

Palaima: Game over: Helping teens deal with violence

Thomas G. Palaima, Regular contributor

Updated: 10:43 p.m. Friday, Sept. 17, 2010

Published: 8:19 p.m. Friday, Sept. 17, 2010

As I approach 60, I have less and less concern about what happens to me and more concern than ever about what happens to the young, like our 15-year-old son. Young people today inhabit a violent world. Many of them do not understand how the violence that surrounds them, often subtly and almost invisibly, affects their lives or how to deal with its consequences.

Go online to www.kumawar.com and see the electronic games they play. Kuma Reality Games has the motto "Real War News. Real War Games." But all of the characters in their online reality war games and in the images for the armed services enlistment advertising linked on the website at www.militaryspot.com look like full-grown and healthy adults. Their limbs are intact. They ride shining armored vehicles that look more exciting than dune buggies. Neither Kuma Reality Games nor our armed services shows images of what human bodies or armored vehicles look like after coming into contact with an improvised explosive device or a rocket propelled grenade.

We, too, think we are sending mature men and women off to fight our war on terror. When I visited the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to lecture in fall 2003, the cadets were healthy and full of life. West Point cadets know in their souls the message Douglas MacArthur delivered to their predecessors in May 1962: "Only the dead have seen an end of war." But they also will not see combat until they are 22 or 23 years old and after four years of intensive education and rigorous mental and physical toughening.

For a dose of sobriety, look at the cover of the latest issue of *War, Literature & the Arts* (volume 22, 2010), published by the U.S. Air Force Academy. In 2007, Pulitzer-Prize winning photographer Craig F. Walker followed 18-year-old Ian Fisher into combat in Iraq after he finished high school. Walker's photo of Ian and his unit appears on the cover: http://joanfores.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/pulitzer_2010_4.jpg. They look like cherub-faced 16-year-olds playing paintball. But they are the front-line troops we are using to prosecute our war on terror. One picture, in this case, is worth 10,000 words.

Our youth need to learn about violence and how to manage it. This applies not just to young men and women who will enlist in our armed services, but those who face violence in their families and neighborhoods and schools, who encounter it on television and computer screens, and who need tools and skills to shield themselves or their friends against it.

Fortunately, the University of Texas Humanities Institute is offering a six-lesson course for parents and teachers called "Helping Our Teenagers Think about Violence and Peace." The course will meet Tuesday evenings 7:30-9:00 PM beginning Oct. 12 at the Community Engagement Center at the Marvin C. Griffin Building, 1009 E. 11th St.

As Director Pauline Strong explains: "The Humanities Institute is sponsoring this informal course to help parents and teachers learn about ways to engage teenagers in constructive thinking about violence and peacemaking. In its first 10 years, the Humanities Institute has developed educational programs for community members in Central Texas. For example, the Free Minds Project has given over 50 adults living at low to moderate incomes a 'jump start' to their college education. Now Austin psychiatrist Dr. Stephen Sonnenberg has assembled an exciting team of teachers who bring diverse perspectives to this topic. There will be ample time for participants to share their own viewpoints."

The team and topics include: "How America Thinks of War and How We Might Begin to Think About Peace-Building" by professor David Edwards; "Teen Gangs: What They Are, Why Kids Join Them, How Parents Can Help Kids Stay Out of Gangs" by linguistic and legal anthropologist Barrik Van Winkle; "How Parents Might Help Their Children Think About Violence in Movies and on TV" by Japanese film specialist Kirsten Cather; "Preventing Youth Violence: The Efforts of the Council on At-Risk Youth (CARY)" by CARY founder and Executive Director Adrian Moore; and "How to Tell When Your Child Needs Special Help and How to Get It" by Gemma Marangoni Ainslie, a psychologist-psychoanalyst whose work with adolescents includes parent guidance and supervision of school counselors and psychotherapists. I kick the series off with the topic "How the Greeks Taught Their Children About War."

For more information, see the Humanities Institute Web site at humanitiesinstitute.utexas.edu or contact: information@humanitiesinstitute.utexas.edu.

Palaima is a classics professor at the University of Texas; tpalaima@sbcglobal.net.

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