

## **CARIBBEAN VOICES**

### **WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT VICTORY OVER VIOLENCE?**

**JOSE LUIS VARGAS, San Juan, Puerto Rico:** I was very impressed by an article that Arun Gandhi wrote about nonviolence (in the VOV packet). I kept that article with me all the time since we started this campaign, because it defined very well the message that Mahatma Gandhi was trying to get across.

For me, this campaign has been a personal campaign, not only to practice nonviolence for the community but also to practice nonviolence myself. One of the things that impressed me about this article was that he talks about how we have to see the possibility of having a life without violence just as we can see the possibility of getting an A in school—it has to be an objective.

For me that was very radical, because we are so used to violence—it's such a common trend—and that's the way we expect to live our lives. The article was saying, "No, not necessarily." You see, when it comes to nonviolence, I believe the way it has an impact on society is when people decide to be nonviolent personally, individually. Then they can actually start to impact other people. I practice nonviolence by giving my students the opportunity to learn what I have learned.



**EVELYN RIVERA, with her son, Alex Willoughby, San Juan, Puerto Rico:** Vida Sin Violencia (Life Without Violence) for me has been a change in terms of work—really applying how to work with my co-workers and being able to show actual proof. At work, I introduced my boss to Buddhism. Everyone at my work knows that I practice, and that I've introduced my boss. This campaign has helped me to understand that it's not just about physical violence, it's also about the way that I speak to people in order for them to react the way I want them to react. And also showing them that I use what I practice in my daily life.

It's also helped me a lot with my son, Alex, who is 14. He spends a lot of time alone. Because he practices, he understands what I have to do. So many times I come home very overwhelmed. I know it's not easy for him. Sometimes not consciously, I express a lot of the anxiety or stress that I've had all day. With this campaign, I've learned to work toward being compassionate and understanding, and not to come home and load it off on him. He's been very compassionate and understanding. When I come home, he wants to know how was the day and what can he do to help me relax. That to me has helped me put a stop to letting out my frustration.

Vida Sin Violencia for Puerto Rico, for me, is knowing that I have to really show society how this works in my daily life, through my actions.



**DAPHNIE ILLIS, St. Maarten:** The junior and senior high school students are taking Victory Over Violence very seriously. What I realize is that my nieces at home are more conscious of the campaign than I am. The little things that you tell them, they remind you: "That's violence. You shouldn't be doing that. You shouldn't be teasing. You shouldn't be calling people names." My niece is 14, and she has taken it very seriously. With her friends, she is very conscientious. She is like the peacemaker in her class.

The youth members here in St. Maarten are running in many different directions, and sometimes it is so overwhelming that you feel you are not doing enough. But when I see

activities like this, then I realize that I have done something. It's paying off!



**PATRICIA O'GRADY, Antigua:** I've been practicing for 13 years. In Antigua, we've been a pretty steady group. There are 12 members. The reason I came to this activity was because I need to grow, and I know the benefit of participating in any activity. I felt like giving some kind of support.

I've understood personally about violence and how it affects your life. I feel that in our kosen-rufu movement and particularly working with other organizations, we need to be aware of how violence affects each of us. We talk about the Ten Worlds—we talk about Anger, and I never understood how much anger was inside my own life. So chanting has helped me realize that you can use anger in a very positive way. It possesses Buddhahood, too.

Coming here has been basically a big eye-opener about violence in our daily lives. We can make a positive choice and take positive action. At the crucial moment, there's always a point where you make a choice, so we're always responsible for what's going on. That is the power of one person making the difference. If you make that difference by not shouting at your child or by doing something good for yourself instead of slandering your life, then it really does make a difference.



**JOY REIPH ARNELL, St. Maarten:** Last year there was a lot of youth crime. There were robberies and fighting at schools. The police were constantly going there.

Every few months, there is something happening. The aggression is there. We have gone to two different high schools to show the VOV video, and then we have a dialogue. The teachers have asked us to come in. Eventually, we are going to go to all the high schools.

Orlando Cepeda has gotten together with the high school students here to talk about his experience with violence. They are receptive, but they can't believe they can see a change. When we talk about one person being able to make a difference if he or she takes responsibility, though, they agree.

We established a VOV Foundation in St. Maarten on May 3 made up of not only SGI members but also people in the community. We have an advisory board for the foundation made up of different leaders of churches and the police commissioner.



**ROBERTO VARELA, San Juan, Puerto Rico:** The major problem with violence is the way that we view it. Maybe we don't kill but we discriminate against other people. Now we are trying here in Puerto Rico to find a way to help. Right now at my campus we are trying to help people by building homes. We don't want to have a news conference to tell people we went to X house to help build a room. That's not the case. We only want the guy to at least be thankful. If he has a problem with drinking or drugs, then we want to help him change his life. When he changes his life, he can help other people.

I am grateful because I am well. I have good health. But if I don't help other people to live better, to not accept violence as a way of life, then I cannot say that I am grateful. Because if I want to live better, then I want other people to live better also. And if I don't want to see other people live better, then why am I living?

I think the core of a human being is to help others. I think that is what makes human beings what they are.

And I think we have seen changes in the world, but truly these changes have to come from our hearts. If we don't change ourselves, the purpose of our life is in vain.



**TERESITA RODRIGUEZ, San Juan, Puerto Rico:** For me, VOV is something we need in Puerto Rico because we are living in turmoil. There are so many people who need an alternative. We are committed to spreading VOV to society.

Orlando “Peruchin” Cepeda is a good example for us. He was brought up poor and had a lot of stones in the road, but he transformed himself into someone worthwhile.

Peruchin had a chance to talk with a lot of youth in the housing projects in Puerto Rico. The kids were all saying, “I want to be like him.” I see that this movement has spread throughout the entire island of Puerto Rico.

One of the chancellors from the Inter-American University and the president of the University of Puerto Rico are very committed, as are other organizations, to trying to get kids off the streets. They see this as an alternative—trying to teach culture and peace rather than violence. We are teaching them that they have to take responsibility for their actions. We have the power to change.

*Reporting and photos by Jeff Farr and Jamie Liptan*