



## Learning what it means to 'be the flame'

By Finley Taylor - Monday, September 23rd 2019

Last year I was an Ashland Middle School eighth-grader in Ms. Healy's Roots and Shoots class. It was because of that class that I was fortunate enough to meet David Wick and Irene Kai of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission and be a part of the lighting of the World Peace Flame in Ashland.

At that time, I could not have imagined how those events would impact me. Specifically, the words Irene said to me, "be the flame."

What does that mean?

When I met David and Irene last September, I found it hard not to be inspired by their energy, dedication, passion and journey to bring the World Peace Flame to Ashland. They spoke about how our participation, attitudes and actions as young people can help lead us toward peace — simple things like smiling, saying hello or holding the door for someone can help cultivate peace.

David and Irene invited our class to attend the lighting ceremony at Thalden Pavilion, and Ms. Healy volunteered our class to be the Flame Keepers for the Peace Flame. We were all very excited. As Flame Keepers, we refill the oil lamp with recycled biomass oil and dust the lamp and chamber every Friday. My class rotated these duties, and I believe we all felt it was a great honor and took the responsibilities very seriously.

It wasn't just our class ... the whole school embraced the spread of peace through the creation and expression of various art projects displayed throughout campus. Everyone wanted to help promote peace.

After my Roots and Shoots class was over, I didn't have much involvement in the flame, as the class made up only a third of the school year. That was until my middle school "team" went on a field trip to the flame that spring. There David and Irene were just as enthusiastic about the flame as they had been in September. Talking and listening to them, their passion for peace was still so strong and clear. They told me that peace starts with me.

Peace does start with me, but more importantly, it starts with an awareness for my whole generation to recognize opportunities and activities to help promote peace. An example of this was going to Fresh Start over the summer.

Fresh Start is an orientation program offered by the high school and led by upperclassmen acting as counselors. It was a two-day retreat on Mount Ashland meant to help transition middle-schoolers to high school. Really, it was two days of practicing and promoting peace. The counselors wanted to help us connect with our peers through various team-building activities. These activities centered around trust, listening, respecting and valuing each and every person, and recognizing that everyone has something important to contribute. The counselors encouraged our participation and were genuinely curious about our viewpoints and concerns. To me they were "being the flame" in the perfect way. I came away from Fresh Start feeling that I have a voice and people want to hear that voice.

I have been a freshman in high school for a few weeks now, and I already feel thankful that because of my Fresh Start experience, an important sense of unity has been created for me, and I hope for all the other freshman. I hope to continue to raise my awareness and educate myself and those around me through ideas, words, opportunities and actions of kindness and peace. I hope to continue to gain leadership skills and tools from those around me to be a more effective change maker. So today, let's take steps to make peace a reality, not just a dream for the future. I would like to invite each of you to come along with me and be the flame.

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