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**Pasos Peace Museum: The Inspiration and Challenges of Creating a Museum
that Empowers the Peacebuilder in Each of Us**

By William Repicci

There is a saying that “all meaning is produced by difference.” Our experiences ground us in what *is*, and hence become our inspiration for envisioning what *can be*. This process would never find a greater challenge than it did in the 20th Century as an unprecedented era of war and conflict enveloped the globe. The horrific nature and consequences of these wars and hostile actions would become the inspiration for many who were determined to foster peaceful societies. With the advent of the nuclear age, we had the newly discovered ability to wipe all life off the planet. There could not have been a more pressing time to act.

One phenomenon that this era would produce would be the creation and proliferation of the modern nonprofit or non-governmental organization (NGOs). With between ten to fourteen million NGOs in the world today, it is easy to now take this movement for granted. However, it is impossible not to be impressed by both the growth of this industry in the last 50 years, and what it says about the evolution of our societies. If one considers all the contributors, board members, staff members, volunteers and program participants of these NGOs, one becomes aware of a movement that has been embraced by hundreds of millions, if not billions of people around the world. With themes of social justice and personal artistic expression at the heart of a majority of these NGOs, we have entered an era where individuals are having an ever-greater influence on the underpinnings of the global society.

As is often the case with nonprofits, Pasos Peace Museum* would come to exist as a result of one individual’s inspired reaction to events. Along with fellow New Yorkers and the rest of the world, Nitza Milagros Escalera was witness to the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. Most attempted to move past the loss and devastation of these times. Ms. Escalera, however, was haunted by a desire to use this act of hostility as an inspiration to foster its opposite. Already the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs at Fordham University School of Law, her desire to help foster change led her to attend Columbia University where she would complete a degree in peace studies. It is here that reflection, will, and inspiration joined to envision the beginnings of a new peace museum in New York City where none currently existed.

Pasos Peace Museum was formed in 2006 and received its nonprofit status in 2007. Despite being inspired by the events of 9/11 in 2001, this museum was not to commemorate any particular historical event. Also, whereas the museum was not to be devoid of an historical context, this perspective was not to be a centerpiece of its approach. Instead, this museum would endeavor to foster peacebuilding through the arts and education. Whereas most museums tell their story through artifacts, this proposed museum now faced the formidable challenge of how to effectively design a museum focused on ideas and dialogue. As the inaugural board of directors met, the most pressing question would be exactly how to accomplish this lofty goal. Over the next three years, the board’s effort to refine the museum’s mission would continue unabated. Ms. Escalera’s choice of the word “pasos” in naming the organization was central to its philosophy. “Pasos” is a Spanish word meaning “steps.” Building “positive peace” was seen as a process and thereby required ongoing conversations to achieve the infinite series of achievements that would lead us to a peaceful world. Additionally, although it was seen as encouraging when one considered the millions of NGOs committed to social justice, it was recognized that the structure of these organizations often kept them from joining forces with one another. While this protected their individual identity and focused members on their particular organization, it also

tended to draw attention away from the monumental collective same-mindedness of core principles among NGOs worldwide. It would be in response to these objectives that Pasos Peace Museum would establish its mission:

The mission of the Pasos Peace Museum is to inspire, connect and empower peacebuilders. We strive to be a hub connecting peacebuilders around the world, stimulating their individual and collective imaginations, and taking them to the next transformational steps leading to a just and peaceful world.

To complement and expand upon this mission statement, the new organization spelled out its values, which acknowledged the challenges that must be embraced by each individual, and the inextricable link between peaceful societies and the triumph of social justice. Fostering intellectual curiosity was paramount if we desired to lead visitors to explore new understandings about peacebuilding, which they would in turn integrate into their lives. If we wanted our visitors to be vibrant participants in building peace, they needed to be enlightened as to how everyday decisions and choices relate to creating peace. Finally, it was recognized that to maximize the individual's enrichment through contemplative practices, we needed to creating settings and educational experiences that nurture that journey.

A recent study that looked at the development of language in humans provided a theory we would take to heart. These researchers had hypothesized that human language came about around 50,000 years ago. At this time, a chromosome in hominids mutated allowing them to move their jaws in such a way that speech became possible. It is theorized that our success as a species is directly related to our ability to communicate, and to do so with vibrant nuance. The Neanderthals (more sturdy and with a bigger brain than ours) would become extinct while hominids thrived. We had the ability to tell stories, and with this, a way to remember the ways of the past, the outcomes of past actions, and learn new strategies for the future.

It was now time to put all this theory and good will into practice. We could agree that one of our foundations rested on the belief that "Art" is a rich language that allows us to communicate the most complex thoughts and emotions in unique and powerful ways. Our objective would be to spotlight all the various artistic languages people use to express peacebuilding. Our goal would be to use our focus on art and education to inspire the Moral Imagination of our visitors—the ability to imagine new possibilities, and then to act on this enlightenment.

The question at hand was how to take these principles and use them to spur imagination leading to action. Two personal experiences provided inspiration. Years ago I had produced a tour of a play written by a man with cerebral palsy. This play dealt with the dehumanizing ways society treats persons with disabilities. Produced simply as a play without any attempt to capitalize on its message, it was well received by critics and audiences. However, once it became part of a tour sponsored by advocates of persons with disabilities, it proved a successful rallying cry for a movement that called into focus the injustices in our society. This then directly led to change in the service delivery models that were then in place. What became clear is that lessons get lost when they are disengaged from a broader conversation on a particular topic. To truly maximize impact, critical mass is necessary.

A second formative experience occurred in Kenya where I was an aid worker. Here little success was found getting tribal leaders to allow discussion on controversial topics such as AIDS and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). However, these objections were withdrawn when a contest was initiated that had school age children write their own plays on these subjects. In fact, the exercise would result in a region-wide competition where the children performed their plays for a prestigious judging panel of local dignitaries. The judges would award the first prize to the play on the previously banned topic of FGM. Spoken through the language of art and by their own members, the moral imagination of these communities soared.

As Pasos developed its initial plan, the conversation turned to the nature of the "space" that would constitute the museum. However, the goal wasn't to provide an environment where art was displayed for passive enjoyment. The goal was to expose each visitor to the full spectrum of

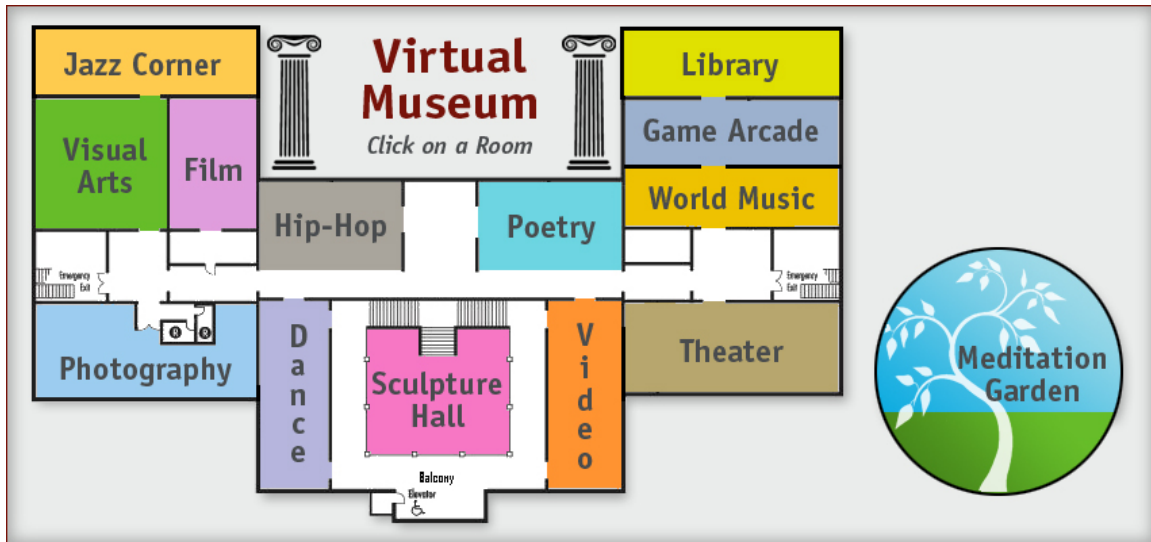
artistic expressions focused on peacebuilding, so as to inspire each of them to find their own personal way of expressing the peacebuilder within themselves. The goal is for the visitor to become an active member of a community of people who see the possibility and power of their individual and collective role in building peace.

Thus, we found we were looking less for the definitive exhibit than a constantly changing display that shows the endless possibilities for expression, the numbers of people with a voice, and the size of the community that demands we create peaceful societies. We began to see that focusing on a permanent “museum” could actually be a distraction from meeting our actual objectives. We decided to change the model. Rather than waiting until we had funding to acquire a permanent space, we decided to begin programming immediately utilizing spaces currently available to us. This allowed Pasos to maximize the use of its limited resources, while immediately beginning programs that spread its message.

In 2009, Pasos Peace Museum sponsored its inaugural event at a Center in New York City. This “Day of Peacebuilding” would provide an array of activities to include dance performance, lectures, peace-through-play workshops for parents and their children, and an exhibit of paintings by a renowned artist. The event would attract around three hundred participants. Registration information showed that the majority of attendees were from the local area. It would also be a fairly expensive proposition requiring considerable effort from the board and volunteers. Though certainly successful, the event led to a discussion of how to maximize impact with available resources. If the goal was to play a major role in getting society to adopt principles of positive peace, we needed to reach larger numbers of people from diverse communities. The answer to this question was to be found in embracing social media. This would entail creating the following:

- A regularly updated blog that discussed topical issues in the field
- A website that kept visitors current on our activities and offered a broad sampling of activities sponsored by other organizations
- Creating links and partnerships with other like-minded NGOs
- Providing web visitors access to these organizations
- Creating active and vibrant Facebook and Twitter accounts

Focused on our core principles of inspiring and connecting peacebuilders, perhaps our most ambitious effort would be developing the web’s only comprehensive Virtual Museum of exhibits reflecting a peace building agenda. This ever-growing online museum now boasts over a dozen categories, each one an art form that has been utilized by individuals with a desire to communicate their moral imagination. Here one can find exhibits ranging from Poetry and Hip Hop, to Jazz and Photography. Dance, Sculpture, Film, Visual Arts, and even Video Games would be represented.



The “return on investment” (ROI) of these endeavors was staggering. In their first year, the Virtual Museum had attracted over 100,000 visitors to the site. Statistics further showed that these visitors were accessing multiple pages per visit. In the first six months of creating a Facebook presence, there have been over 15,000 visits to our home page, where our blogs are reprinted. Lastly, feedback from visitors demonstrated an interest in our activities from an International audience. These statistics provided a stark contrast to our one day event in 2009, which reached 300 persons and cost several times more than our recent annual investment in digital infrastructure.

In keeping with this model, Pasos Peace Museum would sponsor an event called “Pause for Peace” commemorating the September 21, 2011 International Day of Peacebuilding. Grounded in principles of surveillance art, the event invited people from around the world to voice their peace-themed artistic expression in front of surveillance cameras at noon in their time zone. The event drew the worldwide participation of friends of the organization, while visits to the Pasos website and other digital media sites soared. However, along with all this good news one curious statistic stood out. The demographic least likely to visit our site or participate in our programming were males between the ages of 14 and 30 years of age. This would also turn out to be the demographic that researchers determined most likely to engage in violent behavior.

With every success, a new challenge emerges. Happy as we were to see the number of our members and visitors grow, our ultimate success would be measured by the spread of positive peace. Artists were finding us, submitting their exhibits, and joining our community. Our blogs had become points of discussion. We also found ourselves collaborating with an ever-growing roster of other NGOs fostering positive peace. While building upon this momentum, future initiatives needed to reach out to those groups least likely to hear our message through traditional methods. We also needed to find ways to reach those most resistant to our message.

To a great degree, the success of Pasos Peace Museum would be defined by its ability to create a psychological sense of community among broad demographics and cultures all bonded to one another by ideals of positive peace. Our eventual museum space would be a place that encouraged dialogue and action. It must also be the kind of interactive wonder that could successfully compete with the multitude of other venues that command the attention of tourists. As such, in the future we look to collaborate with high tech corporate giants that are able to meld our message with dazzling interactive displays that engage all ages.

In the meantime, in addition to its current programs, Pasos will continue to build its community of positive peace through a series of new initiatives:

- Expanding its website to create ongoing discussion groups on various topics
- Calling upon experts in artistic disciplines to advise on future exhibits
- Creating curricula for both school and adult groups that draw from our Virtual Museum exhibits
- Collaborating with existing museums, and training docents to use these museums' collections to give tours focused on a positive peace agenda
- Expanding our reach by co-sponsoring film, lecture, conference, and artistic events with our partners in their spaces (e.g. The NoPassport writers conference on Global Change that Pasos sponsored in 2011 and will again sponsor in 2012)

Now with an Executive Director, Program and Exhibit Director (Lea Giddins), and Digital Art Director (Michael Minichiello), Pasos has positioned itself to have an ever-greater impact on peacebuilding initiatives. The ultimate goal of the peace movement is to create a critical mass of individuals demanding peaceful societies steeped in principles of social justice. In the five years since Nitza Escalera first dreamed of starting a museum dedicated to peacebuilding, Pasos has set a course to play a unique role. True to its mission, it remains focused on three overarching goals:

- To create ever-impactful ways to use the arts and education to inspire the peacebuilder in each of us,
- To connect these peacebuilders with one another, thereby establishing a collective voice
- And to then use the peace builder's vision and our collective voice to empower us to create the change we want to see in the world

Pasos Peace Museum recognizes it is but one NGO focused on these goals. A great debt of gratitude is due the International Network of Museums for Peace (INMP). The inspiration provided by member peace museums has been key to the empowerment we now feel when addressing our mission. It is this collaborative energy that will surely lead to the success of the peace movement.

William Repicci is a founding board member of Pasos Peace Museum and has been its Executive Director since 2010.

**Formerly known as Pasos: The Museum and Center for Peacebuilding, the organization was renamed Pasos Peace Museum on November 12, 2011.*