



## We are the flame

By Irene Kai, Monday, September 9, 2019

This year is the 400th anniversary of the first slave ship arriving in America.

That was not long after the British colonized America in 1607 and began the destruction of the Native American way of life. It is also 200 years since the first wave of Chinese immigrants came to the U.S. to build the railroad as laborers. All lived in servitude under the laws crafted by white slave owners creating a culture of oppression, exploitation and aggression.

We Americans took our daily habits as a way of life, and it was passed down through generations and became our collective consciousness. After generations of multicultural Americans living under the existing laws, the culture has not changed much. Race still plays a big part of how we view each other as Americans.

We live in a culture of anxiety and rage given our national narrative of intimidation, aggression and dehumanization. We developed habits of labeling "the others" with derogatory terms and find like-minded people to create a tribe to do battle with the enemies, real or imaginary.

Ashland is a progressive community. Most people are conscious of the words of compassion, inclusivity and respect, and speak it freely, but how does that translate into action? It is difficult to dispel the collective consciousness of 400 years of a way of life. Most Americans are not willing or conscious to make room for cultural differences, whether it is the difference in race, economic class, religion, politics or sexual orientation. We certainly have the challenge of disagreements in our community, but how many of us take the time to have a conversation with the person we disagree with? How many of us treat them as a person and with respect instead of hurling insults and dehumanizing the perceived enemy?

We know very well the current culture we live in, and to make it different, we must change the narrative. My partner David Wick and I co-founded the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. Our vision is to facilitate our city to change the mindset of a culture of denial to the culture of peace. What does it take? We built trusted relationships with our community, city and state

leaders. We also brought the World Peace Flame to Ashland, the iconic symbol of Unity. We engaged the Ashland Middle School children to be Flame Keepers to refill the oil lamp with recycled biomass oil. The World Peace Flame is eternal. The Flame Keepers are perpetual.

The children start with the mindset of practicing peace, they are our future. In March, we were invited to present our work in Ashland to the United Nations. Our work in Ashland caught the attention of Anwarul Chowdhury, founder of the Global Movement for the Culture of Peace. He asked to be invited to Ashland to learn firsthand from our community, local and state leaders on how their personal commitment to foster the well-being for all leads to systemic change.

David and I organized the Ashland Global Peace Conference on the fourth anniversary of the founding of ACPC, Sept. 21. We are offering our community the exciting and rare opportunity to be with many of our leaders in the same room and have a chance to experience their sharing of the commitment of uplifting our community with each other, the community, the United Nations and the U.S. Institute of Peace. The conference theme, You Are the Flame, illustrates how personal commitment can lead to systemic change. When we change, everything changes around us. We are the Flame.

Chowdhury, former undersecretary general and high representative of the United Nations, will be our keynote speaker. Other speakers include Dr. David Yang, vice president, United States Institute of Peace; Sen. Jeff Golden; Rep. Pam Marsh; Tighe O'Meara, Ashland chief of police; Sheila Clough, CEO of Asante; Steven Saslow, CEO of Rosebud Media; and Linda Schott, president of SOU. For the complete list of speakers, see our website.

The Ashland Global Peace Conference will be held at the Ashland Hills Hotel and Suites. For tickets and more information, see [www.ashlandglobalpeaceconference.com](http://www.ashlandglobalpeaceconference.com).

*Irene Kai is the co-founder of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission.*