

TOWARD A VIOLENCE-FREE HAWAII BY JOHNETTA ADAMS AND CAROL PELEKAI HAWAII CORRESPONDENTS

Awesome!” These are the words of the many young participants who attended the second annual Westside Youth Festival held on Oct. 28 at the Wai’anae Mall Shopping Center on the island of Oahu, Hawaii.

The theme for the festival was “Victory Over Violence, a Culture of Peace.” SGI-USA members spearheaded the organizing committee with co-sponsors from Nani O’ Wai’anae (a local environmental group), Nanakuli and Makaha Ahupua’a (community) groups and the United Nations Association Hawaii Division. More than 110 companies and organizations supported with donations of all kinds.

The opening event began with the dedication of this year’s festival to the late Marilyn Rosario, an SGI-USA member who gave her unyielding efforts in support of peace within the community. The opening performance was a wonderful Dragon Dance by the SGI-USA Boys and Girls Group.

Many friends, families and more than 300 hard-working volunteers and sponsors made this memorable event a great success. Children from the 10 schools in and around the community enjoyed the chance to display their many skills and talents. Huge paper-flower cutouts and straw leis on which each and every child from the schools shared their dreams and hopes for a “Violence Free,” “Drug Free” and “Trash Free” community draped the entire event.

Three main tents housed the many different activities, in addition to many food and game booths sponsored by the schools. The mayor of Honolulu, Jeremy Harris, presented Koa Bowl trophies for the longest leis in two different categories, elementary and high school. The excitement kept building by the hour.

There were performances by many school groups and young individuals being featured at the main stage, reigning young pageant queens who made their debut public appearances, talented young business entrepreneurs who setup shops to conduct their business skills and showcase their many hand-crafted products and ideas, and a gallery of murals displayed on individual panels from each of the 10 schools. The SGI-USA Victory Over Violence Exhibit, along with a local VOV exhibit was displayed inside of the mall. Also, the local Pacific Zone members and youth created their own United Nation Exhibit and Children’s Art and Rights Exhibit. Many people enjoyed the exhibits and lots of dialogue took place throughout the day.

The highlight of the day was the creative and spectacular Haunted House, which was cleverly designed and operated by a young man who just graduated from high school in May. His creative ideas and determination was the fuel that generated the many young — and young-in-spirit — volunteer actors. It was truly a howling and frightening experience. Some kids went back again and again to enjoy the Haunted House. There were informational and educational awareness interest groups who provided for and shared with our community the same messages of hope for a “Violence Free,” “Drug Free,” “Trash Free” environment.

Hawaii’s Lt. Governor Maize Hirono addressed the audience, commenting, “I want to thank the youth and sponsors as the festival was also celebrating National Make a Difference Day, and I am so excited to see all the schools here participating together.”

The City Council of Honolulu also presented the Westside Festival Committee with an

honorary certificate and commending the SGI-USA and other sponsors for their efforts in supporting the community.

There were many positive comments throughout the day expressing pride of the youth in the Westside. Hazel Sumile, superintendent of the Leeward School, said: "Thanks to the festival committee, all the schools on the coast received books last year. I am so excited to see all the kids' artwork and performances today. I want to thank the festival sponsors for doing a wonderful job."

As the sun began to set, the spirit of the event continued into the night with live music and dancing. It was a memorable event put together by folks who truly care about their community. Victory was achieved by all who played a part in its success with the many new and renewed friendships that were created as everyone worked in beautiful harmony.