

Paper cranes fly for peace 62 years after Hiroshima Pupils continue bomb victim's project

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By Tania deLuzuriaga, Globe Staff | November 20, 2007

For the fourth-graders at the Joseph P. Tynan Elementary School, Japan is a faraway place, and World War II is something that happened before most of their grandparents were born. But the war has come home to them through the story of a young Japanese girl whose life was cut short by the effects of the atomic bomb dropped on her city 62 years ago.

For the past several weeks the 48 pupils have been making origami cranes, an expression of peace inspired by the novel "Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes," by Eleanor Coerr. Yesterday, they loaded their 1,000 multicolored paper birds and haikus about peace into a blue painted box addressed to Hiroshima. They hope their collection will be displayed at the Children's Peace Monument in that city.

"We were amazed and shocked to hear about the many lives that were lost at the time of the bombings" of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, said a letter that the class enclosed in the package. "We have never witnessed such devastation, and we hope and pray we never will."

The novel is based on the story of Sadako Sasaki, who was 2 years old when the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima, just a mile from her home. Ten years later, she was diagnosed with leukemia as a result of her radiation exposure. While in the hospital, Sadako began folding paper cranes in hope that if she made 1,000, the gods would grant her wish to get better. She died on Oct. 25, 1955, having made more than 1,300 paper cranes.

"She couldn't do anything but lie in bed and make paper cranes," said Jenaya Hobson, 9.

The story has inspired dozens of books, several musicals, and films.

After her death, a memorial was erected in Hiroshima, dedicated to her and all the children who died as a result of the atomic bomb. The memorial, which features a statue of her holding a golden origami crane, was unveiled in 1958. Today, people around the world send origami cranes to Hiroshima as a symbol of peace.

"I think people are going to appreciate it," said Alexandra Pizarro, 9. "I think they'll like what we did for Sadako."

"If we do something for them, they'll like us," said Katharine Doolin, 10. "We were at war with Japan, and this is something peaceful we can do for them."

After reading the story of Sadako, the pupils wrote haiku about peace, helping each other come up with the words to fit the strict five-seven-five syllable structure. Then, they set about making paper cranes, even taking home sheets of paper to make cranes on weekends.

"We figured that added up to 20 cranes per person, including the teachers," said Phyllis Simon, one of Tynan's fourth-grade teachers. "It doesn't sound like a lot, but -"

The pupils like to rattle off the number of cranes they made, how long it took, and how many they messed up. They argue about the proper methods and give each other hints for making the best cranes possible.

"You have to crease the paper real good," said Cheyanne Toney, 10. "At the beginning, I didn't know how to do it; I used to get frustrated."

Teachers at Tynan came up with the idea for the cranes, but even they were surprised at how the lesson resonated with their pupils.

"I didn't think the children would feel that deeply about a story," principal Carlene Schavis said, adding that some of the pupils cried when they got to the end of the book and found out that Sadako had died.

And yet, the wish for peace hits close to home for these pupils, most of whom live in South Boston and Dorchester.

"Some of them have had to leave their neighborhoods because of violence and shootings," Schavis said.

The wish is evident in the haikus the pupils wrote after reading the book.

"No more guns in hands/no more wars in the giant world/peaceful down the street," fourth grader Eric Gomez wrote.

Another, by James Mazzone reads, "Some people are nice/some people can be very bad/celebrate the good."

The experience is one Simon hopes stays with her pupils long after they have left Tynan.

"There are certain things I remember from when I was in school that have followed me throughout life," she said. "I want them to learn compassion and carry peace."