

International peace group comes back to its roots

Written by Ryan Howard
Wednesday, 20 March 2013 15:37



CIRCLE PINES – Mel Duncan has travelled all around the world in the last decade, getting into dangerous situations and finding peaceful solutions in a variety of global hotspots as part of Nonviolent Peaceforce, an international organization he co-founded with Quaker activist David Hartsough.

Last week, however, NP made a local stop when Duncan and the group's other leaders held their annual director's meeting at the Circle Pines Hospitality House.

John and Eleanor Yackel have operated the Hospitality House in Circle Pines next door to their home on Golden Lake for about 20 years as a local retreat and conference center. In a way, NP's stay in Circle Pines is a bit of a homecoming, as the group's organizers convened at Hospitality House in 2001 for a key meeting.

Duncan remembered the intense heat of the summer, noting that the meeting took place close to when Vikings offensive tackle Korey Stringer died from complications related to heat stroke. During breaks in the meeting, people would run out of the hospitality house and jump into the lake to cool off.

"Circle Pines has served us well," Duncan said with a smile.

For years before the 2001 meeting, Duncan had travelled around the world trying to promote peace through nonviolent means. As he talked with others who did the same and the people they were trying to protect, he realized that the presence of outsiders in a community alone can help stem the tide of violence because of political pressure. He vividly remembered one conversation with a woman affected by violence.

"She said, 'Isolation kills us,'" Duncan recalled. "'If there's no cost to our lives, we're much more likely to be disappeared.'"

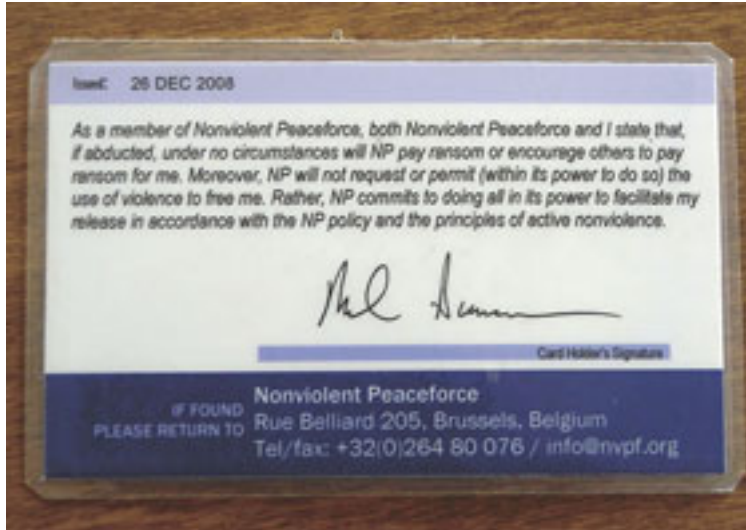
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Duncan, Hartsough and others met at the 1999 Hague appeal for peace and began to lay the framework for NP, combining outside presence with mediation techniques and local training to help communities arbitrate peace on their own.

"This was a recurring vision," said Duncan.



The Yackels knew Duncan, originally from the Twin Cities area, from peace advocacy they had both participated in. In 2001, the Yackels offered the use of Hospitality House to the people who would eventually form the groundwork of NP to discuss the feasibility of a nonviolent peace organization. The organization has occasionally met at the house since.

The following year, NP was launched, and the first country project was started in Sri Lanka in 2003. The organization, which only goes to areas where they are invited by a local community group, helped communities limit violence and stop child kidnapping during the country's civil war between the government and a revolutionary group known as the "Tamil Tigers."

NP does not take a one-size-fits-all approach to peacekeeping, noted South Sudan Country Director Tiffany Easthom. Instead, each project finds solutions that are best suited to its country and communities.

For example, a big problem in South Sudan is cattle raiding.

"The only way to get married in South Sudan is with cattle," she said.

Left alone, cattle raiding can become a vicious and violent cycle, with revenge thefts often including the kidnapping of women and children from neighboring communities. NP helps neighboring would-be raiders engage in "shuttle diplomacy," heading back and forth between the two feuding parties to come up with an acceptable agreement to halt their actions and return what was taken. The organization also teaches men to barter for cattle instead of stealing it, encouraging more stability in this very new country (it broke from Sudan in 2011 after a long civil war).

Another example in South Sudan is rape reduction. A solution in one community involved

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making sure there are cell phones distributed around the village, making sure that every woman is able to quickly call for help if something suspicious or alarming is happening.

In the Philippines, NP is taking an even more involved approach to the overall peace process, helping monitor the ceasefire between the government and independence group Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Relationship building is key to this situation and many others that NP is involved in, said Senior Program Manager Shadab Mansoori.



When NP goes into a country, it immediately begins working with the local community groups, training them in peacekeeping situations, mapping out how conflict starts in an area and giving peaceful people more confidence and clout. In the Philippines, NP worked to create conflict "early warning systems" that would help them learn when fighting was about to happen.

"We started engaging all the different actors in the situation," he said.

Approaching influential people in the area, NP worked with them to find ways to stop the violence before it started. The Philippines project is ongoing, but Mansoori (who is now working on bringing a project to Myanmar this spring) said the country has seen significant improvement since NP arrived there in the mid-2000s.

NP tracks its success by surveying locals about their perceived safety and through more concrete means, like measuring how many people are out after dark or sending their kids to school or putting glass in their windows (those in fear of violence, Easthom noted, won't put glass in their windows under the assumption it will be quickly broken in a conflict).

Key to all of the organization's projects are the principles of local participation, non-partisanship and non-violence. Duncan and all of NP's field workers carry with them cards that state that they will not be ransomed if they're abducted, and that only nonviolent solutions will be accepted for their return. Those principles, he said, have helped NP gain the respect of local groups, both the peaceful and the aggressors, and have allowed the group to succeed in a variety of situations, including reducing rapes, returning kidnapped children, and helping longtime enemies come to an understanding.

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In Circle Pines, the organization met to discuss its future and to come up with new ideas. Duncan thanked the city and the Yackels for their hospitality — and for the house that bears hospitality's name.

NP is always seeking support, either financially or via volunteering as a peacekeeper or other helper. For more information on the organization, visit www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org.