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Peace Talks

By Janet Bronk Reese

Liz Loescher has a burning question: What can we do in the United States to wage peace? For most of her 60 years, Loescher has sought an answer. More important, she has become part of the answer. She believes her work and that of her staff at The Conflict Center in northwest Denver is much of the right answer.

Loescher founded The Conflict Center in 1987 as a nonprofit organization committed to reducing the levels of physical, emotional and verbal violence in homes, workplaces, communities and schools. Through Loescher's leadership as executive director and a dedicated community board, staff and volunteers, The Conflict Center will serve more than 20,000 people this year, about half of them younger than 12.

With a beaming smile and a calming voice, Loescher radiates an aura of peace and tranquility. Her messages are simple, yet powerful.

"Conflict is inevitable, violence is not," says Loescher. "People choose violence when they don't know anything else to do, when their frustration levels are so high it seems there's no other choice. We give people other choices by teaching them conflict management, anger management and parenting skills to help them manage everyday conflict nonviolently and with win-win outcomes."

Loescher thrives on being successful at peacemaking and measures her success through human behavior. "If people are aggressive and become less aggressive through conflict training, that's success," she affirms. "And we'll do all kinds of legal and ethical things to make that happen.

"In one case, we had a group of kids in public housing who didn't know how to play or work together," she recalls. "Through soccer, we believed we could teach them sportsmanship and skills that would help them manage their conflicts. The kids' behavior was abysmal during their first game. They cussed out the referees in three different languages. They kicked each other in the shins, they put each other down.

"By the end of the soccer season, those kids were not good at playing the sport itself," adds Loescher. "But, more important than becoming athletes, they could play a whole game with no personal fouls, they could say 'ata boy, 'ata girl even when they made mistakes and they didn't spit or cuss at the refs or each other."

Loescher's social consciousness evolved during her early years as a Girl Scout working on community service projects in Austin, Minn., her hometown. In high school during the '50s, she became increasingly aware of civil rights as she observed the marches against racial segregation. "I was shocked by the lack of humanity I saw and felt that you just don't treat human beings that way," she recalls. "From that early time, I became interested in peace and justice kind of work."

As an adult, divorced and a single mother of three young children, Loescher earned a teaching certificate to maximize time with her family. Much to her surprise, she loved teaching. She moved her family from Minneapolis to Denver and began teaching social studies at an inner-city largely Hispanic middle school. She and other faculty observed several fist fights occurring there daily. One day a child brought an unloaded gun to school, a catalyst for change, she says. Loescher was asked to develop a conflict management curriculum for the students.

"We [faculty] decided to teach conflict management, communication and cooperation," says Loescher. "We believed that if we taught those three skills and kids learned and practiced them, their self-esteem would increase. Using the skills, the kids would manage their lives and consequently, feel better about themselves. In one semester, we changed the school's culture from violence to peace and eliminated all physical fighting. That's where I got my passion for my work today."

Over the course of many years, The Conflict Center evolved from a desk in Loescher's basement family room to an office building located at 4140 Tejon Street. The center houses a complete library filled with conflict management resources including books, videotapes and school curriculums available to the public, as well as meeting rooms for workshops and offices for 14 full-time staffers.

Though Loescher credits staff and supporters for the center's success, her leadership drives the mission. Colleague and past board member Myra Isenhardt, Ph.D., observes, "Liz will do whatever is required to make a program work – design the curriculum, meet with the players, clean the room, mail the letters. Every detail is important and she does not stand on her title."

After more than 15 years of tireless service to The Conflict Center, Loescher has decided to step aside in June as executive director and serve as a consultant, helping to train her successor. Then she plans to spend time with her grandchildren and think about what to do next. "As I leave, I still will be a peacemaker, figuring out how to help people change the world to become less violent and more humane," she says.