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FAITH IN ACTION | PEACE EDUCATION PROGRAM

Hundred-voice chorus to sing for peace

Group celebrates 25th anniversary

By Christopher Hall
Special to The Courier-Journal

The Peace Education Program is continuing the celebration of its 25th anniversary tomorrow with a "Be the Change" concert at First Unitarian Church.

Area musicians, including the Kentucky Homefront radio show's John Gage and former public radio DJ Laura Shine, will join the 100-member choir in a concert led by Louisville Jazz great Harry Pickens.

Started by members of the local Friends Meeting (also known as Quakers) and sponsored by the Friends and Central Presbyterian Church on West Kentucky Street, the Peace Education Program is a not-for-profit group with no religious affiliation.

However, its connections to the Louisville faith community run deep.

The Friends Council on Social Concerns, part of the Friends Meeting, provided the seed money, while Central Presbyterian gave the fledgling organization office space in the church, Peace Education Program Executive Director Eileen Blanton said.

"We grew out of their faith commitment," Blanton said.

Peace Education works to strengthen schools and communities by teaching young people and adults nonviolent conflict resolution.

The program started 25 years ago in one classroom in one school district and has expanded to 155 schools in seven school districts, according to Blanton.

Thirteen years ago, when Blanton said Louisville's youth homicide rate was among the highest in the nation, Peace Education joined a



Peace Education Program Executive Director Eileen Blanton rehearsed with youth leaders Joe Nelson and Christian Morton, both 16, for tomorrow's concert at the First Unitarian Church on Fourth Street. (Christopher Hall, Special to The C-J)

coalition of local agencies to spread its message from schools into neighborhoods.

Programs were started in seven public housing sites, with trainer Janene Shakir teaching 400 youths who were involved in gangs to be peer mediators.

Peace Education now has 64 community sites where adults are committed to teaching children peaceful resolution, as well as practicing it themselves, Blanton said.

"Our long-term vision is to create safe places for children where they can go from home to school, from school to their community centers, from their community centers to their places of worship, and back home again," she said.

Janene Shakir, now coordinator of community programming, said it is "spectacular" the agency is celebrating a quarter-century.

"We do good work," she

said. "It's all about the positive and helping to show people new ways of doing things."

As a Muslim, Shakir is an example of the agency's continuing ecumenism and faith commitments that, for some, influence their desire to work for peace.

"Peace is important to me, not just the word peace, but human beings learning to get along with each other across all the boundaries," she said.

"Contrary to popular belief nowadays ... Islam is a faith of peace. Its whole premise is peace," she said. "It has a whole lot to do with the way I live my life."

"I have children of my own and I want to make the world as good as I can for them. What makes it good for someone else's children makes it good for my children. I believe that what you put out, you get back."

At a rehearsal for the concert earlier this week, Peace Education youth leaders said they were looking forward to taking part in the festivities.

"It's a great opportunity because we're going to represent a lot of the youth, so for us it's more of a leadership-taking role in our community ...," said 16-year-old Christian Morton.

Janene Shakir's son, Zaky, is one of the Peace Education Program's youth leaders.

"We have a good voice, and we can have a positive impact on our community as youth," Zaky Shakir said. "We get to get our opinions out and give our own in helping the community."

QUICK TAKE

WHAT: "Be the Change" concert and community choir.

WHERE: Tomorrow from 4-5:30 p.m.

WHERE: First Unitarian Church, 809 S. Fourth St.

COST: Admission is free; donations will be accepted.