Now Bernice is beaming. Most of the other children in the second-grade classroom at PS 242 become silent as their classmate, Bernice, near tears, puts down her crayons, leaves her desk, walks over to Siobhan Graham, and whispers in her ear. Graham listens attentively, quietly asks a few questions, and then says aloud: “You mean to tell me that Myles called you a cheese-burger and you didn’t say anything unkind back to him? Wow! That’s great. That gives him time to think about what he said, doesn’t it? I’d bet he’s already beginning to feel sorry that he called you a name. Let’s wait just a little bit and see if Myles decides to apologize.”

All the other children in the second-grade classroom at PS 242 become silent as their classmate, Bernice, near tears, puts down her crayons, leaves her desk, walks over to Siobhan Graham, and whispers in her ear. Graham listens attentively, quietly asks a few questions, and then says aloud: “You mean to tell me that Myles called you a cheese-burger and you didn’t say anything unkind back to him? Wow! That’s great. That gives him time to think about what he said, doesn’t it? I’d bet he’s already beginning to feel sorry that he called you a name. Let’s wait just a little bit and see if Myles decides to apologize.”

Now Bernice is beaming. Most of the other children in the classroom resume their workbook exercise. Myles, apparently deciding against an apology for the moment, begins ripping his worksheets into lengthwise strips. Graham walks over to him, puts her arm around his small shoulders and asks, “Are you having a hard day today?” Receiving no answer, Graham takes a book down from the library shelf and kneels down next to Myles. “Let’s read,” she says. “I know you like to read, and sometimes reading can make a hard day seem much easier.”

For the rest of the school day, Graham will stay close to Myles. As she moves around the classroom, assisting individual students with their math assignments; while she helps keep order in the lunchroom; outside, as she supervises play at recess, Graham always finds a spare moment to spend with Myles. Sometimes they talk. Sometimes Graham simply stands near the young boy, or rests her hand on his head, or...
looks at him closely and smiles. Slowly, over the course of the day, Myles becomes more communicative, less angry. During the afternoon story-telling session, he seats himself on the floor next to Bernice. As the teacher opens up the story book Myles turns and says something softly to Bernice. She listens, thinks for a moment, then nods and pats his hand.

“Yes,” Graham whispers, pumping her right arm in exuberant emphasis. “Yes. Today I earned my title: Peacemaker.”

Siobhan Graham is one of a select group of 130 young adults now working every day to earn that title. They are participating in the Harlem Peacemaker Program, a project of the Harlem Children’s Zone funded by Americorps.

Peacemakers receive their title after a rigorous application and selection process. Recruited from a nationwide pool of young adults, applicants are screened for qualities of character as well as performance. Those who qualify receive training in skills they will need in their work, especially literacy and conflict resolution. Most of those who make the final cut are from the Harlem community. To receive the title Peacemaker they must demonstrate leadership, commitment, dedication, and resourcefulness. To earn that title, all those qualities, and all the skills learned in training or on site, will be tested strenuously—starting very early every school day.

A Role Model for Children

“The job of the Peacemaker starts before classes begin; it starts at breakfast,” says Regina Garrett, HCZ director of education and head of the Peacemaker Program. “When children come to school each day, it is the Peacemakers who greet them, watch over them, and attend to them while they are eating their breakfast. What are the lessons in that? Consistency, caring, and continuity.

“The world of some of our children can be unpredictable in very stressful ways,” Garrett continues. “They may be uncertain about the health or employment status of a parent. There may be financial or legal issues threatening their family’s residence. But when those children come to school, the same Peacemaker, the same thoughtful, helpful individual, shows up and shows them love and guidance every day, from 7:45 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., from the first bite of breakfast through the last of their afterschool activities. That’s powerful.

“There are many kinds of learning and many ways to learn. One of the primary ways the Peacemakers teach the children they work with is through their good example. Peacemakers are excellent role models for our children.”

That modeling occurs on many levels. For
A New Standard for a Generation

The Harlem Children’s Zone would agree. The issue of what is expected of children, especially inner-city children, is what led to the creation of the Harlem Peacemaker Program.

The concept of the program began to take shape in the early 1990s. Juvenile crime rates, which had been rising for several years in the U.S., and particularly in large urban areas like New York City, peaked in 1993. The response in much of the mainstream media, and in some academic journals, was to demonize a generation of young people as “super predators,” brutally violent and amoral criminals who threatened the very foundation of society.

Geoffrey Canada, HCZ president and CEO, felt that this characterization was not only unfair and untrue but dangerous. And he began discussing with his staff ways to combat this pervasive image of inner-city youth. The staff member most deeply involved in those discussions was G. Rasuli Lewis, who became the first director of the Harlem Peacemaker Program.

“By 1993, Geoff had already been working with young people for a long time and with great success,” says Lewis, who is now director of the HCZ Practitioners’ Institute. “He believed, on good evidence, that young people will try hard to meet the standards you set for them. So we set high standards for the children in our programs, and then we work hard to help them live up to those standards. But you have to ask yourself, ‘If young people will succeed in meeting a high bar for behavior, what if you set the bar at the lowest possible level? What happens if a society just accepts the notion that a generation of inner-city youngsters are vicious predators?’

“Did Harlem have a problem in the late eighties, early nineties? Of course it did,” Lewis continues. “Drugs were everywhere. Crime was a serious, a mortal threat to the community. We couldn’t even guarantee the safety of our children, not even in school. In 1993, a kindergarten student was shot in the face while attending PS 154, right on 127th Street. This was a time of real crisis. Was the proper response to that crisis to write off a generation of youngsters? For Geoff Canada, for all of us at HCZ, the proper response was exactly the opposite. We resolved to engage young people in addressing this crisis in our community. We knew that most young people are responsible and caring and committed to the well-being of their neighbors and their neighborhood. And we resolved to find a way for these young people themselves to play a lead role, and a public role, in changing the climate of violence and rebuilding their community. These young people would be the new standard for their generation, not a generation of predators but a generation of Peacemakers.”

The Harlem Peacemaker Program was launched in 1994. In collaboration with the Children’s Defense Fund and the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University’s Teachers College, HCZ trained the small initial Peacemaker cohort in sophisticated conflict resolution techniques. In the fall, they were brought into a few public elementary-school classrooms in Harlem to assist teachers in maintaining calm and order during the school day. It was a delicate, if highly successful, experiment.

“We didn’t want teachers, principals, or parents, for that matter, to feel as if we were stepping over into their territory,” say Lewis. “We entered the schools as conflict-resolution specialists only. But teachers in our schools work so hard, with so many demands made upon their time and resources. And the Peacemakers are smart, creative, dedicated young people with a lot to offer. The teacher/Peacemaker relationship began to evolve quickly, with Peacemakers given increasing responsibility. At HCZ, we responded by giving the Peacemakers more training in other areas, like math, reading, and computer skills. As the breadth of the program grew, so did the number of participants. More than 550 young people have interned as Peacemakers since the program began. Today, 98 full-time and 32 part-time Peacemakers work with parents, prin-
A child is looking to you to make things better. And you had better find a way to do that, because you’re dealing with a child’s life, a child’s future.

A New Strategy Inside the Classroom

Peacemakers work in the classroom during the school day at PS 76, PS 242, and PS 197. Through the School Success Program, one Peacemaker is assigned to each classroom in grades K-5. While retaining their original function of conflict-resolution specialists, fostering a safe and secure environment for learning, Peacemakers also provide an array of support services, including watching over the children at meal times and recess; assisting with schoolwork, particularly math and reading; and providing special attention and care to individual students or groups of students when needed.

The Peacemakers’ work in the classroom affects more than just the teachers and students; it affects the Peacemakers themselves. According to Heidi Lopez, “This job changes your perspective, your understanding, your life.”

Lopez began working as a Peacemaker in a first-grade classroom in PS 149 in Harlem in 2001. In her first few weeks on the job, she encountered her first great challenge. “One of the students in class had a painfully negative attitude,” says Lopez. “She wouldn’t socialize, she wouldn’t share with the other students, and she wouldn’t do the coursework unless she felt like it. One day, she got back her class assignment and didn’t like the results, so she threw a handful of her papers onto the floor. I went up to her and insisted that she pick the papers up or she wouldn’t be allowed out for recess. Well, I guess I had accidentally pushed the havoc button, because this young child just tore the place up. She turned over the bookcase, threw some boxes across the room, and ground a few crayons into the floor for good measure. I remember thinking to myself, ‘I guess that direct-confrontation strategy doesn’t work with this child. Time for a new strategy.’

“In our Peacemaker training sessions, the HCZ staff had prepared us to remain very flexible,” Lopez says. “I distinctly remember Rasuli Lewis saying to us, ‘Being a Peacemaker is not rocket science. No, it’s much, much harder. You don’t learn some rules or laws and then apply them. Every day you face a new challenge—in the classroom, in the play yard, in the principal’s office. And every day you have to solve problems with new strategies and new skills. A child is upset and you don’t know why, and that child is looking to you to make things better. And you had better find a way to do that, because you’re dealing with a child’s life, a child’s future.’

“I spent the next few weeks trying to find a way to work with that child. And I did find a way. I learned that she needed to understand, in detail, why she was being asked to do things. If you could make that clear to her, she was fine. We worked it out. And eventually she became one of the highest-achieving students in the class. She came in testing below grade level and she left as one of our best students. On the one hand, that was a source of great satisfaction to me. On the other hand, it made me realize how this child might have slipped through the cracks if there were not someone in that classroom to deal with her specially, one-on-one, every day. And I think that realization affected the many decisions I have made since then about my own future.”

Lopez began college as an education major. But after working as a Peacemaker she switched to sociology. She intends to found a nonprofit organization that helps to bridge the gaps between theory, practice, and policy in the field of education.

“I took a course in American education,” says Lopez. “and I learned some great education theories there. But then I actually worked in a classroom, and I began to understand that you need a lot more than theory. You have to understand that policy, including economic policy, affects everything that happens in the classroom. Almost all teachers want the very best for the children in their classroom. But if you are teaching 25 or 30 kids, with no extra help, how can you possibly spend time with one child who needs that extra attention? What message does a child get about the value of education when you just don’t have the resources?”

A child is looking to you to make things better. And you had better find a way to do that, because you’re dealing with a child’s life, a child’s future.
The program has changed me. I learned a lot about myself and what I really wanted. I’m nothing like the person who started out working as a Peacemaker. I think I’m a much better person. The program has hooked on working with children," he says. "That wasn’t how I started out. In fact, I’m nothing like the person who started out working as a Peacemaker. I think I’m a much better person. The program has changed me. I joined the program in part because I wanted to take advantage of the education grant that’s part of the package. I wanted to go to college, and the grant was a big help. But being a Peacemaker turned out to be a much more important kind of education. I learned a lot about myself and what I really wanted.”

As Americorps members, Peacemakers are eligible for government benefits, including a scholarship award after one year of service. McClendon used the award to attend John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in Manhattan. “As the name tells you, the Peacemaker Program started out as a mediation or conflict-resolution program,” says McClendon. “I think that when I came into the program I already had some of those skills. I’m from the neighborhood, and you could say that conflict-resolution skills were useful growing up in Harlem. But in the Peacemaker training sessions we learned to think about the peacemaking process in a scientific way, to break it down into its component parts: benefits; qualities necessary for a good media-
I had no idea how good it was going to feel to be able to make a difference in the lives of other young people.

A Way to Serve the Community

Service is the foundation of the Harlem Peacemaker Program. It is the key principle of the training Peacemakers receive and the chief lesson that Peacemakers impart to the young people with whom they work. It is also the focus of a host of special events and activities that Peacemakers direct and participate in throughout the year. Peacemakers lead children in a variety of community-service projects such as food and clothing drives that culminate on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, January 15. In collaboration with Abyssinian Baptist Church Peacemakers facilitate conflict resolution workshops for community children. Peacemakers support parents by providing outreach and child care with structured activities for parent-teacher conferences. Peacemakers work with corporate and community volunteers to plant community gardens, clean up streets and vacant lots, paint murals in school yards. To mark the anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King on April 4, 1968, Peacemakers present an annual event based on the works of Dr. King and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. In the spring, Peacemakers play a lead role in the yearly clean-up and planting of Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem. Every summer, 50 children are selected by Peacemakers, teachers, and principals to attend the Peacemakers Institute at Bowdoin College, in Maine. There, under the supervision of Peacemakers, youngsters learn conflict-resolution and team-building skills, undertake research projects and presentations, go on field trips, and take part in the Peacemaker Olympics—all part of a curriculum that stresses service to the community. In July and August, Peacemakers also operate Freedom Schools at PS 76, PS 242, and PS 197, providing hundreds of children in grades K-2 with a literacy-based experience during the summer months. Each year, the closing ceremony at the Freedom Schools take place just a few hours before one of the signature events of the Peacemaker Program, and of the entire Harlem Children’s Zone—The Annual Children’s March for Peace.

The Peace March was launched by HCZ in 1994 to honor the children whose lives had been lost to senseless acts of violence. Just as the Peacemakers were intended to contradict the public image of a violent generation of young people, so the Peace March was intended to demonstrate publicly the entire community’s desire for a safe neighborhood. Every year since then, thousands of parents, children, teachers, and community leaders, led by HCZ staff, march through the streets of Harlem together, in mid-August, to show the strength of their determination to secure and maintain peace for their families and neighbors. The collective show of strength is powerful and, to many, inspiring.

“It inspired me,” says Mizetta Wilson. “The first time I participated in the HCZ peace march was the year I graduated high school. I grew up in Harlem and had lived here all my life. But I had decided that after I got my diploma I would leave the city. I’m not sure what I wanted; just to get away, I guess. But the march made me realize how much I love this community and how much I wanted to help Harlem to flourish. I had already done some work with HCZ. After the march I happened to run into Rasuli Lewis and I asked his advice about ways I could best serve the community and at the same time follow my own dream of getting a good education. He suggested the Peacemakers.”

Wilson joined the Peacemakers in 1998 and went to work in the second-grade classroom at PS 242. “I was 18 years old and very idealistic,” says Wilson. “And the first couple of months were totally a honeymoon. I thought to myself, ‘This is fantastic. The kids are great. The job is a breeze.’ And then came the second phase, which I think of as ‘test phase.’ And it’s not the kids who are being tested, but the staff.
Stay upbeat and focused, take what you’re given and work with it, learn from every bit of information available, and show up every day, prepared to do your best. We teach that to the kids and we model it for the kids.

“You see, some children have had very little continuity in their life. Even if they’re very young, they may already have moved many times or had many different caregivers. They don’t want to invest their time or feelings in you if you’re just going to move out of their life soon. So they start testing to see if you’re there for the long haul. They get ornery, they stop listening, they even curse you out. When that first happened I began to wonder, ‘What did I do?’ And more to the point, ‘How on earth did I get myself into this?’

“But that’s when the training kicks in. I went back to the Peacemaker basics I had been taught, the four A’s—attitude, acceptance, attention to detail, and attendance. Meaning stay upbeat and focused, take what you’re given and work with it, learn from every bit of information available, and show up every day, prepared to do your best. We teach that to the kids and we model it for the kids. And it works. In a short time, things turned around at school. The kids would come in for breakfast in the morning and give me a big hug on their way to their table. They saw I was there to stay, and I saw that working with children was going to be my career.”

Wilson finished her two-year internship in 2001 and won the Peacemaker of the Year Award at the end of her term. That same year, she became a site supervisor in the Peacemaker Program at PS 242. “The site supervisor is the link that connects HCZ, the school staff, the parents, the children, and the Peacemakers,” says Wilson. “Most of my time is spent working with the Peacemakers, making sure they’ve got the tools they need to do the job well. I help them to think strategically, not just to concentrate on what’s happening with one child in the moment, but to try to think about what’s best for that child in the long term. For example, you have a child who can’t sit still; he’s disruptive in class but he’s also highly intelligent. It’s not enough to simply get him to quiet down time after time. You need to figure out what’s causing that behavior and do something about it. Does he need a physical outlet like sports or martial arts? Could he possibly need medication? Does he need a different kind of intellectual challenge, maybe chess? Is something going on in the home? Should you talk with the teacher about the need for a parent-teacher meeting? If you’re a Peacemaker, you must attend to every individual child’s need and understand the big picture at the same time.”

That’s how Wilson works. Radiating calm and authority, she seems to be everywhere at once at PS 242, checking in on Peacemakers in the classrooms, talking school policy with the principal, filling out mounds of paperwork, and always watching over the children, making sure each one is cared for, each one is safe.

In the spring, Wilson graduated from Marymount College with a degree in history. From her work in the Peacemaker Program, she now knows she wants to work in school administration. “It’s not just that I like administration,” Wilson explains, “it’s also where I think I can make the greatest difference. The Peacemaker Program has helped me to think about what works, about being effective, and that’s where I want to put my efforts and energy. Look at PS 242. The Peacemaker Program works here because we address many different issues at the same time: lack of resources, large class size, the need for individualized attention for students, the need for a safe and secure environment that promotes and rewards learning. The Peacemaker Program was designed by HCZ to address many aspects of the big picture, and to make the big picture better as a result. I think we’re succeeding at PS 242. I think we’ve really made a difference. And I want to keep making a difference like that in my career.”

A Success Story
There is general agreement that PS 242 is in fact succeeding. But it has been a not been easy. The school moved to its present location on West 122nd Street in fall 2001 after the school district closed one of its lowest-performing schools, PS 144, at that site. PS 242 absorbed the students who had attended PS 144 and began the difficult task of giving children with low achievement levels all the tools they would need to succeed.

Within a single year, PS 242 had gained a coveted place in the guidebook *New York City’s Best Public Elementary Schools*. The author, Clara Hemphill, describes PS 242 as “a cheerful, relaxed place where the principal’s door is always open, parents are welcome to stay, and the teachers work so hard that the principal, Donna Brewster, says she has to throw them out at 8:00 p.m.”
Walking into PS 242 on any school day, visitors can easily verify that description. The halls are bright, spotless, and orderly. The classrooms are lively, with both teachers and students engaged and committed. Parents visit freely and are welcomed warmly—as are a stream of educators, who come to the school regularly to talk to the principal to find out how she has accomplished this turnaround. Brewster gives a lot of the credit to the Peacemakers.

“Things look great now, but I can tell you we had a disastrous beginning,” says Brewster, who became principal of PS 242 in 1998, when it was located on West 120th Street. “We were thrown into this and didn’t know what we were getting into. But that became clear the day we moved in: the environment we inherited was chaotic, unsafe, and generally unsupportive of learning.

“We made some important decisions immediately,” Brewster continues. “The staff voted to go to a policy called school-based options, in which the school sets many of its own criteria. Under that policy, teachers and parents help make decisions on hiring and firing, which meant some teachers who were just putting in time decided to leave and a lot of energetic and idealistic teachers took their places. Another decision we made was to bring in Peacemakers. “I was skeptical at first,” Brewster admits. “I wasn’t sure what kind of a difference Peacemakers could possibly make. So I opted to bring in just six or seven of them, to work with only the youngest children. But I quickly became a believer. I saw that these young people were bright, creative, resourceful, and dedicated. And I decided right away to work with them to help make them as effective as possible. We started providing extra training for them, in math and reading especially. They were willing and eager to learn. Now we have fifteen Peacemakers and two site supervisors, and they give us the ability to really give extra care and attention, both social and academic, to children who need it.

“Today I think the Peacemakers are the best thing since sliced bread. They are excellent role models for the children. They are consistent: what they say they will do, they always do. And they have this wonderful can-do attitude. They also get close to the children and their families. Very often it is through the Peacemakers that we find out we need to do some outreach to a family, because of some financial or other problems the family might be having. The Peacemakers always seem to know first.

“You know, everyone has worked hard to turn this school around—parents, students, teachers, Peacemakers, and myself. We work hard together because we all share this attitude that this is our neighborhood and our children and we need to make them the best they can be. I was born in Harlem and I have every intention of retiring here. And when I’m an old, old lady, who’s going to take care of me? I’m going to need doctors and lawyers and electricians to work on my house. And I want them to be from my own neighborhood. I want the children I’m educating now to be capable of taking care of me in my old age.

“We’re all working together at PS 242 toward this same goal. But I have to say, the contribution of the Peacemakers has been absolutely tremendous. They spoiled me, they spoiled all of us. I cannot imagine this school without them. I’m very stubborn. I was determined from the beginning to turn PS 242 into a first-rate school And we’re doing it. When people come in to ask, ‘How can our school do what your school is doing? How can we transform our school into a real institution of learning and caring?’ I always answer, ‘Try to get yourself some Peacemakers.’”