



WHITAKER PEACE & DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Newsletter Summer 2026



**FOREWORD FROM WPD'S
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**



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JUST AROUND
THE CORNER**



Foreword

Caroline Descombris

WPDJ Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Reflecting on the past several months, I am reminded that meaningful peacebuilding begins with listening: understanding what communities need, recognizing how those needs are changing, and ensuring that our work continues to evolve alongside them.

Throughout this edition, you will see how this power of listening manifests itself across WPDJ's programs around the world. In Uganda's Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, we are adapting our programming to better support newly arrived refugees from Sudan, including addressing linguistic and cultural barriers. In South Sudan, we continue to expand access to education, livelihoods, and peacebuilding opportunities. And in France, our work across Seine-Saint-Denis continues to grow, creating new pathways to professional growth and financial autonomy.

You will meet some of the people at the heart of our work. Claudia and Awatif, for example, whose journeys are powerful reminders of what can happen when people are given the opportunity to shape their own futures.

This summer has also confirmed the importance of partnership. From renewed collaboration in Uganda to new initiatives in South Africa and Europe, our partners allow us to continue serving our communities.

As we look ahead, we are excited to bring our global community together on September 25 for our 2026 Gala, *Rise As One: Empowering Champions of Peace*, in New York City, a celebration of the peacemakers, partners, and supporters who make this work possible.

Thank you for continuing to stand alongside WPDJ and the communities we serve. I hope the stories in this edition offer a glimpse of what we can achieve when we invest in people and work together toward a more peaceful future.

Warmly,

Caroline Descombris

Executive Director

The Whitaker Peace & Development Initiative



From **Skills** to **Opportunity**: WPDI France in Seine-Saint-Denis



Since opening its Community Learning Center in Aubervilliers in 2023, WPDI France has expanded its work across Seine-Saint-Denis, creating pathways to opportunity through **entrepreneurship, digital skills training, and conflict resolution education**.

Over the past year, WPDI France strengthened this work through several key initiatives. In February, it co-hosted the **Women's Employment and Entrepreneurship Forum** in Saint-Ouen for the third consecutive year, welcoming hundreds of visitors and connecting women with community leaders, employment professionals, entrepreneurs, and local partners.

In April, WPDI France joined CONNECT, a **European Union-funded Interreg initiative** uniting 13 partners across North-West Europe. Through the project, WPDI France is working with organizations across the region to better understand the barriers faced by migrant entrepreneurs and strengthen the systems that support them.

WPDI France also expanded its **Conflict Resolution Education in Schools program**, engaging young people in workshops on bullying prevention, discrimination, equality, emotional awareness, and dialogue. These activities help students develop practical tools to navigate conflict and contribute to more inclusive school environments.

The year culminated in a **graduation ceremony** at Université Paris 8, where 69 participants received 82 certificates in Business and Entrepreneurship, Information and Communication Technology, and Conflict Resolution Education. Eleven emerging entrepreneurs also received seed funding through WPDI France's Business Plan Competition to advance their projects.

With support from BNP Paribas, Interreg, the A&A Ulmann Fund, and the Département de la Seine-Saint-Denis, WPDI France continues to **equip community members with the skills, confidence, and support needed to pursue their goals and strengthen their communities**.

WPDI's France Achievements in 2025

283

Graduates from
WPDI France's
training
programs

16

New small
businesses
funded

1,657

Total
beneficiaries

→ **Read more** in WPDI
France's Annual Report

Weaving **Heritage**, Building A **Future**: Claudia's Journey with WPDI Mexico



At 27 years old, Claudia Azucena Vázquez Hernández is **transforming a craft passed down by her mother into a thriving enterprise**, weaving ancestral heritage together with modern ambition, while creating a space for her creativity to flourish.

A **traditional embroiderer from Shulvo, in the municipality of Zinacantán, Chiapas, Mexico**, Claudia learned the art of embroidery from her mother when she was just eight years old. What began as an oral legacy passed through generations of women and a modest means of survival has evolved into a professional venture specializing in bespoke traditional garments and contemporary embroidered pieces.

The journey has not been without challenges. Claudia faced a lack of resources to purchase machinery, limited business skills, and increasing market competition. **She joined WPDI's Business and Entrepreneurship Program in San Cristóbal de las Casas.**

"Thanks to WPDI's support, I strengthened my business with new tools, knowledge in management and marketing, and the opportunity to work alongside other women, driving the growth of my business and expanding its opportunities for development."

For Claudia, embroidery is far more than a trade; it is a sanctuary of self-expression, peace, and deep cultural connection:

"This Tzotzil phrase, 'Ja' ti buy xnichimaj a jol a vo'ne' ('Where your soul and mind flourish'), defines me as an artisan because through threads and embroidery, my creativity goes beyond the ordinary. More than just a job, for me, it's an activity I deeply enjoy. When I embroider, time flies by without me even noticing, because it's something that nourishes my soul and mind with every piece I finish."

In every stitch, Claudia connects past and present, carrying forward lineage, personal resilience, and the freedom to shape her own future.

WPDI's Mexico **Achievements** in 2025

4,720

people reached through WPDI Mexico's activities

3,651

participants engaged in peacebuilding programs

1,069

participants engaged in livelihood programs

→ **Read more** in WPDI Mexico's Annual Report

Adapting to **Meet** the **Needs** of Refugee Communities in Uganda and South Sudan



On World Refugee Day, WPDJ highlighted the resilience of refugees and the importance of ensuring that programs evolve alongside the communities they serve. Across Uganda and South Sudan, WPDJ supports people affected by conflict and displacement through education, skills development, peacebuilding, and livelihood opportunities.

In Uganda's Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, this adaptability has become **increasingly important as the conflict in Sudan has brought an influx of new arrivals**, many of whom speak Arabic. In response, **WPDJ has adapted its programming** to help overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. In 2025, 560 participants joined WPDJ's Functional Adult Literacy and English for Adults program, building language and practical skills for everyday life while creating pathways to further training, including entrepreneurship.

Awatif Hamed Brima Mohammed's story reflects this work. After fleeing Sudan and arriving in Kiryandongo, she participated in WPDJ's programs and is now advocating for girls' education. Through community campaigns, **she encourages families to challenge beliefs that keep girls out of school and support those who have dropped out in returning to the classroom.**

→ [Watch Awatif's story and hear directly from her](#)

In neighboring South Sudan, WPDJ continues to **support conflict-affected communities through peacebuilding, education, and livelihoods**. In 2025, its programming reached 54,636 people directly and indirectly, including 3,740 participants in vocational and capacity-building courses.

From adapting language courses for newly arrived refugees to expanding access to skills and livelihoods, **WPDJ continues to respond as communities' needs change**, helping displaced people build the tools and opportunities to shape their futures.



Reflections on Building a **Future** of **Peace** from WPDI's CEO and Founder, Forest Whitaker



This summer, WPDI's Founder and CEO and UNESCO Special Envoy for Peace and Reconciliation, **Forest Whitaker**, shared his **personal reflections at two moments that speak directly to the heart of our mission: World Refugee Day and International Youth Day.**

For World Refugee Day, Forest recalled his experiences and exchanges with refugees and displaced communities, including a visit to South Sudan in 2014 that shaped his understanding of what it truly means to rebuild after displacement. His message underscored that safety is only the beginning: lasting peace also requires the ability to imagine a future.

→ Read [Until Everyone Is Safe](#)

For International Youth Day, Forest turned his attention to the remarkable potential of young people and the achievements they are already making in their communities. Across the countries where WPDI works, he has seen young people turn ideas into businesses, become leaders and peacemakers, pursue education, and create meaningful change for those around them. Their stories are a reminder that **when young people are given the tools and opportunities to thrive, they can shape not only their own futures, but the future of their communities.**

Together, these reflections speak to a principle that continues to guide both Forest Whitaker's advocacy and WPDI's work around the world: **lasting peace is strengthened when people have the tools, opportunities, and support to shape their own futures.** This vision closely reflects UNESCO's mandate to build peace through education, culture, and international cooperation, and is at the heart of the work highlighted in the UNESCO LEAD Report.

→ Read [Investing in Young People Means Investing in Peace](#)

“

Investing in a Shared Future

Moved by the findings of UNESCO's 2026 Lead with Youth report, which reveals a persistent gap between consulting young people and giving them influence, Forest Whitaker, reflects on why youth must be treated as active partners in shaping the future.

“Young people are not waiting to be saved. They are already leading. Through WPDI, I have watched young people launch businesses, mediate conflicts, mentor their peers, embrace technology, and strengthen their communities.”

New Partnerships **Expand Opportunities** for Youth in South Africa and South Sudan



Our partnerships help sustain and expand WPDI's work, bringing together organizations that share our commitment to empowering young people and building more peaceful, resilient communities.

WPDI Partners with Cape Wine Auction Trust in South Africa

WPDI launched a collaboration with a new partner, the Cape Wine Auction Trust, an organization that harnesses the success of South Africa's wine industry to fund education and community development across the Western Cape. Our joint objective is to expand Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) across the Cape Winelands and equip young people with practical skills to build more peaceful and resilient communities. Over the next year, five young leaders will be trained as WPDI Youth Peacemakers and bring CRE programming to five local schools, reaching 300 students and 25 educators.

WPDI and Gemini Africa Renew Partnership in South Sudan

WPDI and its long-time partner, Gemini Africa, a Cairo-based hub for entrepreneurship and innovation, have renewed their partnership in South Sudan through June 2027, continuing their shared commitment to youth empowerment, entrepreneurship, and peacebuilding. Building on their previous collaboration to pilot WPDI's Business Bootcamp, this renewed partnership marks an important evolution of the initiative, drawing on Gemini Africa's expertise to expand its impact. The next phase will reach 600 community members through community dialogues and train 630 community leaders and young people in conflict resolution, ICT, business management, and entrepreneurship. The program will also support the launch of 15 new businesses while continuing to mentor 18 enterprises established during the first phase.

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Building Peace Together.

Local voices illustrate how WPDI's partnerships are creating opportunities across South Africa and South Sudan.

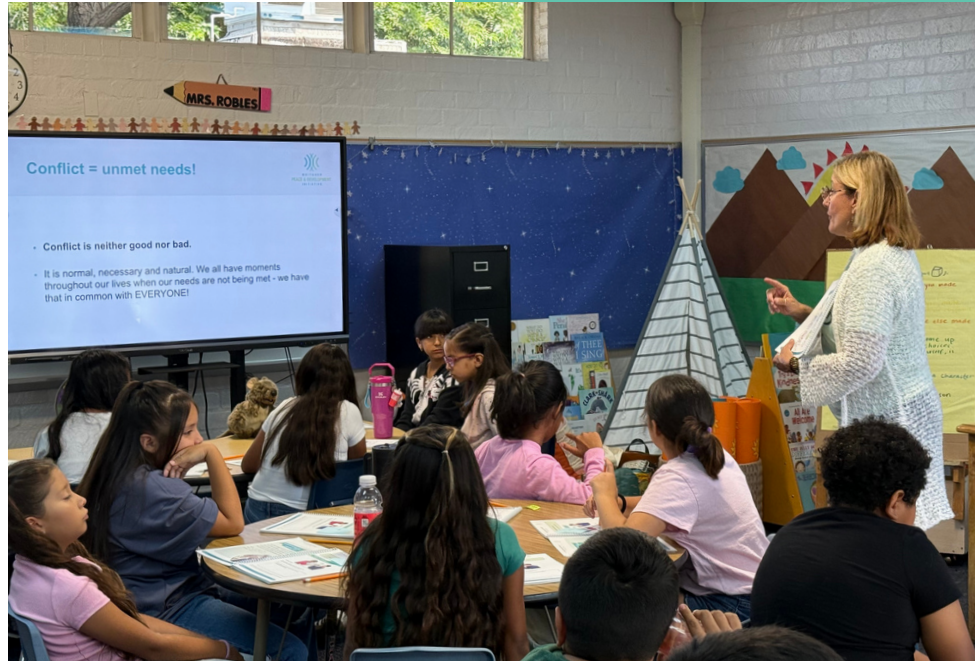
In South Africa, local leader Ayanda Tomos reflected on the importance of the Cape Wine Auction Trust partnership:

“Having them serve as peacemakers in schools is crucial.”

In South Sudan, bootcamp participant David Henry Wandu shared the impact of the Gemini Africa partnership:

“We are now equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to enhance our livelihoods.”

Back to School: Resources for a **More Peaceful** School **Community**



As students and educators head back to school, WPDI's **Domestic Harmonizer Program (DHP)** is rolling out a **fresh suite of resources designed to help school communities strengthen relationships, navigate conflict, and create more supportive learning environments.**

Throughout the school year, DHP works with students, educators, administrators, counselors, and families through initiatives including the DHP Teach-In, Peer Mediation training, Lunch 'N Learn SEL sessions, conflict coaching, professional development workshops, parenting seminars, and schoolwide peacebuilding activities. DHP's Inner Spark initiative further **supports young people in developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, resilience, and the confidence to navigate challenges.**

As Lezya Weglarz of the San Diego County Office of Education reflected on DHP's training: *"The two days of learning offered practical, accessible strategies that participants can immediately apply in their work. It's clear that the skills centered on empathy, communication, and restorative practices are resonating deeply and making a real difference in school communities."*

Educators can also access DHP's Conflict Resolution Education curriculum and the **Domestic Harmonizer Virtual Center**, which offers lesson plans, worksheets, animated videos, interactive games, Inner Spark resources, and a dedicated Parent Hub to help bring conflict resolution and social-emotional learning into classrooms and homes.

Explore the DHP's resources and discover new ways to build a more peaceful school community this year!

“

Finding **Strength** from **Within**

Sophia is a participant in WPDI's Inner Spark program at Cypress High School in California. Through the program, she has gained practical tools to manage stress, reflect on her emotions, and feel more secure in herself.

"In Inner Spark, I feel safe, welcomed, and appreciated. This class teaches great values, and they stick for a long time. I believe this class is much more than just supporting peers but life lessons that make you feel good about being yourself."



RISE AS ONE

EMPOWERING CHAMPIONS OF PEACE
WPDJ GALA

HONORING 14 YEARS OF IMPACT

SEPTEMBER 25, 2026
Gotham Hall • New York City

Later this month, friends and supporters of WPDJ will gather at Gotham Hall in New York City for its 2026 Gala, "Rise As One: Empowering Champions of Peace". The Gala will bring together our global community of partners, supporters, artists, and young changemakers for an evening celebrating the peacemakers and leaders working to transform their communities. With just weeks to go, we are excited to share more of what promises to be an inspiring evening of music, conversation, and impact.

This year's Gala will feature special guests: two-time NBA All-Star Luol Deng, music legend Dionne Warwick, Grammy-winning artist Mýa, and many other artists.

Featuring special guests:



LUOL DENG



DIONNE WARWICK



MÝA



SAWEETIE



MIRI BEN-ARI



ANA NETANEL

“

Part of a
**Collective
Movement.**

Elaine Weidman
Grunewald, tenured Board
Member and Head of
WPDJ's Gala Committee,
shared:

*"Participating in the gala
isn't just about an event.
It's about being part of a
collective movement. It's
about supporting peace
and dignity, and helping
to sustain it. We hope all
our existing and new
partners will take part."*



As part of the evening's program, Frank Cooper III, WPDJ Board Member and Chief Marketing Officer at Visa, will host a special youth panel featuring Khadija Mayman (WPDJ South Africa), Valentina Villarreal (WPDJ United States), and Victor Sántiz García (WPDJ Mexico). Together, they will share their perspectives as young changemakers and reflect on their experiences with WPDJ.

The evening will also offer guests another way to support WPDJ's work through our Gala auction.

Bidding is already open, explore the available items and place your bids [here](#).

There is still time to be part of Rise As One. Join us as a Gala sponsor and help make this special evening, and WPDJ's work around the world, possible.

Reach out to gala@wpdj.org or visit www.wpdj.org/2026-gala to learn more.

Bid for a **BETTER FUTURE**

Guests will also have the opportunity to participate in our Gala auction, featuring exclusive experiences, fashion and jewelry items, special Godfather of Harlem memorabilia, and much more, with proceeds benefiting our programs and our communities.

The silent auction has already started and is accessible through [this link!](#)

Silent Auction

Donate

Q Search

Filter

\$ Price

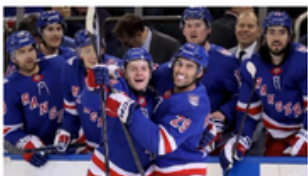


Silent Auction Item 1

2 Ultimate VIP Tickets for Global Citizen Festival

Starting Bid

\$300



Silent Auction Item 2

4 Premium Tickets to NY Rangers with Meet and Greet

Starting Bid

\$2,000



Silent Auction Item 3

Exclusive I Love LA Set Visit with True Whitaker & Cast

Starting Bid

\$3,000



Silent Auction Item 4

Ultimate UFC Fan Experience

Starting Bid

\$3,000

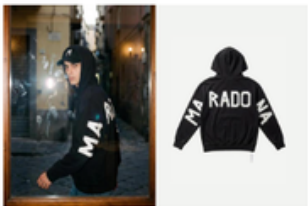


Silent Auction Item 5

Maradona - LS Striped Team T-Shirt

Starting Bid

\$50



Silent Auction Item 6

Maradona - The Statement Black Hoodie

Starting Bid

\$80



Silent Auction Item 7

JAY3LLE Oversized Leather Biker Jacket - Black

Starting Bid

\$800



Silent Auction Item 8

JAY3LLE Oversized Leather Biker Jacket - White

Starting Bid

\$800



W H I T A K E R
PEACE & DEVELOPMENT
I N I T I A T I V E

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