

MEMBER SUBMISSION: GIVE PEAS A CHANCE

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By Cynthia Blayer

"With every true friendship, we build more firmly the foundations on which the peace of the whole world rests."

—Mahatma Gandhi

In March, I participated in the *Commission on the State of Women (CSW70)* at the United Nations. This global gathering is focused on advancing gender equality and the rights and empowerment of women. Related topics, such as education, cultural bias, domestic violence, environmental sustainability and war, were discussed. It was

exhilarating to see thousands of people from all over the world coming together to share information and work towards a common goal. The annual March event is the largest one for the group, but throughout the year there are many other meetings, conversations, plans and initiatives among international organizations continuing to work together.

I was attending as a member of *Servas International*, a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to building peace through cross-cultural understanding and friendship, via a network of hosts and travelers who welcome others for day visits and home stays. *Servas* was founded after World War II by Bob Luitweiler, with the aim of creating a more peaceful society and preventing wars. Bob had been inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, who said, “With every true friendship, we build more firmly the foundations on which the peace of the whole world rests.” At CSW70, people spoke about peace not being just the absence of war, but a society where racial, cultural and gender bias have been alleviated and people can live together harmoniously.

During the conference, I hosted a *Servas* visitor from Bolivia. It was an opportunity to learn about life in another part of the world. My visitor showed me photos and videos of her family and neighborhood in Cochabamba and how her son and daughter participated in local cultural events, dancing the traditional Bolivian dances they had learned in childhood. We compared notes on our lives, cultures and traditions, and I was invited to visit Bolivia in the future.

The Food Coop, like *Servas*, includes people from many cultures and countries. The Coop can and should be a place that is free of racial, cultural and gender bias, building an underpinning for a peaceable society. How can we better promote cross cultural understanding and friendship? How can we remember that “cooperation” is key to being a cooperative? Without cooperation and teamwork, how are we any different than countries at war?

Coop members had more opportunities to get to know each other before the pandemic. The meeting room served as a focal point for in-person films, cooking classes,

game nights, guest speakers discussing environmental issues and much more. While it is good to have virtual options, in-person events are an important part of building a peaceable community.

Many food cooperatives have a member engagement committee. These committees evaluate member engagement within their coops and help to foster more involvement. They determine what might be blocking engagement and find ways to build community. Just as peace is not just the absence of war but a consciously created peaceful society, a food coop can benefit by actively fostering cooperation and community, rather than assuming it is already there.

Cynthia Blayer, a longtime Coop member, has served on the Environmental Committee and as a board member of the Mid-Atlantic Food Cooperative Alliance (MAFCA).