



**International Day
of Peace Symposium
Report**

Sept. 21, 2024

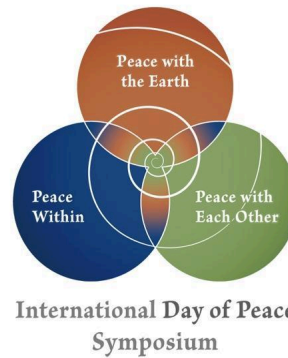
Held at
**The University
of Texas at El Paso**

Organized by



The Vitex Singing Tree of Healing Relationship with Self, Others, Earth and the Divine

International Day of Peace Symposium El Paso, Texas



Introduction

On Sept. 21, 2024, 140 people gathered from many sectors of El Paso at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) for a day of connecting, learning and innovating. The event was one of over [5000](#) that took place in the United States and part of the 55 million people across the globe who commemorated the 42th anniversary of the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of the [Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace](#). Our institutional sponsors included [Unity Through Creativity](#), the [Interfaith Alliance of the Southwest](#), UTEP's [Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens](#), the [UTEP College of Liberal Arts](#), the [UTEP Women's and Gender Studies Program](#), the [UTEP Department of Theater and Dance](#), the [UTEP Department of Sociology and Anthropology](#), and the UTEP branch of the [Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#). We dedicated this Peace Symposium and the heartfelt energy of this entire collective to the eradication and healing of war, pain, and suffering anywhere in our world.

The **Mission** of the Peace Symposium was to foster a space where imagination and connection would empower participants to become more effective in building a world that works for all. Our objectives included growing the reality of El Paso, Texas, as an [International City of Peace](#) and transforming the image of El Paso as a violent city, by highlighting and connecting individuals and groups whose work is built upon peace practices. In that vein, participants shared insights and practices in the realms of *Peace Within*, *Peace With Each Other*, and *Peace with the Earth*.



“World Peace” painting by Hal Marcus (photo by Monica Jasso)

Goals of the Symposium included:

- to build networks between participants of the International Peace Day 2024 through speaking, listening, learning and co-creating.
- to identify, support, and strengthen local and national connections between peace practitioners, strengthening El Paso’s identity as an [International City and County of Peace](#).

The structure of the Symposium was as follows:

1. Three livestreamed keynote speakers, addressing themes related to Peace with the Earth ([Devon Peña](#)); Peace with Each Other ([Stephen Niamke](#)); and Peace Within ([Paul K. Chappell](#))
2. Panels of local community activists and organizations
3. Small group round table reflections led by facilitators.
4. Cultural celebrations and creative contributions including the [Vitex Singing Tree Mural](#), a blessing led by Ilhuicatlahuili – Beatriz Villegas - and dance led by [Tawanda Chabikwa](#).
5. Plenary session on next steps



Panel Discussion of *Peace With Others* including Pax Christi, Project Regeneracion, YWCA and Abara

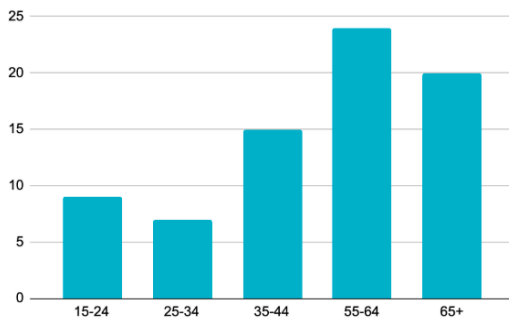
A full schedule of the speakers and panelists is available [here](#).

Impact

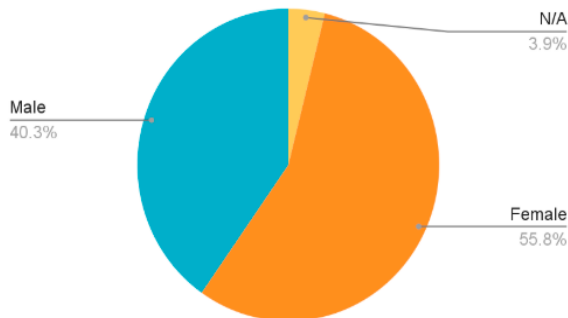
To gauge the effectiveness and impact of the event, the members of Unity Through Creativity's planning committee designed and administered a pre-/post-questionnaire on the day's events. The data summarized below represent responses from 79 attendees, out of approximately 140 people who were present at the event.

Attendees included people of various age groups, from teenagers to elders, but were mostly middle-aged adults. More women than men participated, as well as a few non-binary individuals.

Ages:

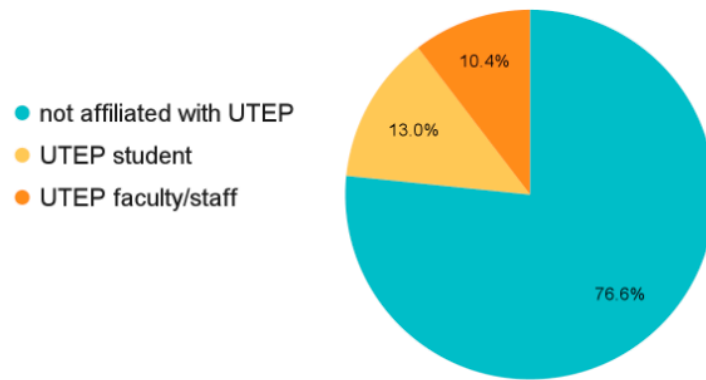


Gender



One concern of the planning committee was that locating the event on the UTEP campus might limit participation mostly to people affiliated with UTEP, rather than reaching the broader El Paso community. Happily, this did not turn out to be the case, as over 3/4 of the participants were not affiliated with UTEP.

Are you UTEP faculty/staff, student, or not affiliated with UTEP?

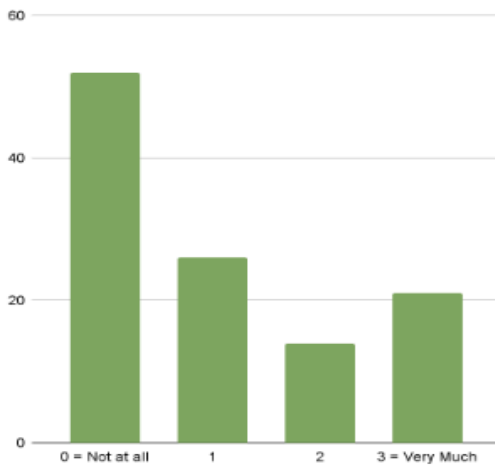


Additionally, Spanish as well as ASL interpreters were provided throughout the event. Seven participants took advantage of the simultaneous Spanish interpretation, while no Deaf or hard-of-hearing participants were registered. This indicated that future events could benefit from stronger outreach to the local Deaf community, as well as the local chapter of [ADAPT](#). Having ASL interpreters there did mean, however, that our video documentation includes sign language, which will support our outreach efforts for next year's event.

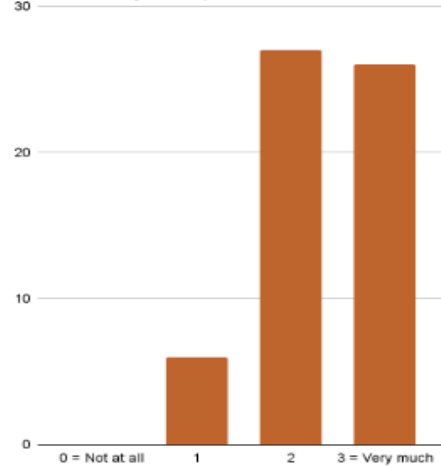
While the Spanish interpretation services were well-received, they did have the unintended effect of segregating non-English-speaking participants from the rest of the group. In light of the fact that most of El Paso's population is bilingual (Spanish/English), we are considering other ways to address the community's linguistic diversity in future events.

Much of the questionnaire was devoted to participants' levels of familiarity with the themes and practices of the symposium. Notably, a **full 4/5 of the participants** stated that this was the first International Day of Peace event they had attended. Prior to the event, more than half of the participants indicating zero or little engagement with peace and justice initiatives in El Paso. In contrast, on the post-questionnaire, a large majority foresaw taking a larger role in such initiatives going forward.

How familiar are you with local (EP/CJ) organizations and networks working toward peace?(0 = Not at All - 3 = Very Much)

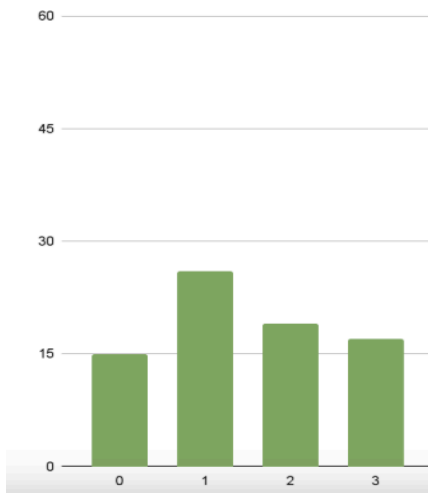


After the events of today, how familiar are you with local (EP/CJ) organizations and networks working toward peace? (0 = Not at All - 3 = Very Much)

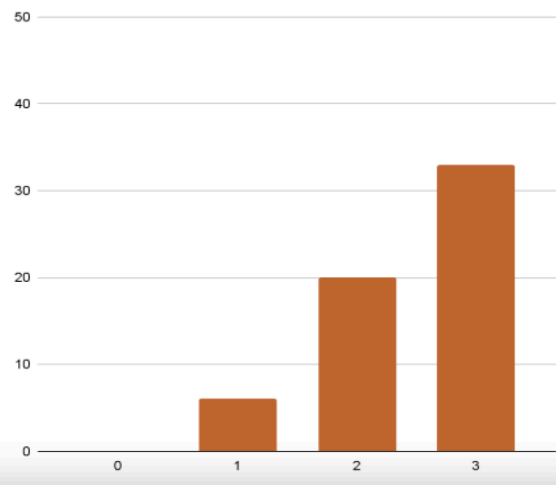


We also asked participants to gauge their familiarity with **local initiatives** around the three themes (peace within, peace with each other, and peace with the earth), prior to and after the event. The results indicate a significant increase of awareness.

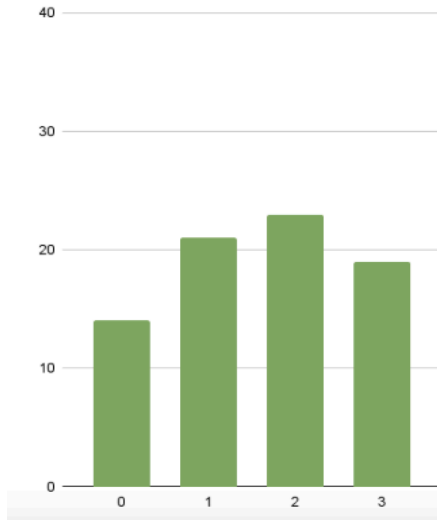
Pre: How would you rate your level of knowledge about specific local initiatives relating to Peace Within



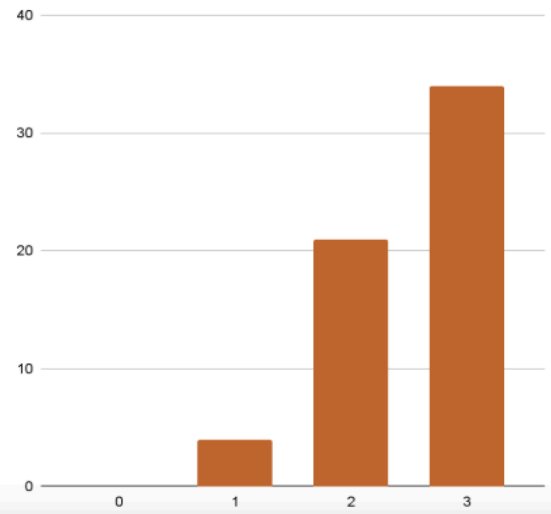
Post: After the events of today, how would you rate your level of knowledge about specific local initiatives relating to Peace Within



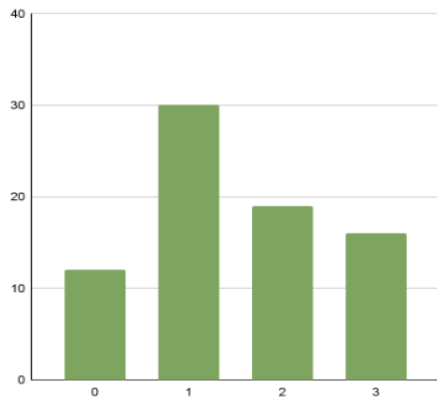
Pre: How would you rate your level of knowledge about specific local initiatives relating to Peace with Each Other



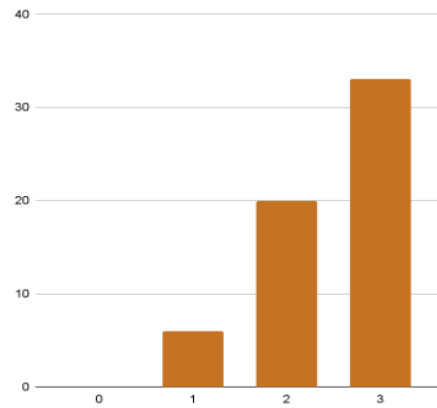
Post: After the events of today, how would you rate your level of knowledge about specific local initiatives relating to Peace with Each other



Pre: How would you rate your level of knowledge about non-local initiatives relating to Peace Within

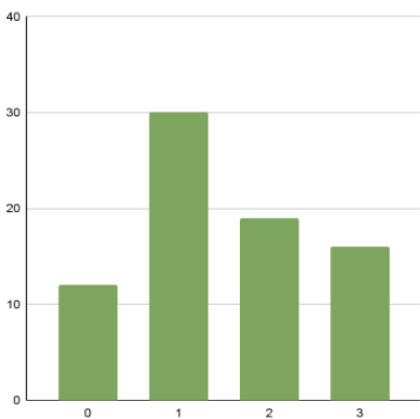


Post: How would you rate your level of knowledge about non-local initiatives relating to Peace Within

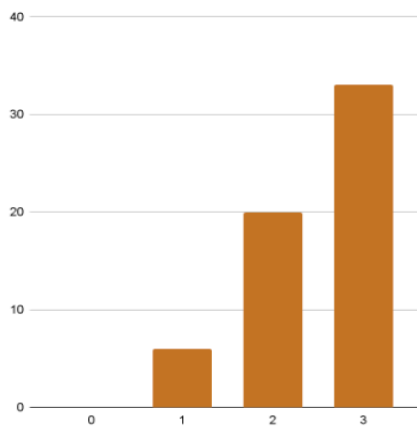


The questionnaire also asked about participants' familiarity with **non-local** peace efforts, prior to and following the event, with similar positive results:

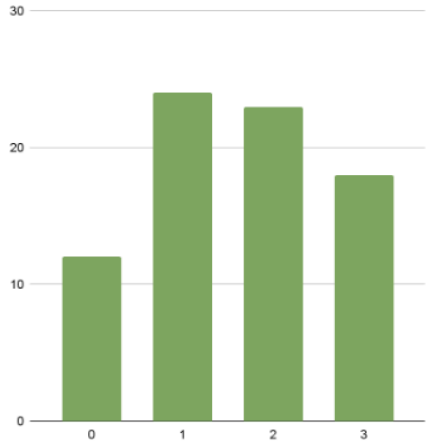
Pre: How would you rate your level of knowledge about non-local initiatives relating to Peace Within



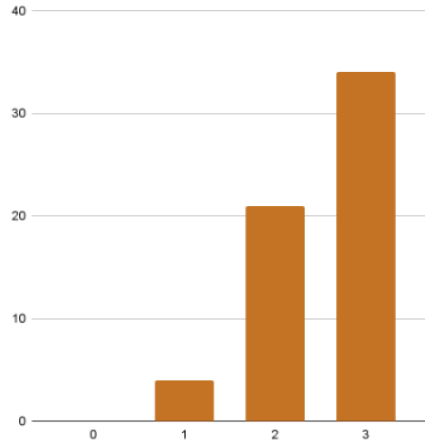
Post: How would you rate your level of knowledge about non-local initiatives relating to Peace Within



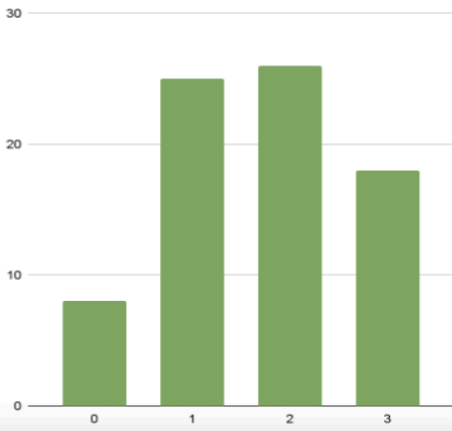
Pre: How would you rate your level of knowledge about non-local initiatives relating to Peace with Each other



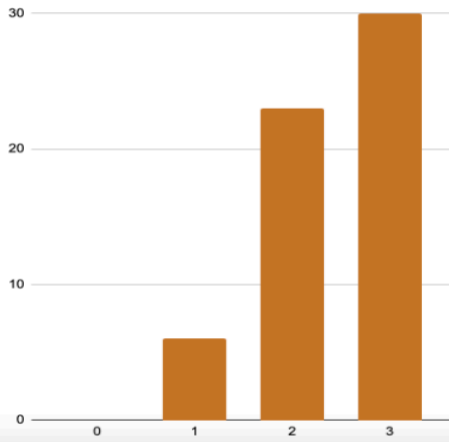
Post: How would you rate your level of knowledge about non-local initiatives relating to Peace with Each other



Pre: How would you rate your level of knowledge about non-local initiatives relating to Peace with the Earth



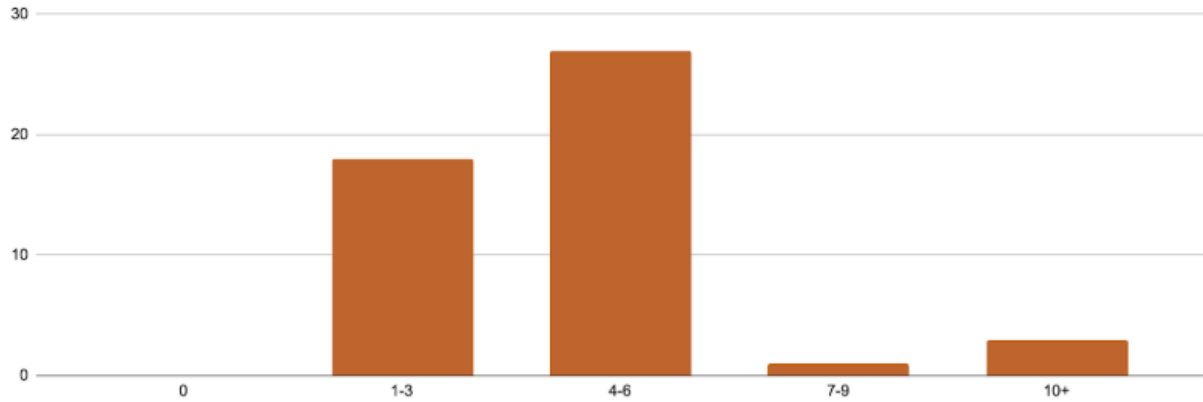
Post: How would you rate your level of knowledge about non-local initiatives relating to Peace with the Earth



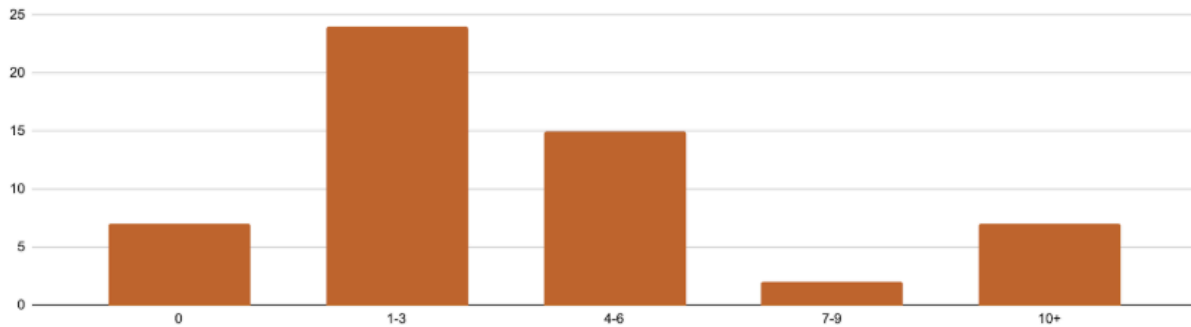
Detail, Vitex Singing Tree of Healing Relationship with Self, Others, Earth and the Divine

A major aim of the event was to strengthen our local "community of peace" by creating opportunities for participants to network with other individuals and organizations. For the most part, we successfully met this objective, by having participants move to different small groups for different segments of the program, and building into the program time to learn about local organizations which were tabling at the event.

At today's event I learned about ___ local organizations that I didn't know existed. [how many?]

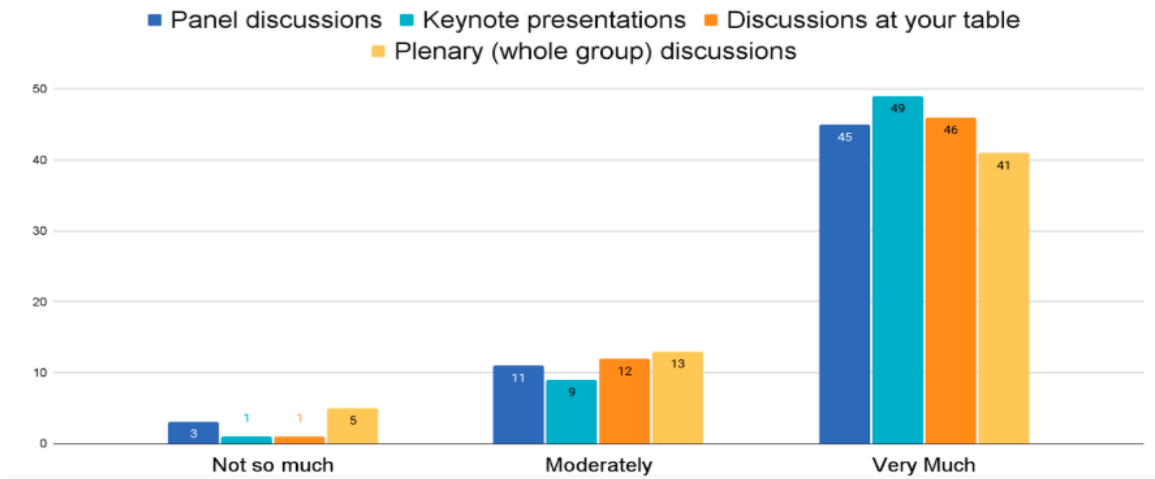


At today's event I exchanged contact information with ___ new people. [how many?]



While most respondents reported finding all of the program's elements to be useful and/or informative, they found the keynote presentations to be slightly more impactful.

On a scale of 0-3, how useful/informative did you find the following?

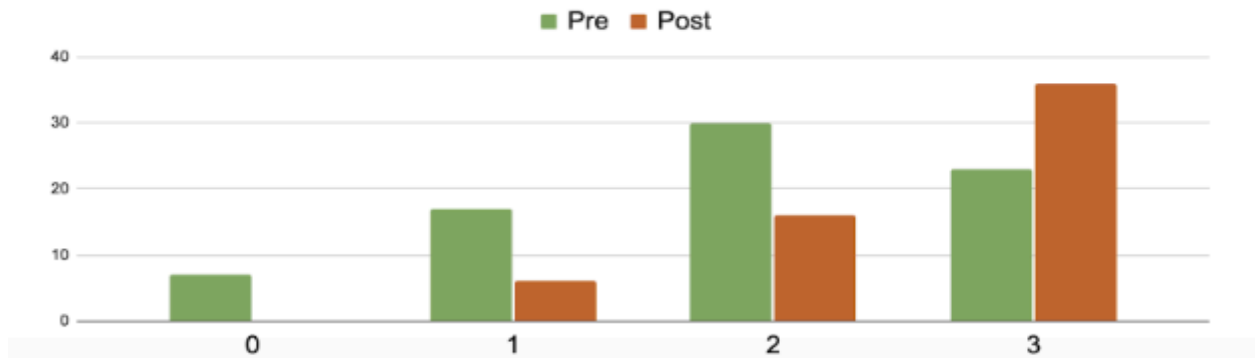


Given that a major focus of the event (and of UTC's overall mission) was **the role of artistic expression and creativity in peace-building**, we asked participants to gauge their awareness of such efforts, and also how effective they thought arts-based efforts could be in peace-building.

How would you rate your familiarity with arts-based efforts toward peace-building / peace education? (0 = Not very much 3 = Very much)

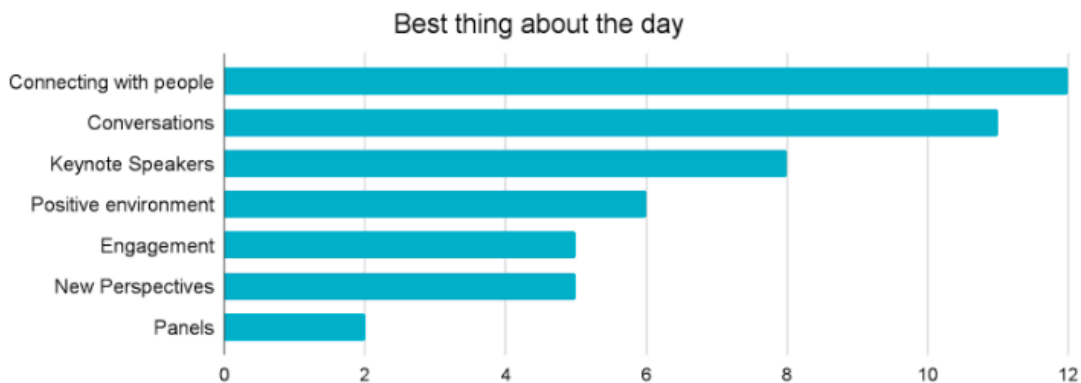


How would you rate the effectiveness of arts-based initiatives in peace-building / peace education? (0 = Not very much 3 = Very much)



While the results were generally positive, the team felt in retrospect that we could have emphasized this theme more clearly. Future events could include a dedicated keynote and/or panel discussion on the topic. Additionally, the hands-on/full-body activities related to creativity could be introduced or followed up with explicit analysis of art's role in peace-making.

When asked what struck them as the most positive aspect of the symposium, participants highlighted the opportunities for sharing and networking with others.



Detail, *Vitex Singing Tree of Healing Relationship with Self, Others, Earth and the Divine*
Moving Forward

Areas for which a dozen or more respondents indicated their intent to actively participate during the coming year included:

- conflict resolution & de-escalation practices
- non-violent communication
- immigrants' rights
- anti-poverty efforts
- reproductive rights
- LGBTQ civil rights
- anti-war activism
- restorative justice/prison reform
- reducing consumption/zero-waste initiatives
- renewable energy
- animal rights/vegetarianism/sustainable food systems
- conservation of wild spaces

Respondents also made a number of suggestions for improving next year's Symposium and bringing the format and logistics of the event more closely into line with IDP goals. Foremost among these were:

- spread the Symposium over two days, to allow for more time for participants to interact with the tabling organizations and with each other;
- aim for zero-waste, local, and vegetarian offerings for provided meals and snacks;
- incorporate bilingualism into the entire event, rather than segregating those participants who requested simultaneous interpretation;
- greater diversity of participants, to include people not already involved in peace-and-justice circles;
- improve outreach to minority communities;
- more direct participation by local religious leaders;
- share stories/results of actual research-based peace-building experiences;
- more emphasis on participant activities beyond listening to the presentations;
- conclude the event with a concrete plan of action.

The post-assessment also showed a clear interest among many respondents in staying connected with other participants and deepening their knowledge and practices around peace-building. The Symposium Planning Team is addressing this interest with a series of potluck dinners and trainings scheduled for the coming year. Discussions from these events will also provide input for the committee as we design the program for next year's Symposium (scheduled for Sept. 20-21, 2025).



Ruth Aparicio , Maria Cadillo, Beatriz Villegas, Beatriz Vera, Edward Schuldt



Detail, *Vitex Singing Tree* "And a child shall lead them."