

Former Ashlander hopes to help ease tensions between U.S., North Korea

By John Darling For the Tidings

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Former Ashlander and civil rights lawyer Eric Sirotkin is forming a cadre of progressive lawyers to help create relationships, mediation and constructive dialogue between conflicting parties on an international level.

Sirotkin, who practices law in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has been to North Korea four times and says he's available to go back to teach the principles of ubuntu (humanity toward others) that he learned working with Nelson Mandela on the Peace and Reconciliation Project following the end of apartheid in South Africa.

He and the other lawyers will be organizing in August in Washington, D.C. They are working back channels in Washington, trying to interest Trump administration officials in ubuntu rather than "blustering and flexing muscles" following North Korea's recent nuclear and missile tests. Koreans will attend the meeting, he says.

His recently published book, "Witness: A Lawyer's Journey from Litigation to Liberation," details his 12 steps toward peace, understanding and cooperation, one of which is to "let go of the rope" if you are in a tug-of-war.

Sirotkin will speak and read from his book at 6 p.m. Sunday, July 23, at the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission office at 33 N. First St., Ashland.

He was last in North Korea in 2012.

"I came back feeling our work is in Washington, organizing," he says. "If a group of us could break the impasse and get involved, I'm more than willing to approach them (officials in both North and South Korea and in the Trump

administration). ... I may go to South Korea and show support for their new president.”

Sirotkin says, because of the recent threat of nuclear weapons in Pyongyang, “It’s important we break down the ‘us vs. them’ in international affairs, as well as in our individual lives. It’s about being an active witness in the world, instead of a passive victim of circumstances. There are always ways we can connect with one another that are peaceful.”

Steve Scholl of White Cloud Press in Ashland, publisher of Sirotkin’s book, says, “He is a bit like a true-life Forest Gump in that he has been at the heart of major social and political events time and again. He has worked with Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and been a key witness to the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His work on North and South Korean peace and reunification is very timely.”

Sirotkin says he has broached the ubuntu philosophy in the past to officials in the State Department and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as well as to the People’s Assembly in North Korea and its Blue House, which is similar to the White House.

“You can’t talk about human rights and nuclear issues unless you establish relations and have some exchange,” he says. “North Korea is actively calling for a dialogue and engagement. The U.S. should not be old school and threaten the use of nukes. War is not an option. ... If we bomb them or try to take out their missiles, thousands would immediately die in South Korea from their missiles.”

Especially in tense times, as is the case now between the U.S. and North Korea, he says, it’s vital for the United States to recognize North Korea and get an embassy on the ground, adding he’s “angry and embarrassed” that U.S. diplomats did not intercede in the imprisonment and death of American Otto Warmbier.

Warmbier was a University of Virginia student who was detained in North Korea for nearly a year and a half before being sent home in a coma in June. He died days later.

The model for adversaries often is noncommunication and conflict, but Sirotkin says, “I have ways to apply this in adverse situations, these principles in South Africa of ubuntu, the heart of which is, ‘What I do to you, I do to myself.’ We are

interconnected, not separate. We share in the common pain and recognize the need for peace. The same is true on the national level.”

His website is ericsirotkin.com.

— *Read Ashland freelance writer John Darling at jdarling@jeffnet.org.*



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