

# Making peace a personal priority

*A new documentary shows "real kids" making peace happen*

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*By Inara Verzemnieks of The Oregonian staff*

They've turned taunts into dances, anger and frustration into rhymes. They're mediators, crusaders and street-corner poets, free with their words and their hope. They are teen-age peacemakers, and the subjects of a documentary that will be shown during the Dalai Lama's visit to Portland in May.

The Oregon Peace Institute commissioned the documentary, which was unveiled Thursday, to show what young people were doing to promote peace and prevent violence in their communities. And they discovered scores of local teens working, in their own small, everyday ways, on the problems of violence and racism and discrimination.

The video, called "Peace by Piece: Youth Take Action," was produced by the nonprofit Green Fire Productions. It's 16 rapid-fire minutes of personal testimonies and spoken-word performances.

The video relies on teens -- on both sides of the camera lens. The filmmakers drafted interns from local high schools to help them select the youth highlighted in the documentary and to make sure the project never strayed too far from their reality, says Karen Meyer, executive director and founder of Green Fire.

John Wagner, 19, from Open Meadow Learning Center, was one of the interns. "If they didn't have some sort of teen influence in this, it could have been just another boring teen video," he says. "But . . . this will affect teens in a different way. It will connect with them more, instead of talking down to them."

Perhaps most importantly, the creators say, this documentary shows teens what kids -- "real kids, very much like themselves" -- are doing to cope with the kinds of conflict and personal violence that teens bump up against

everyday, says Frances Kaplan, treasurer and Peace Institute board member.

There's a 13-year-old girl, frustrated with violent video games, who launches a campaign to ban them from public spaces. A Cleveland High School student who endured the racist taunts of classmates, who now performs native dances to raise awareness and understanding of her culture.

There's Erika Poole, a 17-year-old Franklin High School senior, who fell into her school's peer mediation program and soon fell in love with it. By day, she helps classmates work through miscommunication and hurt feelings. Evenings, she works with parents and teens who've come to the Resolutions Northwest's Family Mediation Program.

"What appeals to me about mediation is that it puts the responsibility on the people with the problem," says Erika. "I help them communicate with each other, but what I like is that I don't tell people what to do. It's empowering people to make the decisions and find the solutions for the themselves."

And there's Felipe Gonzalez, a 16-year-old Lincoln High School student who dreams of a hip-hop career but thinks back to the days he roamed North Portland streets with a pack of friends, "assaulting people for no reason," and to a friend who was shot and killed.

"I'm the ultimate cliché -- ex-thug turned rapper," says Felipe. He laughs, then turns serious. "I started rapping for all the wrong reasons. What I was writing about before was guns, basketball and corner stuff -- 'I got an AK-47 in my pocket' -- dumb, ignorant things. It had no meaning. Basically, when I noticed people were actually listening, I thought I had to change so I didn't make people more violent."

The documentary will be shown before the Dalai Lama speaks at a May 14 youth summit that more than 6,000 teens are expected to attend. Beyond that, there are plans to distribute the video to schools and youth organizations. The video holds lessons for adults, too.

"I'm not a parent, so I haven't dealt much with teens, and so, my experience of teens has just come through the media," says Meyer of Green Fire. "I'm one of the people who ended up with a cynical attitude -- 'What's happening with America's youth?' I wasn't very optimistic. But when we got this project and started uncovering what youth are doing in

their community, in their schools and their homes, I was extremely taken aback and surprised. I find they are far more responsible and far more involved than I or my generation ever was."

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