

Social networking sites are great for staying in touch with friends—but **PATRICIA SMITH MELTON** wanted something more meaningful. So she created a virtual space where women can get advice and support for making the world a better place.

BY GAY NORTON
EDELMAN



Peace TOGETHER

PATRICIA SMITH MELTON LOVES A GOOD PARTY, but the one she gave in January 2002 was unique even for her. This was a gathering that practically demanded to be held, and its impact was nothing short of huge. “It was the week after 9/11,” says Patricia, 67. “Like everybody else, I was in a state of shock. Then one morning I woke up with a powerful gut feeling that I should bring together experts and women from several different cultures to ask what more we could all be doing to end the violence.” Having spent years as a mother, poet/playwright and dealer of vintage quilts, she had learned that her intuition should never be ignored. “I believe that the spirit is a muscle that has to be exercised,” she explains.





The first step was deciding whom to invite. She started with two names in her address book and spent the next several weeks e-mailing, faxing, calling and cajoling candidates who'd be willing to travel thousands of miles for a weekend of thinking, probing and discussing. One by one, six women accepted. Five came together at Patricia's Vienna, Virginia, home, despite a heavy snowstorm. They were, Patricia says, "women whose voices of passion are known to the world": Susan Collin Marks, executive vice president of Search for Common Ground; Barbara Marx Hubbard of the Foundation for Conscious Evolution; author Isabel Allende; Fatima Gailani, head of the Red Crescent of Afghanistan; and Azizah Y. al-Hibri, Ph.D., founder of Muslim Lawyers for Human Rights. The sixth, Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian politician and peace negotiator, joined in by phone. "As we talked around my rented conference table," Patricia says, "I had a revelation. Men may be the news makers, but women are the ones orga-

nizing on the ground, doing the micro-financing, helping HIV orphans, fighting violence. Women's work is like oxygen. It's taken for granted."

The first day, someone lit a candle and the group began debating, "What is peace, and how can women be empowered to create it?" As the discussion deepened the bonds between the women grew, and when it was time to finish they felt it was vital not only to keep the dialogue going but also to open it up to the world. The result was the nonprofit organization Peace X Peace (pronounced "Peace by Peace"). After her guests left Patricia set up her desk on the spot where the conference table had stood and promised herself she'd do eight follow-up actions a day. She kept her commitment by phoning people to brainstorm, investigating the legalities of forming a nonprofit and researching the world's problem areas. It quickly became clear, she says: "I had to go big, big picture, and that there had to be a way to use the exploding new digital media."

The result was Peace X Peace's free

Woman to Woman

Peace X Peace members share their experiences.



LESLIE ELLORIN, 38,
*Mount Shasta,
California*

→ **Reaching Out** "Our circle connected with a group of women in

Morocco who were living in the local dump, sorting through trash to make a living. They said their husbands were shepherds with no sheep, and they were rug makers with no wool. So we created the Rugs to Riches program to get the men some sheep and the women supplies to start weaving the wool."

→ **My Take** "I respect women, and myself, in a whole new way because I see how powerful women are in this world. I used to define success only as having a great job, and now I know I have success as a wife, mother and neighbor."



DONNA BARBER, 42,
Ladysmith, Wisconsin

→ **Reaching Out** "I work with the Liberian government to create and fund foster homes for

special-needs kids who would otherwise languish in hospital beds. The kids are held, fed and educated, and the foster mother has a source of income."

→ **My Take** "This work gives me such a global perspective. It's so easy to give \$5 to a charity and say, 'There you go.' But Peace X Peace is teaching me how America's decisions affect other people. There's so much more we could be doing. The economy is hard on us, but it's even harder on families in developing countries."



MARES HIRCHERT,
63, Hartland, Michigan

→ **Reaching Out** "The U.S. members of my circle arranged for Professor Naba Hamid from the

University of Baghdad, also a member, to take a six-city tour of the U.S. in 2005 and again in 2007. She shared little-known details about what it's like to live in a war zone."

→ **My Take** "With Peace X Peace I have instant support when I click 'Connect'. Now I'm working with the organization to save a kindergarten in the Palestinian town of Al Aqaba, in the West Bank."

international social networking website (peacepeace.org), where women who want to make a difference in their communities can receive support from others. "There are lots of organizations that distribute food, offer medical care and build wells," says Patricia. "But that aid, worthy as it is, is from the top down. What was missing was a way for women at the grassroots level to figure out what they need and how to get it." The site quickly blossomed and now connects more than 20,000 members in more than 100 countries.

People log on to read about members' lives, form friendships, get information about important issues and join in a weekly activity designed to build community spirit. Examples of past ideas: taking the first step to resolve a personal conflict in your life; thanking a veteran; spending time outdoors with your family; sharing the "dating bill of rights" with a teenager; learning more about the indigenous peoples in your country. Every task is designed to promote international peace by building on women's strengths.

But the most powerful feature of the site, and of Peace X Peace, is the "circles," groups of women, ranging from a few to hundreds, that band together to resolve problems. Circles may meet in person, online or both, and very often will pair up with a group with similar interests in another country. Some accomplishments: Ugandan women sell handmade jewelry to their U.S. circle and re-invest profits in their community; U.S. women co-invest with their circle in Kenya, founding and operating a hostel for visitors that helps the local economy; members in Egypt receive health information not available in their own country from a sister group



Patricia Smith Melton wanted something tangible to represent her organization. So Peace X Peace published *Sixty Years, Sixty Voices*, featuring

interviews and photographs of Israeli and Palestinian women. The book documents the efforts and successes of women in one of the world's most troubled areas. Find more info at peacexpeace.org.

Woman to Woman (continued)



JOANNE COLLENS, 58,
Anchorage, Alaska

➔ **Reaching Out** "After four years connecting with a Peace X Peace circle in Mubende, Uganda, I pulled

together \$5,000 from sponsors and spent a month there. I brought gift baskets and mosquito nets, but more than that, I talked my head off, cried with them and showed them I'm not the American you see in the movies. 'You are a good mother,' they told me. They have so little—not even spice for their food—but they are all so there for each other."

➔ **My Take** "My trip took me back to the basics, which prepared me for life when I got home. My 21-year-old son, Jesse, was severely injured in a motorcycle accident. Opening myself up to the Uganda experience gave me a foundation of courage to be there for him."



LISA BANTZ, 37,
West Alexandria, Ohio

➔ **Reaching Out** "I've made a close friend, Chantal, a Rwandan mom of three and survivor of the

massacres. She and I e-mail weekly. We have a photo of her family in our home—she has three kids, I have two—and she has our portrait in her home. Chantal is part of a women's group that makes baskets. I'm trying to help her find a way to sell them in the U.S."

➔ **My Take** "Our friendship gives me hope that peace is possible, because when you have that personal bond with someone whose life experiences are so completely different from yours, but you still have shared interests, goals and worries, that makes the hope for the world much more real."

in California; Israeli and Palestinian circles that include U.S. women cohost cultural exchange events; U.S. circles facilitate scholarships so women from Afghanistan, Mali and other countries can study in the U.S.

Patricia readily admits that while she had the vision, she depended on help from others to make it happen. Her husband, William, 67, a venture capitalist, operated behind the scenes, providing funds and acting as a sounding board. Patricia's daughter, Karen Celia Fox, 40, assisted with the website and says "I'm at all the fundraisers and awards ceremonies." The most recent event was Peace X Peace's first "Women, Power and Peace Awards," where four members were honored for their work. Watching and listening, Karen says, brought home an important insight. "Every one of the women talked about how she just did her little thing and how what the others had done was so much bigger. I realized peace actions always seem grander when other people do them. Yet it really is the small things that make a difference."

Peace X Peace now has six full-time employees in its Washington, D.C., headquarters and many more volunteers. These days Patricia spends most of her time fundraising—the highly interactive site is expensive to maintain. She's passionate and proud about what members are doing. "Peace X Peace doesn't create programs," she says. "The members themselves do that. We create connections." ●

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