WTB Monthly Meeting Minutes - November 23, 2014/ Jownoio School

President Betty Lamb called the meeting to order at 3:12 pm. After the reading of our Mission Statement and Safe Place Declaration, general announcements were made:

* Sis Zucker, an active volunteer at WCNY, has set up our time to help out at the WCNY Travel Auction. WTB members will answer the phones and take bids from 5:30 to 9:00 pm on Friday, January 16th. Volunteers should arrive about 5:20 for a brief training session; dinner will be provided.
* Our next WTB meeting will be December 14th from 3 to 5 pm. Poet Jennifer Jeffery will give us a chance to write some poetry. Betty sent around sign-up sheets for the Travel Auction and refreshments on Dec 14th.
* Jennifer Crittenden announced that the Book Club will meet December 8th at 7 pm to discuss The Commoner and invited everyone to borrow a book from a number of previous book club selections she had brought. Barbara Fought has posted the complete reading list on the WTB website.
* The next Schmai will be December 3rd from 5:30 to 7:30 pm at Shirley Wells' home. Bring a special family holiday dish to share.
* Sue Savion displayed a picture painted by her neighbor, artist Clare Wilson. Claire has agreed to present a program for WTB later this year. Sue also invited us to a book signing for her recently published book about Jocelyn Gage at May Memorial from 3-5:30 pm on Saturday Nov 29th.
* Starting in January 2015, monthly WTB meetings will be held at Interfaith Works, 1010 James St.

Gay Montague then introduced the topic of today's presentation: the September 19th trip to the UN International Day of Peace made by members of the Syracuse Chapter of Seeds of Peace. Danya Wellmon, who spearheaded this trip, was unable to attend today. Gay, who made the trip with the group, began by giving us an overview of how the trip came about. When Monica Willard of the UN invited some young people to come down for the UN Day of Peace, Beth Broadway of Inter Faith Works (IFW) suggested the Seeds of Peace. IFW, United Religions International (URI) North America, and WTB provided financial help.

At 3 am on September 19, a group of 30 Syracuse high school students and chaperones boarded a bus for NYC. After breakfasts provided by Wegmans (unfortunately sans coffee), the group disembarked at 8 am to began an amazing and inspiring day. Gay was truly moved to watch young people from all over the world collaborate with each other. Seated in a large conference room (complete with language translating equipment), the group participated in a program including an address by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, a concert by Yo-Yo Ma, a presentation by Jane Goodall. After the UN event, the Syracuse young people visited the Museum of Tolerance and the Seeds of Peace NYC office, where they enjoyed pizza before boarding the bus back to Syracuse.

Gay introduced Kathy Ferro, Administrative Assistant for the El-Hindi Center for Dialogue of IFW who also chaperoned the trip. Her favorite part of the day was getting out of her office and really getting to know the kids! She turned the meeting over to a panel of eight students who had made the trip to talk about what Seeds of Peace is and tell us about their day at the UN.

Anna Nguyen (Fowler), Cimone S. Jordan (Fowler), Tatyanna K. Jordan (Fowler), Olivia Vought (Nottingham), Ahmed Shalaan (Corcoran), Yousif Kareem (Nottingham), and Yasir Almafrachi (Nottingham) each introduced himself and shared an impression/memory of either the UN trip or the Seeds of Peace Camp in Maine. A summary of their discussion follows these minutes. After a break for refreshments (excellent, and much appreciated by all) the panel of young people continued to answer questions. The sentiments they expressed, as well as their eloquence and sincerity truly inspired all of us.

Kathy Ferro then showed a slide presentation of the Seeds of Peace camp experience, which had us humming along to "Lean on Me" and concluded with our standing ovation. Betty adjourned the meeting at 5:15 pm, thanking the students for sharing their experience and their stories with us. Penny Hart's closing thoughts voiced our gratitude for the opportunity to meet these young people who have such bright futures ahead.

A Summary of Information Shared with us by the Panel:

Seeds of Peace was founded in 1993 by John Wallach, who started a camp in Maine to provide a safe environment where Palestinian and Israeli kids could come to learn about each other , share their ideas honestly, and learn the skills needed to work toward peace. It was expanded to include teenagers from our country and others. The Syracuse chapter of Seeds of Peace is sponsored by Say Yes To Education. Applications to attend camp go through IFW but any student can join the school clubs.

Seeds of Peace camp in Maine is a transformative experience. With no internet available, a very diverse group of kids and counselors from all over the world meet and get to know each other beyond stereotypes. "I learned not to trust the media because of stereotypes. Never judge the other side unless you have interacted with them." The approximately 160 campers break up into groups and dialogue twice a day. Any subject can be brought up. Discussions can be highly intense as people have strong emotional opinions and often come from communities in conflict. Some panel members returned a second year as PS (Peer Support) to facilitate discussion and support kids. Campers learn that listening is equally as important as talking. When asked which topics were most difficult to talk about during dialogue sessions, various panelists answered: stereotyping and its influence on behavior, gender issues and feminism, White privilege, opening up and sharing your personal background/story. One student said that he talked and wrote about the violent conflicts he had personally experienced--his family had to leave first Iraq and then Syria because of war/civil war before coming to Syracuse.

The camp "validates every culture and every religion." As Ramadan occurred during their last camp session, accommodations were made for fasting, and everyone ate together at the end of the daily fast. Muslim, Quaker, Jewish, and Christian religious services are offered and campers can attend those of other faiths. Camp is about building relationships; it includes group challenges where teams must work together to meet physical challenges and culminates in Color Games, a camp-wide competition between two teams that encourages real teamwork across cultural differences. Several students stressed that campers become "as close as family" in two and a half weeks.

When students return from Seeds of Peace Camp they sometimes have a difficult time communicating with their families. "It's hard when you're the only one who believes in something different." They stay connected through Facebook and try to spread the word to their friends. Each school Seeds of Peace club plans activities to get other teens involved such as poetry slams, multicultural festivals, a "speed friending" event to foster relationships across school groups, and inter-school dialogues. School administrators are supportive of their efforts. Some teens on our panel plan to continue to work with Seeds of Peace after graduation as counselors, or plan a career influenced by their camp experience (Peace Corps, UN, environmental policy.)

Several students said the UN International Day of Peace trip was truly memorable. Two members from Syracuse read a speech about non-violence and the importance of tolerance from the Syracuse Seeds of Peace Day. Others got to hold a flag during the Moment of Silence. Olivia was impressed with the amazing building itself--all the flags--an auditorium filled with young leaders . Honoring the good things happening in the country and throughout the world really "made you feel like peace can happen." Students were excited to hear different perspectives of kids from different areas of the world. A video feed from Africa brought home that some areas of the world face worse challenges than we do. One student summarized: "Peace is when there is conflict but you are able to cope and compromise." Jane Goodall's portion of the program expanded the notion of peace to include our need to be in peace with our environment.

Their trip was enriched by their visit to The Museum of Tolerance, which featured interactive displays about stereotypes throughout history and included information about slavery existing today. After watching a film, they left the Museum and visited the NYC office of Seeds of Peace. Students welcomed the chance to reunite with some of their counselors from Camp, to dialogue about the experiences of the morning --and to eat some pizza!

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Bova,

Monthly Meeting Secretary