

TPRF treasurer Bruce Keenan regularly visits Nepal, and shares more about this initiative.

Bruce: So, having been in Nepal a few times, and having the incredible opportunity to visit the Food for People facility there, over the course of the past few years, the work of the facility and the work of the Food for People Program there have expanded. And initially, they were feeding the kids from the students from one school that was like, you know, a couple hundred yards away. And then after the earthquake, they started feeding two other schools, and recently in June expanded to a school in the next district over that has 750 kids in it. In my experience, having the opportunity to visit all four of these schools previously, I saw that there was a real lack in terms of computer literacy in the students that are there. They do take a standardized test when they leave Class 10 that has some computer stuff in it, but it's mostly just theory, and it doesn't really confirm that the kids know how to use a computer or have ever used a computer.

My wife and I had installed Internet access to these four schools, which really helped. But again, the problem was for these schools, there was only two or three or four computers in a school for hundreds of kids. So, in discussions in Nepal, I ran across these guys from the Microsoft Innovation Center there, and they had been installing computer labs in other schools around Nepal. So the Board decided to go ahead and make this grant. The funds were given to the Microsoft Innovation Center in Nepal, and they installed these four computer labs, one in each of the secondary schools supported by the Food Kitchen.

And so each computer lab is made up of 18 workstations. Everything you see on the screen comes from one of two file servers in the classroom, and the computer teacher can observe what each student is doing on the screen.

On the servers are Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Publisher, and Encarta, and we're also working with another organization called Deerwalk, who has been videotaping Nepali curriculum. Deerwalk has started recording a whole year's worth of classes. We're also going to install a hard drive in the next six months in each one of these schools to put those Nepali classroom lessons. So they would be available in these computer labs.

Jake: Bruce, how are you hoping the computer labs and the trainings you're describing will work in complement to the daily meal service that TPRF is providing to help these kids have prosperous lives?

Bruce: I think having these kids learn computer skills is an additional kind of complement to the work of the Food Kitchen. So if you look at like the intention behind that the founder put in when he first came up with the idea of doing these food kitchens is the whole idea for these kids to end up with a life of dignity, peace, and prosperity. There are so many things, so many factors that go into this idea of prosperity. Obviously, the kids to get a good education is one, and the fact that they're getting fed a healthy, nutritious meal once a day goes a lot towards them being able to focus in school, to study in school, to get the most out of their school education. And now with this, they're going to have an advantage that other students in that area don't have.

I'd like to express my personal gratitude and convey the gratitude of the students, the children, the teachers and the school administrators for the help and support of the TPRF volunteers and supporters that are making this possible.

(23:08) **Jake:** Thank you Bruce. And thanks for listening to our first "*Around the World with TPRF*" podcast.

Be sure to subscribe to the TPRF email list at tprf.org to be among the first people to get these new podcasts, as well as other news and stories and information about how you can get involved.

"Around the World with TPRF" and the work of The Prem Rawat Foundation is made possible by your support. Thank you.

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