

## ***Changing the Subject: Harnessing the Power of Art and Storytelling in Peacebuilding***

*Peace Day Philly features photographs, paintings, and stories by Syrian refugee youth this year. Art and storytelling are effective means for cultural change. Philadelphia resident Greg Shaheen presents children/youth works, video footage, and his experience working with a Syrian refugee community in Lebanon.*

By Mariko Siegert

Art and storytelling are powerful tools for cultural change, on which peacebuilding efforts are built. Some Philadelphian may recall an art exhibition at Haverford University held last fall, *Testimonies in Arts & Action: Igniting Pacifism in the Face of Total War*. There have been a great number of art exhibitions across the country and globe on the theme of conflict, war, and peace. The Visions of Conflict Art Exhibition held in Dayton, Ohio last fall posed a question to the audience through testimonies, sharing of firsthand experiences of war, and artworks created through the memories: *What is your understanding of war?*

The small portion of the world's population that has never experienced or witnessed the cruelty and aftermath of war, including myself, would benefit greatly from exposure to these cultural artifacts in contemplating what our lives are built on, how "we" matter to "them" and vice versa, and what we could do so that the peace that we enjoy can be a story that they will be telling. By the way, according to Uppsala Conflict Data Program, in 2014, there were 40 conflicts worldwide, 80% of which occurred in Africa, Middle East, and Asia where over 75% of the world's total population lives (Population Reference Bureau, 2014). Our stories have intergenerational effects--the story we tell today may be passed on to many generations to come.

Foster, Horowitz, and Allen (2016) contend that it is necessary that the society is radically restructured in order to build sustainable peace globally. I believe the radical social, or cultural, change, although this term may sound too extreme and may face resistance, could start with some simple steps--with our "changing the subject"--from the subject we look away from or the story as we understand it to the subject and story as experienced and told by those who have experienced them. By immersing ourselves in their stories, we are able to experience and live them, cultivating empathy and sharing the desire for peace.

The Peace Day Philly program "We Grow Where We Are: Photos, Paintings, and Words by Syrian Refugee Youth" will take place on September 18, from 5:30 p.m. - 8:00 p.m. Artworks will be on sale and all the profits will be donated to refugee communities. Please come join us to learn the stories of Syrian refugee youth.

### References

- Foster, J. A., Horowitz, S. M., & Allen, L. (2016). Changing the subject: Archives, technology, and radical counter-narratives of peace. *Radical Teacher*, 105, 11-21.
- Population Reference Bureau. (2014). 2014 world population data sheet. Retrieved from [http://www.prb.org/pdf14/2014-world-population-data-sheet\\_eng.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf14/2014-world-population-data-sheet_eng.pdf)
- Uppsala Conflict Data Program. (2014). Armed conflict by region. Retrieved from [http://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/66/66314\\_1armed-conflict-by-region-1946-2014.pdf](http://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/66/66314_1armed-conflict-by-region-1946-2014.pdf)