

Some remarkable people, among them victims of violence from Kosovo to Cambodia to the

# Will We Help Them

Ideas, concerns and images for now and the 21st century

BY COLIN GREER

**I** BECAME AN OLD PERSON at 14," Genevieve Sangudi says. "Nothing I experienced before mattered. Everything changed. One world ended, and another one began."

Genevieve is now 22. Her family fled Liberia—where civil war was tearing the country apart—when she was 14, finally reaching the United States in 1991.

"For me, everything has been shaped by the war," Genevieve says, "especially my awareness of our human capacity for evil and for good. When the horrors of Rwanda hit the world press soon after I arrived in the United States, people were shocked and wondered how that could happen. But I knew what it was like."

Eva Morales also knows. "I was imprisoned at the age of 12," she remembers. Now just over 30, Morales is a Guatemalan who arrived in the U.S. after living through civil war in her country. "I had to watch as family members were taken away, never to be seen again," she says.

Every year, more than 100,000 victims of political violence make their way to the U.S. Many are children who have experienced brutality, terror and fear in their short lifetimes. Among these survivors are some remarkable young peo-



"Our mission is to support young people in action worldwide who are standing up to those who commit human-rights abuses."

—Judith Thompson, Global YouthConnect

Children of Sarajevo lay flowers at the site of "the bread-line massacre," where at least 17 persons were killed and 117 wounded by three mortar shells in 1992.

**GENEVIEVE SANGUDI, 22**

"How can we expect things to get better if we don't take responsibility for making them better? Individuals working together can add up to a powerful force for change."



Born in Liberia, which experienced a violent civil war from 1989 to 1996. At least 15,000 children were used as soldiers. More than 150,000 people died, including as many as 50,000 children and teenagers.

**HAMEED WILLIAMS, 26**

"I value the opportunity to work with colleagues from many countries in efforts to change conditions of oppression and violence that affect people here in the U.S. and around the world."



Born in Brooklyn, where he has been an activist on U.S. human-rights and civil-rights issues since age 14. In college, he founded the National Youth Network, which focuses on violence and abuse against African-Americans.

**EVA MORALES, 30**

"I was afraid of people. I couldn't tell them about my experiences. As I became able to tell them, I got more and more free. I want to bring that freedom to people back home."



Born in Guatemala, which for 36 years was torn apart by civil war. More than 150,000 people were killed, 50,000 are still missing and more than a million civilians (out of 10 million) were driven from their homes or forced into exile.

**MIKI JACEVIC, 27**

"Some of my close friends and family were caught in the siege, and I saw many, including my grandmother, die of hunger... It's over on the outside, but it goes on inside for those who survive."



Born in Sarajevo, which was under siege from 1992 to 1995. Approximately 200,000 of a population of 500,000 fled. More than 10,000 were killed—including 1500 children—and 50,000 civilians were wounded.

mean streets of U.S. cities, have come together to heal and rebuild.

# Save The World?

ple. In response to the horrors they witnessed, they have founded an international human rights organization for youth called Global YouthConnect (GYC). Its purpose is to bring together committed youth of all nations to support other young people around the world who are working for peace.

Seven of the 16 core members grew up in nations torn apart by civil war or ravaged by strife with neighboring countries. Eight are Americans who have worked with them. A ninth American—Hameed Williams, 26, of Brooklyn, N.Y., who has worked on human-rights issues in this country since he was 14—recently was added. The group decided to focus on the U.S. as well, recognizing that children at home also can be traumatized—by impoverished inner cities, migrant labor camps and from neglect, abuse and violence (even in prosperous suburbs).

The group was formed in 1997 when Dr. Frank Ochberg, a psychiatrist specializing in trauma, approached Judith Thompson, an American who had worked with children from war-torn countries who were trying to spark activism in U.S. schools. His idea was to create an international human-rights organization for youth. Thompson helped form a nucleus of extraordinary young people who would become Global YouthConnect. The Dart Foundation, which Dr. Ochberg represents and which supports many proj-

ects dealing with victims of violence, contributed \$75,000 to get things started.

Until now, the group's projects have been small, restricted to the members' native countries. But now Global YouthConnect plans to expand, says Thompson, and to train young people from around the world here in the U.S. The 16 original members are the group's steering committee.

"Global YouthConnect's mission," says Thompson, "is to support young people in action around the world—young people who are the victims of human-rights abuses and young people who are standing up to those who commit such abuses. We also aim to inspire others who might be bystanders to these events to become engaged with those who have no choice but to be engaged because their very lives are at stake."

As Genevieve Sangudi says: "How can we expect things to get better if we don't take responsibility for making them better? The work of individuals together can add up to a powerful force for change."

But as the young people worked together, something unexpected happened: They changed themselves as well. Talking with others similarly wounded, they were able to reveal long pent-up wounds and to heal.

I spoke with members of YouthConnect individually and as a group in New York City, a usual meeting place. They

talked openly about the scars they carry. "It's over on the outside, but it goes on inside for those who survive and must go on," says Mirsad Jacevic, known as Miki.

Miki, 27, is from Sarajevo. "Some of my close friends and family were caught in the siege," he recalls, "and I saw many die from hunger as well as random acts of violence. My grandmother was the person who taught me about tolerance. She never understood the hatreds, and the ethnic cleansing horrified her. She was Muslim and accepted my non-Muslim father. I learned the value of accepting others from her." He pauses. "She was caught in the area of the city where there

*continued*

## To Get Involved

Here are some other organizations that help people at home and abroad:

- **STAND FOR CHILDREN** tries to influence policy that affects children in this country at local, state and national levels. For information, call 1-800-663-4032 or visit [www.stand.org](http://www.stand.org) on the Web.

- **FREE THE CHILDREN**, founded by Craig Kielburger in 1995, when he was 12, has chapters of young people (who run the group and make all policy decisions) in the U.S., Canada and around the world. Their goal is to free children from abusive working conditions. Call 1-800-203-9091 or visit [www.free-the-children.org](http://www.free-the-children.org) on the Web.

- **GIFT FROM WITHIN** supports those who have survived trauma caused by abuse and violence. Write to: Gift From Within, 16 Cobb Hill Road, Dept. P, Camden, Maine 04843.

Or send e-mail to [joyceb3955@aol.com](mailto:joyceb3955@aol.com).


- **THE IGNACIO MARTIN-BARO FUND FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS** supports grassroots efforts to heal individuals and communities who have been traumatized by war and violence. Write to the fund at P.O. Box 2122, Dept. P, Jamaica Plain, Mass. 02130.

- **OXFAM AMERICA** works for solutions to poverty in the U.S. and abroad, particularly as it affects children. Its current campaign focuses on a child's human right to education in order to break the cycle of poverty. Write to: Oxfam America, 26 West St, Dept. P, Boston, Mass. 02111, or call 1-800-776-9326.




Craig Kielburger (r) visits kids living on a garbage dump in Manila in 1998. Craig, now 15, formed Free the Children to fight child labor when he was 12. This year he will be honored by *react* magazine as part of its Take Action program.

**HAFSAT ABIOLA, 24**  
 // We want to use the power that grows among us for others too. We want to encourage acts of courage. The world needs that so badly. It's so easy to watch things from afar and do nothing.




*Born in Nigeria, which for 28 of its 38 years of independence has been ruled by the military. There have been at least 7000 political prisoners, including Hafsat's father, who died there. Her mother was shot dead in 1996.*

**MARTIN DUNN, 32**  
 // Young people can spark enormous change in a country. Think of Tiananmen Square. Think of America and Martin Luther King Jr., who was 26 when he led the civil rights movement.



*Born in a Boston suburb, he wished to connect to the larger world. Young people "grow up afraid of losing income or opportunity or reputation," he says, but the courage of survivors "helps me and others find the courage we need."*

**ARN CHORN-POND, 31**  
 // My big job has been to learn how to cry, to get my feelings back, to get myself back. Sharing the pain has been the way in which I could find myself again and commit myself to the world.



*Born in Cambodia. Under the Khmer Rouge, 1.7 million Cambodians died between 1975 and 1979 (a quarter of the population) through forced labor, starvation and executions. Almost all Cambodian families were destroyed.*

**SAVE THE WORLD/continued**

was no food to be had, and she starved to death."

Arn Chorn-Pond, 31, is from Cambodia. "The Khmer Rouge [the Communist guerrilla army that took over the country] killed my friends and family without warning," he says. "To the Khmer Rouge there was no excuse for crying. I watched children my own age being taken to work fields and executed when they cried. I learned how not to cry when I saw those horrible things happen. If I had cried, I too would have been executed."

"My big job has been to learn how to cry, to get my feelings back, to get myself back, to be with others," he adds. "Somehow sharing the pain has been the way in which I could find myself again and commit myself to the world."

Acutely aware of how years of brutalization can bring about a paralysis of will in individuals as well as an entire community, members focus on peaceful rebuilding and leadership development among young people. They also intend to educate American youth to take ac-

tion in human-rights issues at home and abroad. They all meet about once a month to discuss potential projects.

"So many people, young and old, have grown up with so much horror and so much fear that they are frozen inside, like I was," says Eva Morales. "When millions of young people are closed up because of what they have seen and endured, there is no chance for freedom to come to a whole society. Talking about my experiences with the group, becoming free, has made me want to do it for people back home."

Eva brought together a group of 20 Guatemalans in their late teens and early 20s. "We began talking about what they had seen and felt," she says. Her group quickly grew to 100, spreading to other parts of the country.

Arn Chorn-Pond started his project with a small group of Cambodian orphans and prostitutes, building an organization called Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development. It now has more than 50,000 members, aged 5 to 25, who are involved in community rebuild-

ing projects: Some build houses and roads, others provide services for youths who have been physically and emotionally devastated by their experiences.

Arn also has looked to the artistic traditions of Cambodia to help repair its society. "I have been raising money to find old musicians who've been hiding during the wars and to bring them to teach young people in order to pass on our culture's traditions," he says. "I myself have learned from such masters. The war cut us off from our culture. Through our art and music, I believe we can help to heal and make ourselves ready for the work ahead."

In addition to healing, Global YouthConnect emphasizes peaceful protest. "We think acts of courage are important," says Hafsat Abiola, 24. Her father, the elected president of Nigeria, was imprisoned in 1993 after a military takeover. He recently died, still in prison. Hafsat's mother, who worked for his release, was herself shot dead by military agents in 1996. In the U.S., Hafsat has worked to promote democracy in Nigeria.



Arn Chorn-Pond of Global YouthConnect saw these Cambodian children sleeping on the sidewalk and brought them to a shelter.

"We want to use the power that grows among us for others too," she says. "We want to spread the spark of healing and encourage acts of courage. The world needs that so badly. It's so easy to be a bystander, to watch things from afar, to wish they were better but to do nothing about it."

Miki Jacevic sought to organize support for young activists in Kosovo, Serbia. When word came that a student demonstration was planned there in March 1998, even after students had been beaten in past demonstrations, Miki arranged for a small group of American students to travel to Kosovo to stand witness. (This time no violence occurred.)

What motivates the American members of Global YouthConnect?

"So many young people don't tap into their true power," says Martin Dunn, who grew up in a Boston suburb. "They shrink from caring and create a kind of isolation for themselves. This is reinforced by how the world so often refuses to listen to young people."

"But young people can spark enormous change. Think of the young people at Tiananmen Square or in Indonesia recently. Think of Martin Luther King Jr., who was 26 when he led the civil rights movement. We want to challenge young people to think differently and follow their thoughts into action. We can reshape the world together." ■