

B Y J A N J O H N S O N

WHY CAN'T WE ALL GET ALONG?

What do you see yourself doing to make peace?

Kathy couldn't believe what she was seeing. "I was sitting in the school office waiting for a friend to make a phone call when my English teacher stumbled through the door with Dan—a ninth grader—leaning on her shoulder. There was a lot of blood on his T-shirt, and someone said he'd been stabbed with a knife by a kid named Pete.

"At school the next day there were TV cameras and newspaper people," continues Kathy. "It turned out that Dan died at the hospital—probably at the same time I was walking home from school. I was shocked. From what I knew of Dan and Pete, they weren't bad kids. They were like everyone else. Dan was the best pitcher on our baseball team, and Pete was a quiet Hispanic kid who never bothered anyone.

"Later I learned that Dan had been drunk at school that day—that surprised me—and he'd been picking on Pete (who was half his size) all year. When Dan had leaned forward to punch Pete, Pete pulled out a knife and pushed it forward. Pete's friend had given him the knife just a few minutes before it happened."

Kathy lives in a quiet midsize city where for two years before

the stabbing there had been no murders. "Nothing ever happens here," she continued. "How could someone my age be dead and another one be going to prison? Is this a bad movie?" She wondered to herself, *What if I had been standing there? Could I have helped? Am I the kind of person who could help settle a tense situation?*

What *can* teens do about violence? Acting like Terminator or Rambo doesn't work in real life, because ideas like "Make my day!" and "Only the strong survive!" don't solve anything; they only make people angrier. Most people are worried about protecting themselves, and that's important, but is there anything I can do to make a difference?

Any teen who wants to make a difference will find a way. Kids listen to other kids more than they listen to adults. A word, a gesture, even a joke by you at the right time, can make a big difference to help lighten the situation.

Start by deciding that you won't be shocked by violence. One Los Angeles kid told his youth counselor, "Look, man, you gotta be prepared. Violence is a part of life." At first that sounded depressing to the counselor, but then he figured out that it is

important to be aware. If you live in Kansas, you understand how to take shelter from a tornado. This is the same kind of thing.

Here are some other ideas:

• IMAGINE WHAT YOUR OWN PEACEMAKING STYLE WOULD LOOK LIKE.

If you got caught in a tense situation, what do you see yourself doing that could help make peace:

- making a joke to break the tension?
- distracting people, maybe asking, "Hey! Where'd you get that cool jacket?"
- offering a handshake to promise peace?
- saying you understand how the other guy feels: "No wonder he's mad"?

Your style of response will match who you are. Sixteen-year-old Jordan has five little brothers and sisters, and so his style is direct. Once when a scuffle started in the hallway at school between a White kid and an African-American kid, Jordan jumped in and said, "What's the problem?" One kid explained that the other kid had bumped into him and made him drop his books. The other retorted, "It was an accident." Jordan looked from one to the other and said, "I've got friends on both sides, and I don't want anyone to get hurt. Color makes no difference to me. So what's the big deal?" Some of the kids, echoing his words, said, "Yeah, what's the big deal?" and the crowd scattered.

• LOOK AT THE SITUATION FROM EVERYBODY'S PERSPECTIVE.

In a tense situation, no one is thinking about how the other person feels. Ask yourself, *Why is*

• Have you let TV and movies convince you that weapons will solve problems? They don't.

