

PATHWAYS TO PEACE

Told by Masankho Banda

On September 11, 2001, Avon Mattison was at the United Nations, launching what was to be the first annual Culture of Peace Week. This same day, New York City became the site of the most horrific act of war ever inflicted on U.S. soil.

People were being evacuated from the UN and the surrounding area, but Avon decided to stay. She stood on the grounds of the United Nations, under the flags of all nations on the planet. On this perfectly clear day, she could hear the sounds of sirens and planes flying very low; she didn't know whether they were more attacks, or U.S. security forces protecting the city. Instead of fear, she felt an unearthly calm. "If this is my last moment on earth," she thought, "I want people to know what we stood for."

Avon was just doing her job that day: helping young voices for peace be heard. The next day she helped provide supplies to relief workers at "Ground Zero." "The spirit of love was everywhere," Avon says. "I've never seen so much courage—as in the French word *coeur*, courage comes from an unselfish and giving heart.

"War is so horrifying, so unnecessary, and so destructive of life," she thought, remembering other war zones she had witnessed. "It is always the innocent who become the victims." That day, Avon renewed her commitment: to work with others to bring forward the highest good for all beings, especially the children.

Over the years, Avon has mentored children from all over the world, like Masankho Banda, who, at eighteen, fled political persecution in Malawi, West Africa. Masankho's passion for peace through social justice was born when his father was imprisoned for speaking out for democracy. "We will lock him up until he learns to be quiet," said the president of Malawi. Masankho's father languished in a cell for twelve long years: another voice for freedom silenced.

At the time, there was little Masankho or anyone could do. For thirty years, Malawians lived in terror under the cruel dictatorship of their president. Relatively speaking, Masankho's father was one of the lucky ones. Today he is one of only three surviving members of the twenty in Malawi's first cabinet, formed in 1964. Most of the others disappeared without a trace. Their children were considered outcasts and were prohibited from going to school.

Arriving alone in the United States, Masankho carried the weight of his family's suffering. He wanted to connect with other young people whose lives had been shattered by war, but he didn't know where to go. One day a friend said to him, "Masankho, if you want to work with someone who is truly making a difference in children's lives around the world, call Avon Mattison." It turned out to be the most important telephone call of his life.

Although Avon was from America—on the other side of the world—she was a kindred spirit. When she was born in 1941, the darkness of World War II covered the whole earth. On her fourth birthday, Avon looked out her window and made a silent wish for peace.

Avon's wish was answered by a most extraordinary vision! As she

stood there, she saw the planet Earth as a living being, and people of all ages and countries living harmoniously with the Earth and with one another. When she wondered what they were doing, an inner voice told her they were building pathways to peace for future generations.

Young Avon wasn't sure what her birthday message and "pathways to peace" meant. She tried to tell some grownups what she had seen and asked them for an explanation. She was told that it was just her childish imagination. While her voice was not heard, she kept trying.

As a young adult, Avon asked how people could make peace a practical reality for future generations. She met with leaders from the United Nations, corporations, and government agencies, and with military officials and scientists, and asked them all the same question. Many of them were too busy preparing for and fighting wars to answer her, but, in time, she found one or two brave souls from each walk of life who were willing to see what they could do together to build pathways to peace.

In the mid-1970s, Avon decided to bring these kindred spirits together. For the last twenty-five years, Avon's organization, Pathways to Peace (PTP), has coordinated a peace-building initiative involving two hundred global organizations and has co-sponsored several International Children's Conferences, sending young people as its official representatives to UN conferences.

Avon's greatest joy comes from working closely with young people, preparing them to become leaders of the twenty-first century. She believes that they have the greatest stake in creating peace, since they will be the ones who have to live with the decisions we all make today.

At their very first meeting, Avon began training Masankho to be a facilitator at the upcoming Children's Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. She gave him her ticket and her place at the conference, and in so doing, she passed him the torch. She was living her commitment to putting young people first. Four weeks later, Masankho was on a plane to Vienna.

In Vienna, Masankho met 140 other young people, many of whom had been traumatized by years of war. At first, some of the youth had trouble even speaking their names. But in time they came to trust each other, and their transformations were dramatic. For example, at the beginning of the conference, Liliana, a shy fifteen-year-old high-school student, could barely introduce herself. But by the fifth day she was leading workshops with strength and authority. Igor and Vladimir, Bosnian and Serbian teenagers who had each lost a close relative in the war, led a joint workshop on tolerance and forgiveness. At one point, Igor turned to Vladimir and said, "You and I are here, we are friends. Our people have done horrible things to each other. We can create something different. Instead of revenge, we need to talk about reconciliation. Instead of destroying, we can rebuild our country." When they hugged, there was not a dry eye in the room.

Each night, Masankho worked with the children from Croatian refugee camps. On the last night they gave a special presentation wherein these children who had known only war in their lives danced for peace. Everyone danced and sang together and spoke of peace, love, and reconciliation. They all knew that this was the way things should be, all the time.

After the dancing, Ivana, the Croatian children's chaperone, approached Masankho. "These children have been in the refugee camps for two years," she said. "This is the happiest I have ever seen them. Please come and dance and sing with the children we have left behind." So they designed a children's peace education project for the Croatian refugee camps. Since then, they have made three trips to the camps and have touched the lives of more than one thousand children.

Through Pathways to Peace, Masankho sees Avon's childhood vision becoming a reality. Although the pathways to peace are difficult to build, Masankho truly believes that each one of us can make a difference so that peace will prevail on earth.

Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of bright torch which I have got hold of for a moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Participate in the annual Culture of Peace Week from September 11–21, including Hear the Children Day of Peace, concluding with the International Day of Peace. Participate in the We The Peoples initiative, for local-global citizen peacebuilding. To learn more, including how to support **Pathways to Peace**, write to P.O. Box 1057, Larkspur, CA 94977; e-mail pathwavs@peacenet.org; or visit their Web site, <https://pathwaystopeace.org>.