

PEACE PAPER PROJECT

Peace Paper Project is an international organization of hand papermakers, art therapists and social activists. Since 2011, I have helped establish 35 studios that use papermaking as art therapy, social action and fine art; they are across the globe in Australia, Turkey, Ukraine, Poland, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and as far west in the States as Hawaii. Peace Paper runs a number of regular programs with survivors of war and terrorism, sexual violence, people living with mental illness, art therapists and mental health providers. Peace Paper takes on 5 to 10 interns a year that travel with the portable paper studio, learn papermaking and design their own paper initiatives. Most recently Peace Paper has launched programs in Ukraine, working with veterans from the war with Russian Separatists; the United Kingdom, working with people living with mental illness and Germany, working with refugees from the wars in the Middle East.

I was first introduced to papermaking through my undergraduate studies at Buffalo State College, where we were required to take a class called papermaking. At first I thought it was a stupid idea, a class where little old ladies sat around and knitted, or something. As a 20 year old printing student, I was much more interested in wearing clothes that were too small for me and trying to be cool. After I learned that I could make paper out of my clothes, I immediately ran home and grabbed all my old shirts and started to cut, pulp and make paper from them. Then I brought them to the etching, letterpress, screen printing and lithography studios, where I began to layer prints on top of the paper.

When I was home on break during that first semester of papermaking, I was going through a box of my father's things that were left after he had been killed. My Father was killed in a car accident when I was five. He was an architect, poet and activist. He studied the philosophy and work of Buckminster Fuller, built geodesic domes and burned his draft card. The way that my five brothers, one sister and mother would commune with 'dad' was we would go into his old study and pull down a cardboard box, full of his writings, drawings, photographs and blue prints. So, while on break after learning papermaking, I was going through my father's box and at the bottom of the box were a few articles of clothing, an old pair of his blue jeans (paint encrusted and torn up), a flannel shirt, stained white t-shirt and a blue handkerchief. As soon as my fingers touched the clothes I immediately thought, what if I could turn this into paper.

So with that idea I asked my mother what she thought. At first she was hesitant and said; 'that's all that we have left of him and so I am not sure.... but let me think about it'. So throughout the week I remember seeing her going through the box, and one evening she said; 'you know I think it would be good if you could make paper from the old clothes and print some of his poems and photographs onto the paper. Make a set for everyone in the family'.

And so I called all my family together and we sat around the dining room table and cut up my dad's clothes; my mom shared in stories about how she met my father and what it was like being married to a travelling artist, activist and architect. And my brothers and sister talked about what it was like growing up without a father, always looking to our male instructors in school, or our hockey, lacrosse and track coaches for a sense of father.

I took the material back to the studio in Buffalo and ground it into pulp, make paper, created reproductions of the content of the box and bound an edition of 13 books, enough for each one of my siblings, my mother and for my father siblings. When that semester ended, I brought the books home travelled around delivering them to my family. My brothers and sister, were like 'oh this is what you did with dad's stuff, neat'- but what was, for me the most significant encounter when I shared the book with my uncle, who was closest to my father in age. They grew up together playing football, ice hockey, fishing and were very close. But during the Vietnam war, my uncle felt it was his duty to protect America from the growing threat of Communism and so he enlisted in the military; and my father felt like it was his duty to stand up for democracy by refusing the draft and protesting against the war in Vietnam. Ever since the two had a strained relationship. I was unaware of this until, I met with my uncle and handed him the copy of my father's book. My uncle was a very hardened man, very tough. He opened the book, saw the picture of my father, quickly closed the book and sat down, his hand over the book's cover and the tears just started to run down his face. After a minute or two he opened the book and closed it, opened it again, closed it and then he started telling me stories of fishing with my father, summer breezes and moon light walks. Stories of double dates and first loves, stories of pranks and eventually about their split; he told me how much he regretted not making amends.

My uncle recently passed away, but every time I would return home I would pay him a visit and my father's book was always on his desk and he would open the book and read a passage, or look at a picture and laugh and say something- it was a way to remember my father, bring him back- and it was through my exchange with my uncle that I realized that papermaking could be something more than just a substrate to layer my prints on.

While in grad school at Columbia, Marilyn Sward shared videos of a paper making mill she was helping get started somewhere in Africa and I was interested in the community building as business models; but it was seeing an exhibit with paper works by Dr. Eric Avery and John Risseuw that really inspired me to make paper with war veterans, to pulp American flags and eventually create Peace Paper. Through seeing how both Avery and Risseuw used paper as a media to address social, political and psychological issues, I saw how I could very easily merge my interest in political art and community building with traditional hand papermaking. I have much success with developing and co-directing Combat Paper and Peace Paper and since 2007 have introduced papermaking to over 25,000 workshop participants around the globe.

At the core of the workshops, I create a space where individuals are able to create uniquely personal works; I seek to share in the powerful processes that I experienced by creating my father's book, and to help activate individuals' voices as they work through, often painful, material.

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www.peacepaperproject.org