Peace Week 2013 & Call for Future Leaders of the Students for Peace and Justice

Traditionally, the Students for Peace and Justice (SPJ) host the Peace and Justice Film Series during each fall and spring semester at the University of Montana. For the spring 2013 season, however, SPJ and our mentors (most notably Betsy Mulligan-Dague of the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center and Professor Vicki Watson of Environmental Studies) were eager to pull together a weeklong conference to highlight the tenth year anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and to recognize ten years of SPJ outreach, advocacy, and education at UM and in the greater Missoula community.

“Peace Week,” as our conference was dubbed, drew inspiration from the original Peace Teach-In held at the University of Montana in the spring of 2003. Although our steering committee was small (with five core members, both students and non-students) – a limitation which prevented us from holding Peace Week precisely on the 10th year anniversary of the Iraq war in March, together with the help of six co-sponsor organizations, we put together a lively, engaging, and informative week of events.

We began Peace Week on Monday, April 15th by inviting peace and justice-related organizations to conduct informative tabling on campus – a chance to build solidarity among our groups and to spread the word about our conference to the student body. On Monday evening, political science professor and Quaker Chris Muste spoke to us about the importance of tools and strategies used to measure public opinion of the Iraq War at various stages. She was joined by activist and professor Sue Bradford, who was active with SPJ in its genesis and recounted the highlights and organizational insights from the 2003 Peace Teach-In.

Tuesday’s events began at noon with an informative hour about drones on the UM Oval. SPJ had originally hoped to find someone locally to pilot a hobbyist’s drone above the Oval, with a live-feed camera which could educate students about the significance of drones in both military and civilian spheres, as they watched themselves from above. Without the drone, we still had a lively event, and one which captivated the interest of passersby. SPJ member Sara Anderson created drone awareness signs and placed them around the Oval – these seemed to be a good substitute to our actual model drone. After a quick introduction of the event, local poet and activist Rita Jankowska’s voice boomed across campus as she read from several of her most riveting poems on drone warfare and the tragedies of war. We were joined by the Missoula Women for Peace, who stood vigil with signs bearing messages of “Keep Space for Peace!” Brandon Bryant came forward at the end of the hour to introduce himself and generate interest for his Wednesday night informational presentation on his career as a drone sensor operator for the U.S. military.
Tuesday evening, keeping with tradition, we screened a film entitled *The Ground Truth: After the Killing Ends*. Recommended by keynote speaker Tammara Rosenleaf (who has befriended several of the men and women interviewed in the film), it weaves together the testimonies of a number of Iraq War veterans on the true nature of the war as seen through their eyes – and tells of the failure of the U.S. military to uphold its promise of caring for veterans upon their return home. As always, a lively discussion session among audience members followed after the film.

On Wednesday, several SPJ members braved the cold in the Free Speech Zone between the U.C. and the Mansfield Library, encouraging passersby to write a letter of solidarity to Afghani communities that had been ravaged by U.S. military violence, or to others whose lives had been strained by war or injustice. Our table also displayed pictures of Afghans holding signs reading “From Kabul to Boston With Love,” showing the solidarity of Afghans for the people of Boston in the wake of the recent marathon bombing.

On Wednesday evening, Brandon Bryant spoke to an engaged audience for two hours about his experience flying drones and the larger policy and consequences of drone warfare. Bryant is the first drone operator or pilot from the U.S. military drone community to have spoken publicly about drones and to caution the American people on the need to inform ourselves and pressure our elected representatives to require oversight and accountability, and to prevent the implementation of artificial intelligence with regard to drone deployment.

On Thursday evening, keynote speaker and Army Captain Paul K. Chappell spoke to Missoulians and UM students about waging peace, violence endemic in our media and culture, and the psychology of warfare, and promoted a hopeful message on the inherent tendency among human beings towards nonviolence.

Because Peace Week overlapped with the annual Central and Southwest Asian Studies Conference, we directed our audience to attend one or more of three excellent events put on by this conference on Friday. In the morning, a panel of exchange students (Daler Rakhimov and Farzona Shukurova from Tajikistan and Shakib Rajaieean from Afghanistan) presented candidly about the cultures, histories, and policies of their home countries. In the early afternoon, attendees learned about U.S. and Chinese policy vis a vis Iran & Israel. And in the evening, we enjoyed a very insightful keynote lecture on Arab Uprisings: Causes and Implications, which included an epilogue presentation about Chechnya and the plight of its people who have been stranded without a homeland.

And finally, to conclude Peace Week, fellow Montanan and veterans’ activist Tammara Rosenleaf presented our final keynote lecture on the true cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to our families, our nation, and our world. Her no-holds barred presentation
wove together photography, video, news articles, history, and personal testimony into a highly compelling and gut-wrenching plea for action, accountability, and change.

Now that Peace Week is over, the Students for Peace and Justice are looking to bring back our traditional film series format – and to do so, we need your help. Our spring 2013 student leaders have now graduated or are on the cusp of graduation, and accordingly we are eager to connect with an organized and conscientious individual at UM or a small group of students who would be interested in taking the reins for the upcoming fall 2013 season of the film series. Documentation, mentorship, and guidance will be provided, and there is internship credit available for the individual who becomes SPJ’s next coordinating student. Please contact Betsy at the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center for details, and/or visit the internship description web page at ________________.

The Students for Peace and Justice wish to thank all of you for your ongoing support – we couldn’t do our work without your help!

Most Sincerely,
David Schaad – spring 2013 co-coordinator, Students for Peace and Justice