Unity through Diversity
by Cynthia Sor

To answer the question, “How can diverse people unite and work together to promote peace?” I offer an example for illustration. On a hot and humid Monday evening during the summer of 2013, Zapopan Park in Rosemead, California is a depressing place. Empty and desolate, the park is still save for a stray cat stalking along the perimeter. Cardboard boxes are scattered with abandon, haphazardly strewn about as if they were giant white die tossed by a huge hand. A bright red tent stands, half-completed and standing on one leg. The heat beats down on the faded, sun-lightened metal of a playground. Particles in the air shimmer, and the play structure itself seems to sweat. The grass is starting to shrivel. Not a soul is in sight.

The next day, on a breezy Tuesday afternoon, volunteers come, and do their magic. The tent is fully constructed, the trash cans are uprighted and someone has wheeled out a grill to cook over. A few hours later, the gates open and guests come trickling in. The sun has mercifully ducked beneath the horizon and the sky above takes on an ethereal, almost hazy twilight veil. Over 700 guests have brought their children, pets, and families to Zapopan Park. This place is no longer empty or desolate. The air filled with the smoky scent of barbecue as volunteers cooked hot dogs and burgers and provided snacks and refreshments. The sound of kids shrieking and laughing could be heard from the playground as parents relaxed on benches and watched their children play. Music pumped in the background, and a high-pitched wail reminded everyone that even the local fire department stopped by for the evening.

This event was known as National Night Out, a common community awareness-raising event held in cities all over the United States, usually on the first Tuesday in August. National Night Out is promoted as “America’s Night Out Against Crime,” and among other things, aims
to increase public knowledge on community police programs. For example, some of the many booths stationed during National Night Out included drug prevention, town watch, neighborhood watch and emergency preparedness. Along with police officers and firefighters, local business vendors were also encouraged to participate, and the majority of the booths were local organizations like the public library, as well as several municipal programs like BikeSGV and the Parks and Recreation Department.

As a resident of the San Gabriel Valley, notorious for its high Asian-American and Hispanic-American population and lovingly referred to as the country’s top “ethnoburb” (ethnic suburb), I’m no stranger to exotic foods, languages, or customs. Am I just extremely cultured—a seasoned and worldly traveler among a sea of homebodies? Hardly. Being aware of and sensitive to other cultures just comes with the territory, especially if you live in a city like mine, where you can eat pad thai, walk down the street, and wash it down with some horchata.

I’m not sure what comes to mind when most people think of the word “diversity.” Do they imagine streets like Valley Boulevard, or perhaps downtown San Gabriel? Where a Mekong hair salon sits between a taco place and a boba shop?

One of the best things about such a loud and proud cultural presence in my community is the crossing over, and blending of cultures that happens quite easily, especially among us “young’uns.” Often you can see non-Asian students enjoying boba after a long day of school. And I’ve never met a single human soul, regardless of race, who doesn’t enjoy a good Alberto’s burrito.

This blending of cultures is easily seen in National Night Out. Not only do families of all ethnicities, sub-races, and heritages attend, but each is invited to share their customs. Parents on the PTA whip up sweet, fragrant jugs of Agua De Jamaica, and the tray of egg rolls over by
refreshments is gobbled up within minutes.

People from all walks of life are brought together, for a single night. You might see the janitor from your school, or you might see the superintendent. Kids as young as two years old and adults as old as seventy years old. We come together, united by the fact that we’re different, united by the fact that we take pride in our differences and appreciate what’s unique about each other.

We come together to teach ourselves and others. We speak about our neighborhood as if we all live on the same street, the same block, under the same roof. A crime in our city is a crime against us. We fight against that crime. We teach kids to be careful. We teach adults to give back to their community, to volunteer for service, to devote time to safeguarding their houses, to learn proper emergency procedures. We show our appreciation for the danger faced by our police force so that we can sleep restfully. We give our thanks to those who work, and work hard, to keep our city running.

People, no matter how diverse, can always find a way to unite and work together for a common goal. National Night Out is just one example of how the citizens of Rosemead cooperate to reach this lofty vision. It’s an ambitious dream, but we know we can achieve it someday. For now, I know I’ll continue volunteering at National Night Out. Next year and many years from now on. I know that this community pride, this community awareness, this community family is something I want to be a part of.