

HELPING OUR YOUTH

# PEACEKEEPER CIRCLES

One dedicated local woman teaches children how to resolve conflict and build community in the classroom and beyond. BY CARRIE VISINTAINER

**I**T'S A TUESDAY afternoon at Irish Elementary School in Fort Collins, and a class full of first graders sits in a big circle. They're fidgety, sugared up from celebrating a child's birthday with cupcakes, but the adult leader of the circle, Kiri Saftler, is undaunted. She smiles, legs folded underneath her, and tosses her long wavy red hair behind her back. "Hi everyone, welcome," she says in her lilting voice. The students look at her, rapt. Then she holds up a black shiny peace stone and asks who would like to share an "appreciation or concern."

A boy with sandy hair and freckles raises his hand, itching to go first. Rubbing the stone, he looks at a child across the circle who's wearing a Spiderman hoodie. Addressing him by name, he says, "Thanks for playing with me at recess. That made me feel happy."

He passes the stone to the girl next to him, a petite student with shiny black hair. She looks toward a Frozen-clad classmate a few spots down. "Thanks for saving me a seat at lunch," she says. "That made me feel good."

The next boy reluctantly takes the stone and shyly looks at a student who is much taller than he is. It takes him a while to get the words out, and Saftler patiently encourages him. Finally, he says the other boy's name and follows with, "It makes me feel sad when you don't play with me."

The children look at Saftler uncertainly. But Saftler looks pleased, because this has opened a door. She talks for a few minutes about friendship, and what this means, and how people sometimes play with other children, but it's not because they don't like you. She elicits feedback from the students, who contribute their thoughts willingly. In the end, the two boys look at each other and smile.

This is a day in the life of a peacekeeper circle. Saftler, who has been educated both in spiritual direction and in the restorative justice practices of peace circle work, started training teachers in the Poudre School District in 2008, because through her teacher and parent friends, and in hearing about the violence reported in the media, she "saw too many children struggling, without a good way to resolve conflict."

And of course, conflict is part of life. It's what we do with it that matters. So Saftler married her various skills, with the goal of building community in classrooms. "When we feel a connection, we don't want to go out and hurt people," she says. "When our kids are emotionally stable, they learn. And if



Saftler encourages kids to open up and share appreciation or concerns in a safe space, moderated with respect.

kids have the skills to say to someone, 'It makes me feel upset and or angry when you treat me like that, can you please try to be respectful,' they can forgive, forget, and move on."

Many in the Poudre School District have literally joined the circle, with more than 120 teachers implementing the program, and five complete schools. Classroom teachers who do peacekeeper circles report fewer referrals to the principal, and principals have noted the positive effect the program has had on the climate and culture in their buildings.

Which says a lot about Saftler's expertise in develop-

ing the program. Knowing how overwhelmed school staff are with pretty much everything, she's made using peacekeepers as convenient as possible, training the teachers along with the children. "The teachers never have to leave their classroom or pay for trainings" she says. "They're watching it in action and learning from me."

In order to do this, Saftler visits the classroom five times in 10 weeks, following a format that begins with introducing the program, moves on to addressing appreciations and hurts and making full-hearted apologies, and ends with the teacher guiding the circle. Teachers then commit to a year of weekly peace circles. Saftler also leads an in-service for all staff, so that anyone in the school who has interaction with kids can use the peacekeeper language. Plus, there's an adult component, so children can teach their parents or caregivers how to use it.

But of course, as with everything, there are obstacles. "For me, it's funding," says Saftler. Although Peacekeepers isn't a nonprofit, she does have to raise her own funds through private donors, who give their money directly to the school so that it's a tax write-off for them. The schools also contribute some funds for the training.

It's an ongoing challenge, but Saftler remains passionate and undaunted. She'll keep raising money, and in fact, the program is growing so quickly that she's currently training a young woman to help her expand into more classrooms.

And expansion is necessary, because Saftler has a big dream. "It's for every child, every teacher, every school, to experience social emotional learning through peacekeeper language so we will have compassionate, conscious connections between students and have less animosity and anger."

You can learn more about the Peacekeeper Circles at [www.peacecircles.com](http://www.peacecircles.com). **FC**