

Historian Irwin Abrams captures—

Inspirational work of peacemakers

When Irwin Abrams walks between his home on Xenia Avenue and the Antioch College library, he's most often smiling and moving with fast, determined steps.

If you read his latest book, you might understand the source of his good cheer and purposefulness. For much of the past 20 years, Abrams, 87, has been immersed in the lives of some of the world's most inspiring and remarkable people, and the result is *The Nobel Peace Prize and the Laureates*, an illustrated biographical history, originally published in 1989 and recently re-issued to coincide with the prize's 100th anniversary.

At the most recent Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo, Norway, on Dec. 10, Abrams himself was honored. At a symposium attended by many past laureates, he was asked to stand and be recognized for his work documenting the history of the prize and its winners.

"It was heartwarming," Abrams said recently of the honor.

Being recognized for his work was icing on the cake for Abrams, who was especially excited to attend the awards ceremony and hear the speech by this year's winner, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, "a man of great presence and grace," and to attend the three-day symposium, to which all of the past laureates were invited, including Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and the Dalai Lama.

"Meeting many of the people I've written about and having a chance to talk to them—it was a big thrill," Abrams said.

While being honored and meeting some of the laureates was gratifying, the biggest thrill to Abrams has been his work.

"Could it be any better?" he asked. "It's been a rich experience to live with these people all of these years."

Abrams' immersion into the lives of the world's greatest peacemakers began in 1979, the same year he retired after 32 years of teaching history at Antioch College. Approached by the publishing firm G.K. Hall and Company to write a history of the Peace Prize laureates, Abrams pondered the request, since he was planning a different project. But at the time, he happened to be attending a conference where organizers distributed the results of a survey of the heroes of American teens. The survey proved pivotal to Abrams' decision.

"I was appalled by the list of film and television stars and rock and roll performers whom they seemed to want to emulate," Abrams said. "I could see that a book



Irwin Abrams was honored last month at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo, Norway, for his work documenting the history of the prize and those who have won the award.

presenting Nobel heroes of humanity could make an important contribution."

Abrams was uniquely qualified for the project, since he wrote his thesis on the origins of the European peace movement. Raised in San Francisco, Abrams had decided as an undergraduate at Stanford University to pursue a career in history. From the beginning, he saw history not as compilation of other people's research, but as a vibrant puzzle to be solved.

"I like the challenge of having to work out what really happened," said Abrams, who came to Antioch College with his wife, Freda, soon after receiving his doctorate. At the college, he often introduced a history course with a detective story and encouraged his students to take an equally investigative approach to their subject.

While he enjoyed his years as a teacher, they were busy years, with "wonderful stu-

dents and lots of committees," and thus little time to write, Abrams said. At retirement, a time in life when many choose to take it easy, Abrams chose instead to begin a new and engrossing and, as it turns out, 20-year project. It's a choice he has never regretted.

In his book, the biographical summaries of the laureates sparkle with lively quotes and colorful details, and convey Abrams' enthusiasm for his subjects, especially those whose lives were inspirational.

There's the story of Albert Schweitzer, who at age 30 gave up a promising career as an organist to become a doctor and provide medical care to some of the world's poorest people in Africa. For 20 years a group of German scholars pursued a campaign to win the prize for Schweitzer, Abrams wrote, because even though he

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wasn't a statesman or a leader of a world peace society, he had lived his life in a way to "awaken humanity to a new ethos of brotherly love."

When Schweitzer's nephew heard on African radio that his uncle had been awarded the Peace Prize, the nephew offered congratulations to Schweitzer, a humble man who was immersed in his work and had not yet heard the news. "For what?" Schweitzer responded. "Has my black cat finally had her kittens?"

Learning that he'd won the 1952 Peace Prize, Schweitzer was delighted, Abrams wrote, because the \$33,000 prize was "enough to build and equip the hospital for lepers that he had dreamed of."

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was awakened by an early morning phone call announcing the prize, he thought he was still asleep and dreaming, Abrams wrote. Because he believed the award had been given not just to him but to the civil rights movement, he asked 30 of his colleagues to travel with him to Oslo, the largest group that ever accompanied a prize winner. For King, the most difficult part of the ceremony was getting dressed for it, according to his wife, Coretta Scott King.

"He bridled especially at the 'ridiculous' ascot tie, vowing 'never to wear one of these things again.' And he never did," Abrams wrote.

While the Nobel Peace Prize hasn't led to the end of war, it has served a huge

purpose, Abrams believes, by focusing the world's attention on peacemakers and humanitarians, even if only once a year.

Receiving the Peace Prize gives peacemakers a world stage and a "big microphone," said Abrams, and some laureates, after receiving the award, broaden their efforts to make the world a better place. For instance, Schweitzer, who was chosen for his humanitarian work, commented after receiving the prize that now he "should do something to earn it," and became an outspoken advocate for a ban on atomic testing.

Over the years, the Peace Prize has become more global in reach, and has sometimes, especially recently, aimed a spotlight on human rights struggles, said Abrams. For instance, the 1992 award to Rigoberta Menchu Tum helped publicize the struggle of indigenous people in Guatemala, and the 1996 award to Carlos Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta focused attention on the independence movement in East Timor.

While he "doesn't like to pick favorites," Abrams will, when asked, identify Schweitzer as the laureate who he'd "put at the top of the list" for his "reverence for life — for the way he lived his life."

Then there is Linus Pauling, "a remarkable man," the only person to have won both the Nobel Prize in Science and the Peace Prize. After winning the science prize in 1954, Pauling became increasingly concerned about scientists' responsibility to speak out against the dangers of the atomic bomb, a stance that got him in

trouble with the U.S. government, which limited his foreign travel. Receiving the Peace Prize in 1962 gave Pauling increased stature in the world, Abrams said, as well as the financial freedom to devote the rest of his life to his fight against atomic testing.

When asked to describe the one trait all laureates shared, Abrams' answer was "courage."

"So many displayed courage, so many overcame obstacles" in their work for peace, said Abrams.

As well as displaying courage, almost all laureates exhibit some sort of faith, Abrams said. "Not necessarily a religious faith but a faith in humanity," he said. "You have to have faith to overcome all those obstacles."

It's a faith shared by the man who wrote the peacemakers' stories. Abrams and his late wife and collaborator, Freda, became Quakers during the Second World War, and the Quaker perspective, along with his immersion in the lives of the world's greatest peacemakers, has shaped his own response to recent world events, Abrams said. When asked how he feels about the world's future, Abrams pondered the question.

"I have this problem. If I'm just thinking about it intellectually, I might be more pessimistic. Things look pretty grim," he said. "But as a Quaker I have faith in humankind, have to believe that there is 'that of God' in everyone. I'm optimistic. In my gut I have hope."

—Diane Chiddister