Meet a Changemaker
A monthly series designed to spark conversation about leadership and social change.

Meet a Changemaker is a monthly series designed to engage students in conversations about leadership and social change. This program has been developed as a collaboration between The Purpose Project (www.purposeproject.org) and the News in Education initiative at the Hartford Courant. Each month, we will feature the story of an exemplary social leader from across the country who is working to make our world a better place paired with classroom resources that promote social engagement.

The information and resources featured introduce students to issues and challenges facing our local, national, and global community along with the approaches ordinary citizens have employed to create solutions. Students will consider the roles they can play as leaders in their community now and in the future.

Unit 21: Betty Williams

Unit Objectives
Students will
1. explore elements of personal responsibility and community service,
2. examine the common forms of suffering when injustice occurs between two groups of people,
3. identify the risks involved with taking a stand, and the risks associated with inaction.

Background Information*

Betty Williams was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland on May 22, 1942. She was baptized a Roman Catholic, even though 3 of her 4 grandparents were not Catholic (two were Protestant and one was Jewish). When Betty was 13 years old, her mother suffered a massive stroke, and Betty dropped out of school to take care for her mother and raise her younger sister.

Like many families in Northern Ireland, Betty’s family was touched by violence. Her Protestant grandfather, a riveter in a Belfast shipyard, was thrown down the hold of a ship that was under construction because his son was marrying a Catholic woman. Her cousin Daniel, a pre-med student, was killed at the age of 18, when Protestant extremists shot him in front of his house. Another of Betty’s cousins was killed when a booby-trapped car abandoned by members of the IRA exploded as he was driving past it. In Betty’s words, “The Protestants killed one of my cousins, and the Catholics killed the other.”
Betty joined the Irish Republican Army in 1972, but “didn’t remain a member long.” After witnessing a British soldier shot in front of her in 1973, she knelt and prayed beside him. She was criticized by Catholic neighbors for showing sympathy for “the enemy.”

On August 10, 1976, a runaway car driven by an IRA member, Danny Lennon, crashed into a family of four who were out for a walk. (Lennon had been fatally shot while fleeing from British soldiers.) All three children, Joanne, John, and Andrew, were killed. Their mother, Anne Maguire, was critically injured and later committed suicide in 1980. Betty Williams had been driving home from visiting her mother, heard the crash, and was the first to arrive on the scene.

Betty immediately began to circulate petitions against the violence and, in less than forty-eight hours, had over six thousand signatures. When Mairead Corrigan, the children's aunt, heard what Betty Williams had done, she invited her to the children's funeral. On August 13, 1976, the day of the Maguire children's funeral, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan met with journalist Ciaran McKeown, who joined the two women in co–founding the Peace People, an organization dedicated to nonviolence in Northern Ireland and throughout the world.

Betty and Mairead organized a peace march to the graves of the children, which was attended by 10,000 Protestant and Catholic women. The peaceful march was disrupted by members of the Irish Republican Army, who accused them of being influenced by the British. The following week, 35,000 people marched with Williams and Corrigan to show their support for ending the violence in their country.

In recognition of their extraordinary action to end the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, and for their dedication to building a foundation for a peaceful future, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976.

In her acceptance speech, Betty said, “That first week will always be remembered of course for something else besides the birth of the Peace People. For those most closely involved, the most powerful memory of that week was the death of a young republican and the deaths of three children struck by the dead man’s car. A deep sense of frustration at the mindless stupidity of the continuing violence was already evident before the tragic events of that sunny afternoon of August 10, 1976. But the deaths of those four young people in one terrible moment of violence caused that frustration to explode, and create the possibility of a real peace movement... As far as we are concerned, every single death in the last eight years, and every death in every war that was ever fought represents life needlessly wasted, a mother's labor spurned." She also said that, “The Nobel Peace Prize is not awarded for what one has done, but hopefully what one will do.”
True to those words, since receiving the Nobel Prize, Betty has traveled the world, working tirelessly with fellow Nobel Laureates wherever peace, and especially the safety and well-being of children, is at risk.

Betty Williams currently serves as the president of World Centers of Compassion for Children, whose mission is to provide a strong political voice for children in areas afflicted by war, hunger, social, economic or political upheaval. The aim of the centers will be to respond to their material and emotional needs by creating safe and nurturing environments. The WCCC has recently announced that they will be building their first “City of Compassion” in southern Italy. This city will be a safe haven for children who are most at risk to the horrors of war, hunger, disease and abuse. In it they will find homes, food, education, health care, love and compassion. This city is meant to serve as a model for others that can provide health and healing to suffering children throughout the world.

*Background information provided based on information compiled and shared by PeaceJam.

Core Questions and Activities for Use with Your Students

Becoming our Own Heroes: Betty Williams believes deeply in everyone’s capacity and responsibility to contribute towards improving the communities that they live in. As she shared in her interview for the Meet a Changemaker series, she says “I have to address the fact that young people in America are looking for heroes all the time, and they are the heroes, or they could become the heroes. I mean I don’t even believe in heroes. I just think you do this thing because it’s the right thing to do. It’s as simple as that. It’s like eating Quaker Oats, it’s the right thing to do. And I would ask young Americans to do the right thing. Very simple. Regardless of what their government, or their politicians are telling them, do the right thing.”

When she accepted the Nobel Prize for Peace, she also said, “The Nobel Peace Prize is not awarded for what one has done, but hopefully what one will do.” But, she also recognizing that standing up for what you believe in can be scary. Lots of times, when you speak up, you take risks. There is the risk that other people won’t feel the same way that you do. There is the risk that other people won’t feel as strongly about an issue that you do. There is the risk that no one else will join you. However, when Betty spoke up, thousands of people joined her. When we asked her why she thinks her message connected so strongly with other people in Northern Ireland, she says, “I have no idea, except that I’m not an academic. When I was doing the interviews, I think I was talking for every woman. I said it her way. These were the ones on the ground who were wondering, “Is it going to be my child next? Is it going to be my husband next? Am I going
to go into town one day and get blown up?” I mean, these women were me. So I think that is what they could relate to.”

1.) Lead the class in a discussion about Betty’s perspective on leadership, and her style of leading. Use the quotes listed above as discussion prompts, focusing specifically on the elements of:

- **Personal Responsibility** – When a problem has many different causes and components, and is bigger than any one person can solve alone, who’s responsibility is it to try to fix it? One can one person do to help create progress?
- **Risk Taking** – What kinds of risks are involved in standing up for your beliefs? What types of risks have you felt when dealing with a difficult situation?
- **Identifying “the right thing to do”** – When a problem is obvious and the solution isn’t, how do you figure out what the “right thing to do” is? Do you think that there is more than one “right thing to do” for any situation? How might people differ in their opinion of what the “right thing to do is”?
- **Finding the right way to communicate your feelings, and gain support** – Betty emphasizes speaking her truth in a way that others like her could understand. What kinds of truths do students in your class have that they would like to share with others? Are there ways that they could communicate those truths more effectively than others?

2.) Then, have the class pick an issue that they feel is unjust. Ask them to think about what “the right thing to do” is for that specific situation.

3.) Then, ask them what they think their role is in helping “the right thing” to happen.

- What risks would be involved for them personally? What are the risks of not speaking up or taking action?
- What can they do either individually, or with support from other people or groups?
- How would they go about doing that?
- How would they find a way to communicate their desire for change to the people they would need to help them?

This exercise can be completed as a whole-class discussion, a breakout discussion amongst smaller groups of students (3–5), or a personal written reflection by each member of the class. However, some form of sharing with others in the class, or their community would help students gather feedback about how real the risks they have identified are, what other steps or resources might be available to help them, and how their passion for a cause or an idea occurs to others, as a result of how they have communicated it.
Get Involved!

Learn more about PeaceJam:

The mission of the PeaceJam Foundation is to create young leaders committed to positive change in themselves, their communities and the world through the inspiration of Nobel Peace Laureates who pass on the spirit, skills, and wisdom they embody. PeaceJam is bringing young people together with Nobel Peace Laureates to tackle the toughest issues facing our planet – issues ranging from basic needs, such as access to water, to basic rights, such as social justice and human security.

For more information about PeaceJam, and the educational and leadership-building opportunities that it provides to students of all ages, please visit: www.peacejam.org

Learn more about World Center for Compassion for Children International:

Betty Williams founded World Center for Compassion for Children International (WCCCI) in order to create a strong political voice for children in areas of stress due to war, hunger or social, economic, or political upheaval and to respond to their expressed needs materially and emotionally.

Together, with leaders from around the world, WCCCI spreads a vision of a new paradigm within global cultures and governments that embrace, nurture, and empower children with a compassionate world view. We believe this new paradigm will occur by changing not what we see but how we see.

To achieve this, WCCCI works through “Three Pillars of Action”:

• Centers of Compassion
• Peace Education
• Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Rights for Children.

For more information about World Center for Compassion for Children International, it’s current City of Peace initiatives, and other programs, please visit: www.wccci.org

Talk Back

Ask the Changemaker: Send us questions that you have for Betty Williams. We’ll pick the best ones, pass them along to Betty, and share her answers with you next month. askthechangemakers@purposeproject.org

Inspiration to Action: Has a part of Betty’s story inspired you to make your community a better place? Tell us what you’ve learned, and how you have
become a leader in your community, and we’ll consider featuring your story on our website! inspirationtoaction@purposeproject.org