

Die another day

Jeremy Gilley has lobbied everyone from the Dalai Lama to Jude Law in his quest for a day of world peace. Is he a naive dreamer or a gifted visionary?

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PHOTOGRAPH
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Five years ago a struggling 29-year-old film-maker named Jeremy Gilley had an idea. A very big idea. Increasingly frustrated and confused by the violent state of the world and his inability to use film to ameliorate it, and feeling powerless to do anything that might make a difference, he hit upon the notion of establishing a global ceasefire day. It was a dream – at once both beautifully simple and implausibly idealistic – that in the future, for one day every year, the whole world would stop fighting.

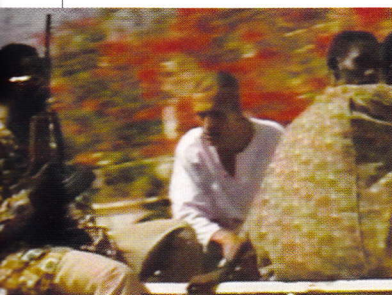
In the way of most Damascene conversions, Gilley decided to devote every waking hour to making his dream come true. Despite the enormity of the task that faced him – at least 500 people are killed every day through armed conflict; 250 major wars have been waged since 1945; scarcely has there been a day in the past 200 years when some kind of mortal battle has not occurred – he formed an organisation called Peace One Day.

He borrowed money, cajoled family and friends and badgered business associates and corporations for support. He set up an office in his mother's spare bedroom and recruited volunteers and helpers. He organised fundraising dinners and theatre events. In 1999, he held a press launch at London's Globe Theatre, which the press assiduously ignored. Yet still, from that day forth, he decided to document his journey every step of the way. "All I had, after all, was a crazy idea and a film camera," says Gilley.

He travelled to Somalia and Burundi to witness at first hand the devastating effect wars have on civilian communities and individual lives. He met orphaned children, mutilated teenagers and shattered families. He was told horrifying stories of starving babies suckling on their dead mothers. Suddenly he felt that his mission mattered more than he had ever imagined, that "creating the day was at least a beginning and surely something hopeful". So he lobbied diplomats, politicians and



The power of one: Jeremy Gilley, on the path to creating a world day for peace, meets, second from top, Nelson Mandela, and, above, Kofi Annan



Peace man: above, Gilley in Africa. Right, from top, at the UN; with the Dalai Lama; and with Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias Sanchez



world leaders, and through the sheer force of his enthusiasm and commitment, engineered meetings with such Nobel Peace laureates as Shimon Peres and the Dalai Lama.

Despite his slender build and boyish appearance, Gilley found that the skills he had developed as an actor helped him to stay composed during nerve-racking appointments and so better present his case. Growing up in Southampton, he had played Bugsy Malone on the West End stage at the age of 13, later became a member of the RSC, and made a living through small parts in such TV series as *EastEnders* and *The Bill*.

Gilley had no particular religious or philosophical convictions, but he was aware that there were certain historical precedents: the ancient Greeks' Olympic Truce; the famous First World War football match between British and German soldiers on Christmas Day 1914; and the tradition of observing "peace weeks" in war zones in some parts of Africa. In a meeting with Dr Robert Muller, a former assistant to the UN Secretary-General, he was told that "any new idea is first considered ridiculous, then violently opposed, and finally accepted as common sense". So he pressed on.

Convinced that education was a crucial part of his campaign, he visited schools in the UK and Ireland. He met representatives from the UN, UNICEF, the Red Cross and many other organisations involved in humanitarian aid and relief. Mary Robinson, then the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, reassured him that her experience of conflict "is that those who are involved in it long for even a day of peace. To have a day of cessation of violence – that to me is an idea whose time has come." He travelled back to Africa, and to the Middle East, to meet peace negotiators and activists. At each meeting he gathered more and more support.

Having discovered that, almost 20 years earlier, the UN had created a day of peace but not fixed a date in the calendar, he petitioned high commissioners and under-secretaries to unify the day and create one specific day, 21 September, as the official UN-backed International Day of Peace. Eventually, during a meeting with Kofi Annan, before which Gilley dramatically changed his appearance from ponytailed hippy traveller to

Those who are involved in conflict long for even a day of peace. This is an idea whose time has come



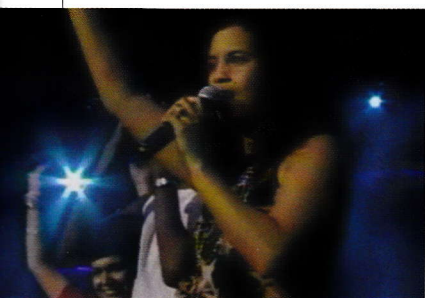
neatly cropped, business-suited professional campaigner, he received the backing of the UN Secretary-General. And in New York on 7 September 2001, just four days before the events of 9/11, a new resolution, co-sponsored by the UK and Costa Rican governments, was adopted in the UN General Assembly establishing 21 September as an annual day of "global ceasefire and non-violence".

It was a moment that, as with all his encounters, he recorded on his camera, as he looked down, dewy-eyed, from a tiny television gantry in the roof of the assembly building. "It was the best day of my life – nothing comes close," he says. "I remember looking down at the General Assembly and thinking of all the people I had met and how it was all coming together in this moment. There were all these world leaders debating – and about to vote on – something that was just a little idea I had just three years before and that a lot of people had helped make happen. It was absolutely unreal."

IF GILLEY'S STORY BEGINS TO SOUND SOMETHING LIKE A MODERN FABLE AT THIS POINT, a parable of one man's struggle against the darker forces of the world, a heroic, Michael Moore-style experiment in how much one man, armed with little more than the power of self-belief and persuasion, can bring about political change, then this is only the beginning. "You have proved that individuals can make a difference and if each of us does our bit collectively we will make a major contribution," Kofi Annan told him. The attack on New York had, after all, superseded any significant observance of the day that year. So Gilley decided to push on further.

He resolved to raise awareness of the day and to make its observance as meaningful as possible. Many of the people he had met had explained that not only could a cessation of hostilities act as a starting point for dialogue, but that it could also have many practical benefits, including allowing access for humanitarian aid such as food and immunisation, and providing vital information and freedom of movement.

He started back on his speaking tours of community organisations and schools around the world (during the past



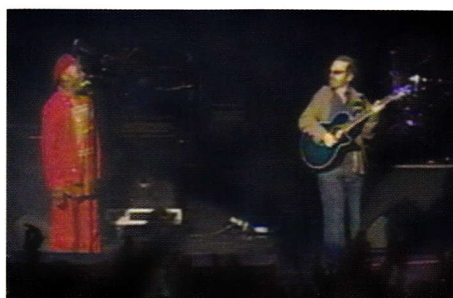
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five years he has addressed 26,000 young people and attended more than 2,000 meetings) attempting to promote the day as one of non-violence, not just between armed factions but also in communities, schools and homes. "In order to break the cycle of violence and give a moment of hope you have to work on the level of me, myself," Gilley tells me. "There is something about encouraging people to step into the equation, about them being empowered by this day, that can provide a lead to governments. It's not the leaders of the world who will make the day a reality, but the people on the ground."

Believing, too, that it's essential to campaign for Peace One Day beyond the western world, Gilley secured a meeting in Cairo with Amre Moussa, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States. His diplomatic and negotiation skills were by now more carefully honed. As a child of parents who divorced when he was three, he recognises that early on he developed skills as "a mediator and a keeper of the peace", yet during his first meetings he was sometimes too evangelical, impatient and breathily earnest. Now he is much more assured, articulate and convincing. Moussa told him: "I wish to state categorically that we support the Peace One Day programme – this is a step forward in international relations."

Back at home, Gilley began to plan a celebratory concert for 21 September at London's Brixton Academy. His growing team of volunteers – now housed in offices near the City donated by stockbroking firm Execution – approached musicians willing to support Peace One Day. He was still devoting all his time to the project, sacrificing money, a permanent home and the possibility of a relationship to his cause.

A growing network of the great and the good came into effect. Dave Stewart and reggae legend Jimmy Cliff penned a Peace One Day song that was sent to radio stations around the world to be played on the day. Stella McCartney designed a T-shirt. Richard Branson lent organisational support. Trevor Beattie, Chairman and Creative Director of TBWA London, handled the advertising campaign. "At TBWA we have a simple work philosophy, which is: an idea is only as big as the difference it makes," explains Beattie. "And what I see in Peace One Day is, I believe, the biggest idea that anybody has ever had."



On the night, in front of 4,500 people, there were messages and appearances from Badly Drawn Boy, Damon Albarn, Moby, Coldplay, Turin Brakes, Annie Lennox and Jonny Lee Miller. Live sets were performed by such acts as Faithless, Zero 7, Starsailor and Neneh Cherry. The evening was broadcast live on the web by MSN.

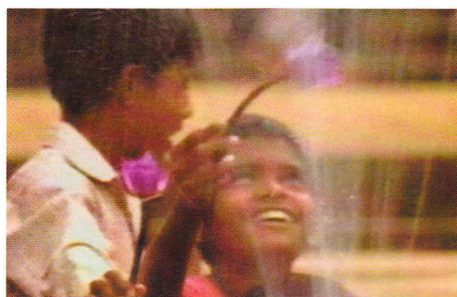
In 98 countries around the world, supported by the UN and other organisations and governments, there were countless local events marking the day. There were ceremonies, vigils, rallies, talks, discussions, seminars, parades, summits, films, plays, documentaries, exhibitions, sponsored walks, conferences and coverage in the media. The Peace One Day website received 800,000 hits in September 2002 alone. Gilley estimates that as many as 244 million people were aware of the day.

Although no ceasefires were negotiated, there were 33 separate UN initiatives designed to instigate breakthroughs in hostilities or to strengthen existing peace deals. In one area of Nigeria, an entire community declared peace and reconciliation after a decade of violence between different factions.

FOR ALL THIS, THERE IS A CASE TO BE MADE AGAINST GILLEY'S UNQUESTIONABLY HONOURABLE AND ADMIRABLE WORK. His idea may be simple; emotional reactions to it often are not. For one thing, the campaign can be seen as hopelessly idealistic –

The no-fight club: Above, Dave Stewart and Jimmy Cliff record the Peace One Day song and perform at the concert at Brixton Academy. Left, from top, Annie Lennox; Maxi Jazz from Faithless; Neneh Cherry at Brixton Academy. Below, T-shirts designed by Stella McCartney





Doing it for the kids: above, Gilley with children in Africa. Right, from top, celebrating the day; children in Israel; at a school in New Delhi

declaring a day of peace does not mean that anyone will actually observe it, or that any of the root causes of war will begin to be addressed. Ceasefires may be breaking out in many parts of the world, but they are long-fought and hard-won, and are often the result of many decades of negotiation, concession and realpolitik. Any effect that Peace One Day might have could be so marginal as to be almost meaningless.

Another criticism that can be levelled against Gilley is that he is sometimes politically naive. He undermined his case at a meeting last year with the League of Arab States by showing a film that included footage of former Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres (much to the anger of the Palestinian representative), and he will not be drawn on America's blatant flouting of the UN's mandate and jurisdiction during the recent attack on Iraq.

Peace One Day may also face public apathy and cynicism. The inclusion, for example, at last year's Brixton Academy event of 22 white-robed members of the "spiritual peace movement" Brahma Kumaris attempting to lead the crowd in a three-minute "interfaith meditation" proved a spectacular failure. The fringes of the light-a-candle-for-peace movement are laced with excessive worthiness. Gilley has to be careful that Peace One Day doesn't disappear under a swamp of well-meaning, lovey-dovey dreaming. All of these points are dismissed, however, with a cheery optimism.

"Frankly, I don't listen to the criticism – it doesn't matter to me and I'm not interested in it," says Gilley. "If you can knock the idea and the person behind the idea then you don't have to do or question anything. It doesn't have to work; I'm just trying to raise the debate. And too many people have told me that it is really important to keep going for me to just let go and stop. There is a cycle of energy now.

"I'm totally realistic about the day. I'm not a man of peace or anything – I'm as angry as the next person – and I lose faith at times. And I know I'm no Bono or Blair, or an expert in conflict resolution. But listen, for me the whole process has been a success. I believe that concrete things happened on that first day and I know that it's going to do some good."

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THIS YEAR'S GOALS AND ACTIVITIES INCLUDE INFORMING ONE BILLION PEOPLE OF THE DAY'S EXISTENCE, the creation of a Peace One Day educational resource pack to be used in schools throughout the world, a relaunched website, and a second concert at Brixton Academy, which will be screened on VH1. As well as musicians, Jude Law and Orlando Bloom have pledged their support. Gilley has also completed a fascinating film charting his efforts over the past few years, compiled from more than 800 hours of footage and co-produced by John Battsek, who won an Oscar for the documentary *One Day In September*. There are proposals for the film to be shown on the BBC and on other television stations globally.

Meanwhile, he is currently planning a second film, the expansion of Peace One Day as an organisation, increasing backing and media exposure and looking to the future with a characteristically selfless zeal. Even though Gilley is now moving in exalted political and celebrity circles, there is no hint of it going to his head. The campaign is all; Peace One Day comes first. It's kind of inspiring. He is an immensely likeable character and empathetic man; after spending a little time with him, a farewell handshake barely seems enough. His passion and energy can't fail to win you over. Part of you wants to sign up there and then as a volunteer; another part of you strangely, genuinely, wants to hug him.

"I don't know what will happen to the day, but I do know that we now have this moment of hope, above politics and religion, that we all can share," he says. "If the momentum continues the way it's been going, soon the entire world will know about the day and support the day and empower the one organisation, the UN, that is the closest thing we have to holding the global community together. This day is never going to go away – it will last longer than all of us – and I don't think we know what the ramifications will be. They could be huge. We can change. We will change. If you want to build a house, you start with one brick. If you want to build peace, why not start with one day?"

For information on Peace One Day, the concert at Brixton Academy on 20 September, and the Stella McCartney T-shirt, go to www.peaceoneday.org

JIM JOLIFFE