A pace for peace / Eye-opening game offers lessons in real-world injustices

BARBARA KARKAVI Staff

TUE 11/11/2003 Houston Chronicle, Section Houston, Page 01, 2 STAR Edition

GEORGE Lyons was confused. All his life he had been a law-abiding citizen. Now he found himself handcuffed and on the way to jail. His offense: smiling too much.

In another corner of the small village she and Lyons were visiting, Jan Steinway was figuring out whether to buy health insurance or food. She had a limited amount of money and was unsure about her decision.

Welcome to Marcia Uddoh's peace and justice camp - a game that re-creates social systems found in the real world. Though at first glance it seems like adult Monopoly, Uddoh's game has a very different purpose.

"Unifying and bringing people together is the key," she said. "I'm trying to get people of different ethnic groups, faiths, economic levels and religions to work together and see that they can change the `game' and the world. We need a vision for peace. How will we have a road map for that if we can't come together as a group?"

The game begins as Uddoh - dressed in a black suit and a jaunty white hat - welcomes her 25 passengers to the fictional Virgin Peace Airways. The short trip takes them from the real world to Uddoh's fantasy world, the Village Virgen de Guadalupe.

As her players soon find out, there's a lot of similarity between the two. The game, say those who have played it, is a metaphor for modern life.

"I had a hard time getting out of jail," Lyons complained. "And then I was unable to pay my taxes."

Uddoh nodded and urged discussion. Isn't that how it is sometimes in the real world? she asked.

"This game has become my life's work," said Uddoh, 38, who grew up in New York and has lived in Houston for almost four years. Uddoh has taught at the University of Houston and Houston Community College, though her goal is to work on the game and other peace and justice issues full time.

"The game will continue to evolve as politics change and the world's needs and the players' needs change," she said.

Her peace and justice game has gone through a number of changes already, including its name - it's currently called the St. John's Peace Camp Village Virgen de Guadalupe. Uddoh is constantly working to make it better and more relevant.

Reactions from players, such as the Rev. Mark Thibodeaux of Strake Jesuit Academy, show that she has done just that.

"We used the peace camp for the first time on our junior-class retreat, and it was fantastic, " Thibodeaux said. "We got tremendous results from the students. Both the game and Marcia herself are extremely inspiring. Her whole personality exudes the peace she talks about."

Uddoh is the daughter of a Jamaican mother and a Nigerian father, who was a doctor. She attended the United Nations International School in New York City with students from all over the world. From the beginning, Uddoh felt caught between two worlds - the poor Harlem neighborhood she grew up in and that of the prosperous, globe-trotting students with whom she attended school. Though her dad was a doctor, he chose to live and work in the inner city.

After graduating from Oberlin College, Uddoh became involved in a relationship with a wealthy friend from her old school. They traveled around the world, until Uddoh became disillusioned with the lifestyle.

"I got sick and depressed," she said. "While I was sick I had this vision, this idea of using art as a way to create peace."

For a few years Uddoh operated an art gallery and took homeless women to see art at New York's Metropolitan Museum. She eventually closed the gallery and earned a graduate degree in social work at Columbia University in an attempt to connect art and spirituality.

In the early '90s she was sent by her church to work with children in a poor neighborhood in Kingston, Jamaica. First she used art, then theater and finally the beginnings of her peace and justice game.

"After many months, it helped them begin to get the idea of community," she said. "First, they painted a peace mural. They started to build a small house, nothing fancy, but they had indoor plumbing. They saw the power of working as a community."

Uddoh went on to get her doctorate in art education at Florida State University. The degree was awarded in 1998, and her thesis was based on the game's development and its effect on different populations.

On a recent Saturday, Uddoh's game was played by a group of adults. The large auditorium at St. Dominic's Center was transformed into a small village. Tables and screens were set up to indicate various businesses - including real estate and finance, a mayor's office, a tax office, a country club, an art gallery, a community activist center, a religious institution and a prison.

Uddoh and several assistants welcomed the players to a group of chairs set up to simulate the inside of an airplane. As flight attendant, Uddoh explained the rules of the intense two-hour game.

"This is a competitive game," Uddoh stressed. "But it's cooperative within your family system."

Ideally, families have four players, she explained. While one family member runs a business, the others are out in the village playing the game.

The game is played in three rounds. During each round, families must buy a house, pay their taxes and make an investment.

Before they step off the plane, each family is given a packet. It contains $2,000 in play money, 26 tickets they must get rid of before the end of the game and a name tag with the shape of a triangle, circle or square.

Before the group rushes off to play, Uddoh cautions them.

"In this world we are going to there are a couple of rules," she said. "You are not allowed to smile or laugh, look people in the eye or sit down. If you do, you will go to jail. I understand that you can buy those privileges at the bank."

The players soon find out that the game - as life often can be - is stacked against them. Triangles represent the elite level of society and get more privileges, circles are the middle class, with squares at the bottom of the heap.

As triangle families run businesses, buy houses and pay their taxes, circles and squares face more obstacles. Sometimes squares don't have enough money to buy a house or pay taxes. Squares and circles then have to look for jobs to make more money for taxes, but can't find jobs that pay well enough.

And so the rat race continues.

Before the game starts, Uddoh tells the players that the rules of the game can be changed. To do that, they must go to the art gallery and get "clue" cards.

In the heat of the game, though, very few players remember that, as they busily buy houses, pay their taxes and behave like good citizens.

Even elite triangles can get frustrated.

"We ended up with a lot of money. In every round we tried to do one community activist thing or peace thing," said Bridget Bludau. "But we always ran out of time."

Joan Denkler sat at the community activist table and found it to be an education in real life.

"People didn't realize how much potential there was to change the situation through community activity," Denkler said. "I was there to energize and help them make changes, but everyone was too busy trying to pay their taxes and buy houses. It's too much like real life; we're all too busy."

As players are busily plunging into the last round, a card is passed from one player to another, telling them they have just died. All must stop what they are doing and go straight to the cemetery.

"I had all this money and I got the death card, so I threw it all at the community activist," said Bludau. "I guess that was kind of like my will."

"We are all so busy," Uddoh agreed. "We don't have enough time, or we don't have enough money to enjoy life. But how much do we need? And sometimes we do things in reverse order. We spend our time in search of money and lose our time doing that. We forget to look at the beauty around us and we forget that the system can be changed."