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Mark Szymanski
Pacific University

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International Conference on Children’s Rights and Education: A Concern for the Soul?

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By Mark Szymanski <marks@pacificu.edu>

The best way to secure world peace and promote democratic nation building is to create an educated, open-minded leadership class among the next generation of youth [1]. It’s a bold statement but one that set the tone for the First International Conference on Children’s Rights & Education [1] at the University of Texas Corpus Christi this summer. The call for papers and participants asked for caring professionals, children, parents, teachers, NGO’s, humanitarian organizations, government officials and politicians to develop an agenda for children’s rights and education for the 21st century.

This kind of call cast a wide net leaving me to ponder whether or not the depth of the presentations would be meaningful. I secretly feared we would be subject to long listening sessions describing global policy setting agendas. To my delight, it was quite the contrary. Many presenters described specific programs and work with children that was meaningful. A select few shared stories of their work designed to nourish the soul of children whose childhoods had been taken away by violence and war.

During my time at the conference I saw two moving presentations by keynote speakers whose presentations whose work focused on the souls of children. Joseph Rodriguez [2] shared his photography of gang members in Los Angeles and Ruzica Maric [3] shared her stories of using museums as a resource for peace, reconciliation and education for youth. Both of these presenters used their life experiences and passion for art to move us to think and act on behalf of children.

Joseph Rodriguez is a documentary photographer born and raised in Brooklyn, New York whose work has appeared in The New York Times Magazine, National Geographic, Marie Claire, GQ,
Los Angeles Magazine, Newsweek, Esquire, Stern and Der Spiegel. He is a highly recognized artist who has received awards and grants from the Open Society Institute, National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, Mother Jones International Fund for Documentary Photography, Alicia Patterson Fellowship, Fund for Investigative Journalism, Konstnarsnamden Stipendium Swedish Arts Council and New York State Foundation for the Arts.

These accomplishments pale in comparison to his commitment to exposing the humanity inside the souls of gang members in Los Angeles. During his presentation Joseph Rodriguez showed us black and white photos from his book *Juvenile* [3]. He shot the book over the course of years during which he spent days and nights with different gangs in Los Angeles.

During his presentation Rodriguez said he wanted to shoot pictures that rested on the theme of family. For gangs, this is the human theme. Many parts of gang life are about the power of family—the breakdown of the traditional family fractured by violence and poverty and the creation of gang family brazed by violence and poverty.

During his presentation Rodriguez sold the simple message of listening and engaging. His ability to listen with his camera poised seemed to be the fundamental strategy that helped him see the souls of the families in his photographs. This is what we see in his simple yet powerful images. The power of the presentation rested on his ability to create compassion in us for children who often create fear in adults.

The second keynote speaker that moved me as deeply was Ruzica Maric. She is the curator of the Vukovar Municipal Museum in exile. She is also a member of the Ministry of Culture for the Republic of Croatia and the director for reconstruction and rebuilding the Vukovar Municipal Museum as a multicultural centre of art and heritage of this region.

During the Serbian attack on Croatia, all collections of the Vukovar Museum were badly damaged or taken to Serbia’s museums. From 1991-2001 Ruzica Maric worked in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of Croatia to take this collection back in Vukovar. Since then she has organized many exhibitions and presentations designed to showcase the culture heritage of Vukovar, and to—in her words—"rebuild the soul of the city."

From her lens she understood that if the Serbs and Croats were going to live in peace side by side in Vukovar, they had to be able to create and celebrate art and music. She understood that after ten years of a brutal war highlighted by ethnic cleansing, the human damage would take much longer to repair than the physical infrastructure of the city.

To accomplish this, she decided to focus on children. She created a space in the museum for children’s art and music. She instituted public candle light celebrations of music culture that served as a nexus for Serbs and Croats whose memories of violence are very fresh.

Maric spoke in the voice of someone who was connected to the life of a city. As the UN was
planning how to rebuild Vukovar’s physical infrastructure, Ruzica Maric was planning how to rebuild Vukovar’s soul.

So you might be wondering—what does this have to do with the Internet? It is these kinds of efforts that seek to bring together people from different fields that would have been almost impossible without the ability to solicit participation via the Internet. In many ways the Internet has been used by people to connect more deeply with others that share a niche. But at this conference the Internet served as a way to connect people who share a niche of concern for children.

I want to share these stories to provide one more extension for these children that Joseph Rodriguez and Ruzica Maric have worked with. The more these stories are told, the more human they become, and the more likely it is that caring professionals, children, parents, teachers, NGO’s, humanitarian organizations, government officials and politicians will develop an agenda for children’s rights and education for the 21st century that changes policy and save souls.

References:


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5 THOUGHTS ON “INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND EDUCATION: A CONCERN FOR THE SOUL?”

Wojewódzki

on January 30, 2014 at 7:10 AM said:

Thanks, I’ve just been searching for information about this subject in your lengthy time and yours could be the finest I’ve came upon so far. But, what about the conclusion? Are you specific on the supply?
Hey really cool world wide web site!! Guy .. Beautiful .. Superb .. I will bookmark your blog and take the feeds also…I am satisfied to find so many useful information right here within the post, we’d like develop additional approaches in this regard, thanks for sharing. . . . . .

A person essentially aid to produce a lot articles or blog posts I would state. This really is the first time I frequented your internet site post and up to now? I amazed with the analysis you produced to create this true article extraordinary. Great task!

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