PeaceJam expands its global outreach in a big way

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Patricia Calhoun | June 19, 2014 | 4:00am

Their story is more fantastic than anything that screened during the Monte Carlo Film Festival last week, a more unlikely saga than even the fairy-tale life of Grace Kelly, who started the festival in Monaco more than five decades ago, after the Hollywood star had married Prince Rainier, the ruler of that tiny nation, and been transformed into Princess Grace.

On Saturday, June 7, Dawn Engle and Ivan Suvanjieff, "two factory kids from Detroit," were sitting in the ornate festival theater with Prince Albert, the son of the late Prince Rainier and Prince Grace; other assorted members of European royalty; and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize winner honored for his efforts to end apartheid. They were all there for the world premiere of *Children of the Light*, a documentary devoted to Tutu that's the second in the Nobel Legacy series produced by PeaceJam, Suvanjieff's brainchild birthed more than two decades ago during Denver's so-called Summer of Violence.

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Back then, Suvanjieff was a musician and an artist working as a car parker and, for 87 days (until right before his probationary period ended), the society columnist for the *Rocky Mountain News*. Now here he was, sitting with international society — and wearing a Calvin Klein suit, rather than his customary punk-rock T-shirt. Engle was dressed up as well. "I'm 57 years old, and I just bought a ball gown for the first time in my life," laughs Engle, who'd gone shopping with her mother at Cherry Creek Shopping Center to find appropriate attire for Monte Carlo. At a ceremony in which Tutu had been knighted two days earlier, he'd poked fun at Suvanjieff's formal outfit. Suvanjieff hadn't even worn a suit when the archbishop had married him and Engle in 2000.

By then, the two had been together for more than a decade — in work and in life. Engle was the youngest women ever appointed to serve as chief of staff to a U.S. Senator — a Republican from Wisconsin — when she learned of the human-rights violations in Tibet. "This is really wrong," she remembers thinking, and in 1991 she co-founded the Colorado Friends of Tibet. Her work for that cause led her to Naropa University, the Buddhist-inspired Boulder institution, where she met Suvanjieff. In 1993, he'd been living on the edge of Highland — the area that would one day become LoHi but was then just a bad part of town where artists could afford cheap lofts — when it seemed like the city was exploding with gang violence. Talking with some neighborhood kids, he discovered that while none of them
knew anything about politics — or cared about politics — they'd all heard about Desmond Tutu and other Nobel winners. That gave Suvanjieff the idea of putting kids together with Nobel laureates — living examples of how anyone could work for peace, could make a difference. But while he was long on ideas, Suvanjieff was short of both cash and connections. Through Engle, though, they actually had a route to the Dalai Lama. They scraped together enough money to go pitch him on the idea of PeaceJam, then enlisted Tutu in the cause.

Today, thirteen Nobel Peace Prize winners serve on PeaceJam's board, strategizing with Engle and Suvanjieff about the organization's initiative, working with youth at events around the world. (Suvanjieff and Engle themselves have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, more than once.)

Before the debut of his film, Tutu had spent two hours with teens from Monaco, Italy and France in a PeaceJam program, listening to their ideas on how they could improve the world and fight for social justice. For the "very privileged" kids of this very wealthy country, it was an eye-opener, says Engle. "They said that Monaco is known for three things: beautiful women, beautiful cars, beautiful yachts. Social justice just isn't a thing they do there." But they do now. Most of the participants were at the theater that night with their families to honor Tutu, and "the kids were on fire," she recalls, shouting the PeaceJam chant: "When you say 'Peace,' I say 'Jam.' PeaceJAM. PeaceJAM." The rowdy cheer rang through the elegant auditorium.

"This is cool," Prince Albert marveled.

The Prince told them that he's interested in expanding the PeaceJam program throughout his country's educational curriculum. And he's already signed on to host the next film in the Nobel Legacy series, The River of Hope, honoring Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, at next year's festival. The Archbishop of Monaco has hopes of getting the Pope to the premiere, since he's a friend of that Nobel.

But there's a lot to do before then.

The week before they went to Monte Carlo, their excellent adventure had taken Engle and Suvanjieff to New York City, where they opened the Social Innovation Summit at the United Nations and formally introduced PeaceJam's Billion Acts of Peace Initiative, designed to inspire "one billion high-quality projects by the end of 2019...that tackle the toughest issues facing humanity." And then they rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange in a ceremony broadcast live on giant billboards in Times Square — they got to see themselves stretched several stories high — that will continue to advertise the global peace initiative all month.
That initiative was first proposed in 2006, when PeaceJam held its tenth anniversary in Denver, bringing ten Nobel laureates to the city. But spectacular as that celebration was, there were rough times ahead. The recession hit PeaceJam hard: Engle and Suvanjieff, who'd been living above the PeaceJam office in Arvada, wound up selling the historic building (it had been home to the first mayor of Arvada) and cutting their already paltry salaries. But out of adversity came advantage: Thanks to the City of Arvada, PeaceJam is now housed in a Victorian building in a local park. And Engle and Suvanjieff have their own place in Idledale, where they can find respite from the world stage.

They'll be back on that stage again on September 21, the International Day of Peace, when new partner Google will make it possible for one billion households to see *Children of the Light* — for free — and get inspired to go out and commit an act of peace. (In the meantime, you can order it for just 99 cents on Google Play.) That's a much more massive rollout than the first film in the Nobel Legacy series, *Mayan Renaissance*, on Rigoberta Menchu Tum, had, and definitely more distinguished than the debut of its forerunner, *The Mayan Prophecy*, a movie debunking myths of the Mayan calendar that first aired on westword.com back in December 2012. Over the past year, PeaceJam has picked up some impressive partners, including Wells Fargo and Hill & Knowlton in addition to Google.

Engle and Suvanjieff are back in Idledale now, unpacking, regrouping, preparing for the next chapter in their amazing story. They have a PeaceJam board meeting in New York later this month; they need to check in with the Nobels; they have more events to plan. "You'd better be in for the long haul," says Suvanjieff.

"We're not going to wait," says Engle. "Governments can't do it. Time's running out. It's up to the people to bring peace."

**Patricia Calhoun** co-founded *Westword* in 1977; she's been the editor ever since. She's a regular on the weekly CPT12 roundtable *Colorado Inside Out*, played a real journalist in John Sayles's *Silver City*, once interviewed President Bill Clinton while wearing flip-flops, and has been honored with numerous national awards for her columns and feature-writing.

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