

BRIDGES

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can win on the issues we're concerned about unless we learn to work together with middle-class people."

Through workshops, role-playing exercises and support work with grassroots organizations, participants in Building Bridges are taught to recognize the subtle barriers that separate people who may share the same goal but not the same experiences.

"I often think about the training in terms of people learning to see," says Dottie Burt-Markowitz, a Peace Project board member and Bridges trainer. "People can be really well-intentioned and motivated. But if you're not part of a group that's been discriminated against, it can be hard to understand how other people feel."

The Building Bridges program differs from other training programs in its practical focus and the degree of commitment it requires from participants, Burt-Markowitz says.

The lessons taught in the program are rooted in the practical experiences of Peace Project volunteers active in voter registration drives, literacy training workshops and plant-closing demonstrations in the Kannapolis area.

Bridges participants are asked to attend training sessions over a three-year period, although some programs have been of shorter duration. Fees are based on the size of the organization and the length of the training.

Laurie Schecter is a graduate of the first Building Bridges program in Boston. She was so inspired by the training that she decided to move to North Carolina to become a full-time Peace Project volunteer.

"I'm not usually much of a course person and not usually drawn to this kind of training," Schecter says. "But

the way they do this is so inclusive. What they are doing is really cutting-edge work. I feel a whole lot of people are going to be thinking in this direction in the future."

Peggy Cleveland, executive director of the Cooperative Christian Ministries in Concord, was impressed by the way Bridges trainers were able to address painful issues such as racism and sexism without being confrontational.

"Their trainings are done with a lot of skill and humor," she says. "The intent is not to make people guilty because guilt tends to make people reactive rather than being a spring for change. Guilty is not a useful response."

The Bridges program now has participants who have enrolled in Ann Arbor, Seattle, New York City and Atlanta. Participants in those cities are paired up with activists in low-income and minority communities in other parts of the country.

For example, the Bridges group in Ann Arbor has held fundraising parties to assist residents of Kenova, West Va., who are battling environmental pollution in their small, mining town.

"It's really very rare that people who are living in a low-income community and people who are living in a more middle-class community have a chance to talk to each other and learn from each other," Burt-Markowitz says. "There's a real depth to the kind of change people go through in their way of thinking and seeing the world."

Taylor and others in the Cabarrus County Women's Task Force hope the Bridges program will help them build on efforts to repair frayed relations between blacks and whites in their community.

Tensions reached a peak last year when students at Kannapolis High School protested the firing of a popular black principal. Police

responded by arriving at the school in riot gear and a lawsuit against the school system was threatened.

Taylor says most of the members of the Women's Task Force work in social service agencies, dealing with clients from diverse economic and racial backgrounds.

"These women are already committed to making those relationships work but are conscious of the fact that because we are who we are, we may be doing things we don't even see that are alienating or hurtful to people," she says.

Task Force members - who will pay \$750 each for five weeks of Bridges training - know they won't see instant results.

"It's not that you go through this training and all of a sudden the community is a better place to live," says Jenny Rokosz, senior staff associate at the Cabarrus County United Way and head of the Women's Task Force. "But you do develop tools and make little steps toward positive change."

This year's budget for the Bridges program is around \$350,000, Stout says. While the program has received grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and the Foundation for the Carolinas in Charlotte, the bulk of support comes from contributions from individuals.

Eventually, the Peace Project hopes to establish a training center that would extend the reach of both the Bridges program and a parallel program called Finding Our Voices that is aimed at working-class activists.

"We're very excited about the progress we've had from these programs as well as the potential for where we can go with them," Stout says. "Our dream is to change the world."

For information about Bridges, call the Peace Project, (704) 938-5090.



Jesse Wimberley (center) takes a group of Piedmont Peace Project organizers on a tour of his family farm in Moore County as part of the non-profit's Building Bridges project to promote links across class and race lines.

Photo courtesy of Piedmont Peace Project

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