



The International Peace Belt  
& Artists for World Peace

By Caryn B. Davis  
Photos courtesy AFWP



Belinda-Madrid, Spain

When the Euro replaced most former European currencies, jewelry designer Wendy Black-Nasta received a phone call from a reporter that was destined to change her life.

Wendy moved to Middletown in 1996 so her husband Bobby, a musician, could study ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University. She immersed herself in teaching jewelry design at various art centers and colleges and through her own studio. As well established artist, Wendy also continued designing for museums, galleries, collectors and stores.

One of her students, Celeste Bellinghieri, was making her belly dancing debut and Wendy went to support her. She was fascinated by the belts the dancers wore and decided to make one as a gift for Celeste. She began sketching ideas that eventually became the catalyst for The International Peace Belt. "A week later Bill Daly, a reporter for The Hartford Courant, called several Connecticut artists to ask how we would integrate European currency into our artwork now that it was out of circulation. I thought it would be interesting to incorporate all the European coins, along with coins from all over the world into an international belt of peace that symbolized the coming together of all nations, peoples, dancers, artists, peace leaders, and tribal people," recalls Wendy.

Wendy immediately contacted all her international customers and family members living abroad, and began the two year task of gathering coins from their respective countries. "Because it was a belt for peace I wanted everything donated because right away we are including the world in our vision," says Wendy.

Word spread. Packages containing coins, gem stones from Iraq, Afghanistan Pakistan and other places where coins could not be obtained at the time, and shells from tribal nations that don't trade in traditional currency, arrived on Wendy's doorstep. Included, was a box from the Bahamas with an unsigned note that read: "I hope this makes it onto the belt, Mom."



Celeste and Wendy in studio



Celeste Bellinghieri

In the summer of 2003, Wendy and her apprentices Katie Rosenblatt and Margaret Sola began working on the belt. When it was completed, 115 countries were denoted with the ultimate goal of one day having all 191 countries represented. "When it was done I thought we should have the belt blessed because I did not know what was going to happen, but I thought it would be big because of the response we had gotten already," says Wendy.

Wendy's cousin Sara Morgues and friend Meghan Ulrich were the belt's first caretakers. The pair was traveling to India to attend the Golden Jubilee for World Peace honoring the 50th birthday of Amritanadamayi (AKA Ammachi), a saint and guru from India. Sara offered to carry the belt and have it blessed by Ammachi. The belt wound up being worn by a person from Ammachi's ashram and led the peace procession of 150,000 people, thus taking on a life of its own. "I started getting calls asking where the peace



Ceramno Confederated Tribes of Siletz

belt was so I thought we should document everyone who wore it because I wanted to see, and I wanted everyone else to see. We put up a website so people could track its whereabouts," says Wendy.

While in India, people wanted to contribute funding to keep the peace belt traveling. It was then that Wendy officially established the non-profit foundation Artists for World Peace so people would be assured that 100% of the proceeds donated went to the organization and not into anyone's pocket.



Les MacLeod, Scotland

After the Golden Jubilee, the belt was danced in by the Classical Nrityagram dancers in India and by an Israeli dance troupe. In December 2003, it traveled with filmmaker S. Smith Patrick to South Korea where it was worn during a dance performance at the prestigious Seoul Center for the Performing Arts.

Since then the Peace Belt has traveled to 16 countries on 3 continents and has been worn during numerous performances and at peaceful and spiritual gatherings. In 2004, the Peace Belt was part of the Women's Art Show at Arts + Literature Laboratory in New Haven to commemorate the first anniversary of the US invasion in Iraq and it was offered as a blessing at Ground Zero in conjunction with artist Donna Sylvester's Lighthouse Project. In 2005, it made its way to DC to participate in the National Antiwar Mobilization, and went on a peace mission to the Middle East where Palestinians and Israelis wore the belt while holding hands and talking about their mutual desire for peace. In 2006, it was worn by Belinda Jiménez González at Carlos III University in Spain during

the university's 4th annual year-end dance performance. In 2007, it went to the Ecuadorian Amazon and was blessed by a Shaman. In 2008,



All Gallery in New Haven, a Dance for Aghast Women

cancer survivor Chantal Laliberte carried the peace belt while climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa to help raise money for cancer programs. "The belt doesn't belong to anyone now. It's just out in the world," says Wendy.

The belt always travels with a caretaker and Wendy is always looking for people to help with this goal. There are only 2 requirements. "Whoever wears the belt is asked to meditate on





Fire dancer, Mexico



India, dancer



Sundance Park, Rosebud, South Dakota



Haiti



Tanzania

peace while they have it, and they must agree to be documented and lend their voice on what peace means to them in their country and in their life. It is intended that through this act, the belt will become a living link between cultures, and a symbol of peace and unity binding the people of all nations as one," says Wendy.

The belt always comes back from every country it visits with a little gift. In Scotland it was a sterling silver bagpipe. In Vietnam it was jade Buddha. In South Korea it was a coin from a reporter. "We have so much stuff now that we can't put it all on the belt because it will be too heavy to wear. We save everything in hopes of donating it to the Smithsonian or the United Nations one day along with all the footage and stories," says Wendy.

In addition to the Peace Belt, Artists for World Peace partners with other entities to assist those in need. With their Children of Peace Project they try to sponsor a child in each country the belt

visits either monetarily or by aiding other artists with their projects. "We had an artist contact us who was trying to raise money to build a school in Ecuador. The kids are not allowed to attend school without proper footwear but they are so poor they can't afford shoes. We had a fundraiser here called 300 Shoes and raised 1200 pairs. We had to get them to California where they were flown to Ecuador, then bussed to the Amazon River, and then canoed up river where they arrived in the rain forest. I try to tell people you never know when you get involved the impact you are having on a life. All of a sudden a child can be in school by a simple act," says Wendy.

For the past 3 winters, over 30 artists have descended upon Wendy's living

room, volunteering their time and talent to make Hats for A Cause. The first year they raised over \$4000 at a charity auction and were able to build a safe house in Cambodia for battered women and their children. This year, because of the current economic climate, the money they made selling their hats remained in the state. "All the local food banks were empty and they asked me for help. I worked with an amazing guardian angel named Lou at Price Right in Cromwell. I showed him our wish list and he saved

me over \$1500 per page. He helped me buy enough food for 400 people that we delivered to local food banks and a women's shelter," says Wendy.

Another ongoing project is their annual Food and Clothing Drive. The drive begins in October and ends in December. Clothing is given to the people of Haiti, food is delivered to a Connecticut food pantry, and blankets, toys, warm clothes and food are collected for the Rose Bud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. "We now have 300 volunteers for this one activity. We used to box and sort at our house but it was too much. Now the First Church of Christ in Middletown lets us do the boxing and sorting in one of their rooms, and Extra Space Storage gives us a unit to house the donations we get throughout the year," says Wendy.

Wendy has her own wish list for the organization that includes much needed funding, and a director who not only knows how to grant write and fund raise, but can help spearhead all their projects. "I get about 200 emails a day from people all over the world asking for help. We try to help everyone when we can but sometimes we have to put people on hold. Artists for World Peace has



Scotland

embarked on a long journey with a grand vision, but one dancer at a time, one performance at a time, and one project at a time, we are building towards our ultimate goal of international peace and unity," says Wendy.

To make a donation, become a volunteer or caretaker, to apply for the director position, sponsor a child, or to learn more about Artists for World Peace log onto <http://www.artistsforworldpeace.org> or call (860)347-4219.



Tanzania