

## EXPERIENCE—JACQUELINE HOEGER, WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. EXPANDING MY ROLE AS A MOTHER

**Jacqueline Hoeger designs creative projects for her daughter's school and unites her community.**

*If we are to reach real peace in the world, we shall have to begin with children.*

—Mahatma Gandhi

In 1991, I quit my job to be at home full time with Katarina, my first child. I was very happy as an at-home mother and chanted for her development into a responsible and independent person.

The following guidance from SGI President Ikeda helped me define my mission as a mother: “Avoid prejudging people at all cost. Any person we meet may be an outstanding individual who possesses tremendous potential that we have no inkling of” (March 1990 *Seikyo Times*).

Three years ago, I asked myself the following question: “What can I do in my community to start to fulfill my role as an SGI-USA member?” That is when I got involved in the “Promise of Unity” campaign at my daughter’s school, the Lee F. Jackson School. Terry Pavone, a parent and former schoolmate of Mr. Jackson, began the “Promise of Unity” campaign by writing a poem, which he enlarged on a 6 feet-by-30 feet fabric scroll. His dream was to have all the people in the community sign it. The campaign included sending letters to President Clinton and having a program in which all the schools in the district would participate in song, dance, music and poetry, with the highlight being the signature signing.

I realized that by joining the “Promise of Unity” project, I could act as a catalyst for the creation of peace in the community.

I suggested to Terry that the children create a group project. I showed him photos of past paintings done by the SGI-USA children. Terry wrote a song called “Together We Have a Dream,” and thought of children’s faces of all different colors singing his song. I came up with the idea of the children painting self-portraits on handkerchief-sized fabric, sewn together into a quilt.

Although people supported my idea, it seemed impossible to them to finish the quilt in time for the ceremony. Through my faith and experience in the SGI-USA, I knew that it could be done if everyone worked together as a team. I chanted every day to show the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and to involve all the children, parents, teachers and volunteers. Weeks before the program was scheduled, the quilt pro-cess began.

Approximately 400 5- and 6-year-old children took on the task of selecting their skin tones, then drawing and coloring their self-portraits on paper. The parents and volunteers drew 400 ovals onto 100 handkerchiefs, painting them with the selected skin colors, and transferring each child’s portrait. Each portrait took up to 25 minutes. With the help of everyone, the 18 feet-by-7-1/2 feet Promise of Unity Quilt was presented to more than 300 people in the community. Everyone stood in silent amazement before giving an emotional applause at what was accomplished in just 22 days.

In January 1998, the Promise of Unity Quilt was presented at the State Education

Department's Early Childhood Conference in New York City by a team from the Lee F. Jackson School that included the principal, art teacher and myself. This conference was attended by more than 3,000 people.

In April 1998, Terry, inspired by our first meeting, wrote a song called "Hands Across My Town," and asked that I contribute another of my ideas for the upcoming 1998 Unity Day program.

I was excited, and after chanting, thought of handprints from all the children in our school district—from the preschool to the high school—overlaid with a map of our school district, showing the locations of each school, the library, police station, the community center, town hall and street.

With a team of parent volunteers, and SGI-USA members, I went to work taking the donated art materials from school to school, getting handprints. More than 1,200 children, ranging in age from 3 to 18, participated in the creation of the 9 feet-by-14 feet high Hands Across My Town Map for Unity Day in May 1998.

For 1999 Unity Day, the theme "Face of America" was based on creating a canvas of a child's face that had features of every ethnic group living in our school district. More than 1,200 enthusiastic children from kindergarten to high school painted a portion of the Face of America.

Due to the success of the Promise of Unity Quilt and the Hands Across My Town Map presentations and the fact that the quilt was recognized at the New York State Education Department's Early Childhood Conference in New York City, both the Unity Quilt and Hands Map processes were presented at the Society for Inter-Cultural Education of Training and Research's Annual Conference in Chiba, Japan, on Nov. 21, 1998. With the added success of the Face of America, our team this year was invited to present the unity projects at two international early childhood conferences.

The Face of America, Hands Across My Town, and the Promise of Unity group projects have all been a product of my desire to fulfill my role as a mother and peacemaker while actively involving the children, parents, teachers, volunteers and community in the cause for world peace.

More than 1,000 district children participated in the unity projects that exemplify how an idea or dream can come true when people work together. Their dedication and unity, along with the parents, teachers and volunteers, made these projects a reality.

Because I am proud to share the inspiration I get from my Buddhist practice, I must express my deepest appreciation to President Ikeda for his guidance, which enabled me to define my mission as a mother; to my children and other SGI children, who initiated my group art project concepts; and to the children in my community, who contributed their art, dance and song for peace.