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“Masters of Peace: Global violence prompts universities to develop conflict resolution studies”

By Dana Micucci

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LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico: The Bradbury Science Museum in this drab high-desert town studded with old army barracks houses life-size replicas of Little Boy and Fat Man, chilling reminders of the human capacity for unspeakable violence. The cutely named atomic bombs, which were invented here, were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945.

Less than 100 miles away, or 160 kilometers, in Montezuma, New Mexico, lies United World College of the American West (UWC-USA), a two-year pre-university residential school offering an international baccalaureate diploma, with a special emphasis on peace studies and conflict resolution.

One of twelve UWC campuses worldwide and the only one in the United States, the school admits about 200 students a year, aged 16 to 19, from more than 80 countries, with the aim of fostering respect for diverse cultural, social and religious backgrounds.

Building upon its commitment to conflict-resolution training, UWC-USA established the Bartos Institute for Constructive Engagement of Conflict in 2000 to expand students' skills in managing and reducing interpersonal and inter-group conflicts locally and globally.

Renata Dwan of Ireland, a 1988 UWC-USA graduate who now works in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations at the United Nations, says her education at UWC was instrumental in teaching her how to live peacefully in a community of diverse cultures.

"Creating an environment where peace can thrive is, at the most basic level, about respecting and accepting others and realizing how subjective our perceptions are," Dwan said.

Peace studies, incorporating anthropology, sociology, political science, theology and history, aim to uncover the roots of conflict, transform the underlying causes, develop preventive strategies and teach resolution skills. More than 400 universities and colleges worldwide now offer undergraduate or graduate degrees, as well as individual courses and certificates. Most peace studies degrees are conferred at undergraduate level.

The Peace and Justice Studies Association, a group for scholars in the field, says student enrollments in university-level courses have surged in recent years.

"Our master's program had doubled in size over the past 10 years, and our doctoral program has grown considerably," said Paul Rogers, professor of peace studies at Bradford University in West Yorkshire, England. Bradford claims to have the world's largest university department of peace studies, with more than 300 students and staff.

"International circumstances such as the end of the Cold War, the tense political climate since Sept. 11, the growing number of conflicts worldwide and the security threat imposed by climate change have spurred interest in the field," Rogers said.

Like many others, Bradford's program defines peace not just as an absence of conflict and violence - known as negative peace - but also as cooperation that fosters justice and freedom: positive peace, based on human rights, equal access to education, and just social and political structures.

Peace studies began after World War II, with the founding of several research institutes, including the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo and the Center for Research on Conflict Resolution at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Manchester College, founded in North Manchester, Indiana, by the Church of the Brethren, a Protestant denomination dating to 18th-century Germany, established the first undergraduate peace studies program in the world in 1948. Manhattan College in New York City and Bradford were also early pioneers.

The field expanded in the 1960s in response to the Vietnam War. Other top schools now offering a degree in peace studies include the University of Uppsala in Sweden; James I University in Castiglione, Spain; the University of Queensland in Australia; the University for Peace in Costa Rica; George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia; American University in Washington; and the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana.

"Since 2000, there has been a sharp increase, particularly in the number of doctoral peace studies programs," said Ian Harris, founder of the peace studies program at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and president of the International Peace Research Association Foundation, which finances international peace research.

"With escalating violence around the world, this is becoming more acceptable as an area of scholarly research," Harris said. "New topics of investigation within peace studies, such as forgiveness, terrorism and environmental security, are expanding opportunities for study. And because non-governmental organizations, which tend to attract many peace studies graduates, are playing an increasing role in international peace-building efforts, they need to be staffed with educated leaders."

The Joan Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, a leader in the field since 1986, this year added a new doctoral program, and it also reports a sharp growth in undergraduate interest in the past three years.

Other schools responding to the burgeoning interest in the field include the University for Peace - established by the United Nations in demilitarized Costa Rica in 1980 - which is planning a doctoral program and has added a new master's degree in media, peace and conflict studies, focusing on the media's role.

The Graduate Institute in Milford, Connecticut, began offering a master's degree last year in Irenic Studies - named for the Greek goddess of peace - while Guilford University in Greensboro, North Carolina, a liberal arts college founded by the Quakers, established a bachelor's degree in peace and conflict studies this year.

Many of the schools offering peace studies degrees in the United States - often small liberal arts colleges like Guilford and Manchester - have roots in religious denominations, usually Christian, including the Quakers, Brethren, Mennonites and Catholics, but not exclusively so.

"Sadly, religion is often manipulated for political ends rather than viewed as a source for healing," said Abdul Aziz Said, founder of the Center for Global Peace at American University and occupant of the Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace, the only such university department in the United States.

"Teaching the common truths shared by all religions is an important component of peace studies at our university," he said. "Peace must be based on an underlying spirituality, which is ultimately a consciousness of interconnection between all people."

Fieldwork is an important part of peace studies, with students taking extended internships in conflict zones where they can learn dialogue, negotiation and mediation skills.

"Peace studies is about relationship repair on all levels, so it's crucial that these programs include both theory and practice," said Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and an early pioneer of the field who founded Transcend Peace University, a Web site that offers certificate-level courses and a master's in peace and conflict transformation.

"The field is moving beyond conflict resolution toward the teaching and practice of conflict transformation and reconciliation, which includes healing past wounds and creating long-term, sustainable peace between antagonistic parties," Galtung said.

The fruits of peace studies may sometimes be difficult to see, but that does not discourage Mary King, a professor at the University for Peace. "When you are dealing with millennia during which war has been the ultimate arbiter of conflicts, you can't expect change in a decade or two," King said.