

Three women, one message, written on hands and bodies



BARB GUY

Shigeko Sasamori offered her hand to me as if it were not sore, as if my shaking it would not hurt her. We ended up in a four-handed greeting, both of my hands clasping both of hers.

I look now at pictures of her, pictures of her hands. They are gnarled, disfigured, emanating pain. There were dozens of surgeries but the bones, skin and flesh of her hands refuse to return to their normal shape. They won't relinquish the right to tell their story.

Kim Phuc's hands flitted busily around her face as she talked, sometimes partly covering an eye or her mouth. She's a little bit funny and a little bit shy. Apart from her sparkly wedding ring, her hands don't reveal much about her, which is merciful because she has already had to bare all.

When I met Rose, whose last name I don't know, her hands were soft but freezing cold and she had a nice perfumed scent about her. Her hands betrayed no sign of her ordeal, but during our handshake I noticed that just a few inches from my thumb there was a number on her arm. Seeing my eyes working to take in the unthinkable, she invited me - ordered me, really - to run my fingers across the tattoo.

These three women have very different lives, but they share the same calling: to talk with people about peace.

Shigeko was 13 and living in Hiroshima, Japan, when a bright white spot in the sky changed her life forever, when a place a few streets away suddenly reached 9,000 degrees. Her face, shoulders, chest, arms and hands were terribly burned by the nuclear attack - so much that her bones changed shape. Now, 60 years later, her face is attractive and kind, but unmistakably scarred, like her hands.

You've seen Kim's picture. It's one of the most iconic images ever created: She's completely naked, 9 years old, arms akimbo, running down the road near Trang Bang village. Her mouth is wide open in agony. Napalm has vaporized her clothes and scorched her skin. She is running with her brothers and cousins, trying to run away from

the war in Vietnam. Today, 35 years later, her back bears no resemblance to normal human flesh.

Rose's father's shop was smashed to splinters, her family was forced onto a Nazi truck, then a train, and into Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Years later, Rose, a teenager, had survived the Holocaust, but without her entire family.

Each of these women has been through war. Not the kind that happens somewhere else, but the kind that comes right to your house. The kind that grabs you by the hand and pulls you into hell. The kind people are experiencing today in Iraq, among other places.

Besides surviving war, what these women have in common is their message. While their experiences range over decades and continents, their main message is identical: No more war. Never again. No cause is righteous enough, no purpose is pure enough, no one is wrong enough or right enough for war to make sense.

Today, Shigeko Sasamori travels and lectures around the world, working for peace. She spoke last month at the Sundance Film Festival. Kim Phuc heads a foundation that cares for children burned and injured in war. She was here last fall,

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speaking to the YWCA. Rose was a docent at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles when I visited in 2002.

These women believe in the power of story. They relive their pain for us. They let us look and invite us to touch. They are never able to get far from their own tragic brushes with some of history's darkest moments because they're on a mission. Shigeko, Kim and Rose are trying to teach the world, a few people at a time, that war is wrong.

BARB GUY's column appears every other Sunday in these pages. She lives in Salt Lake City. © Salt Lake Tribune.