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# FACES OF HOPE

WPDI GALA



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W P D I G A L A

On **September 27, 2024**, in **New York City**, Forest Whitaker hosted the Faces of Hope Gala, paying tribute to WPDI's extraordinary work empowering young people and communities around the world affected by conflict. The evening offered a platform for meaningful exchange and a call for increased support to further the mission of building lasting, sustainable peace. Since its founding in 2012, WPDI has pioneered an innovative approach by mobilizing young people to lead peacebuilding and development efforts within their communities.

The Gala brought together an exceptional array of guests from a wide range of sectors, including representatives from the United Nations, corporate leaders, civil society advocates, and distinguished figures from the arts. The evening's program featured speeches from WPDI's partners, an engaging Fireside Chat with Forest Whitaker and WPDI Executive Director, Caroline Descombris, **powerful Youth Peacemakers' stories**, and a show-stopping performance by YG Marley. These heartfelt performances precipitated profound reflections on WPDI's significant impact over the past 12 years.



## **A Fireside Chat with** *WPDI Founder, Forest Whitaker and* *Executive Director, Caroline Descombris*

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**WPDI's founder, Forest Whitaker and Executive Director, Caroline Descombris participated in a fireside chat hosted by Whoopi Goldberg.** The discussion offered an intimate look into the core of WPDI's mission, its evolution over the past **12 years**, and its ambitious vision for the future.

**Forest Whitaker** shared personal reflections on how his passion for peacebuilding began during his time working in conflict-ridden areas, notably after filming "The Last King of Scotland" in Uganda. He recalled meeting people whose lives were shattered by war and violence, which solidified his belief that peace is not just the absence of conflict but a skill that can and must be taught and nurtured. His journey, he explained, led to the creation of WPDI with a focus on empowering young people to transform their communities from within. Whitaker spoke about the importance of inner peace, emphasizing that real, lasting peace must begin within individuals before it can ripple outward to communities and nations. He discussed WPDI's unique approach of training **Youth Peacemakers**, *who not only earned the skills of conflict resolution, but also become agents of change in their communities, inspiring others to join them on the path to peace.*

*"My commitment to peace arises from recognizing how interconnected we all are. What happens to you affects me—if not immediately, then eventually."*



**– Forest Whitaker**  
**WPDI CEO and Founder,**  
**Artist, and Social Activist**



**Caroline Descombris**, who has been an integral part of WPDI's since it's beginning shared insights into the organization's growth and the challenges we face in conflict-affected areas. She spoke about the critical role of partnerships in advancing WPDI's mission, as well as the personal stories of transformation she has witnessed through the organization's programs.

Together, Whitaker and Descombris discussed the organization's reach, which now spans nine countries, and *the significant impact WPDI has had on the lives of nearly 2 million people*, many of whom are women and children. Our Executive Director highlighted how WPDI's programs have provided not only peace education but also vocational training, trauma-healing, and support for entrepreneurship, building resilience in communities often devastated by decades of conflict.

The Fireside Chat concluded with a message of hope and a call to action. **Both emphasized that while the challenges of peacebuilding are immense, the dedication of WPDI's partners, supporters, and youth leaders proves that peace is achievable—one community, one youth leader, and one act of compassion at a time.**

*"Our work is rooted in the belief that peace can be taught. It's a skill—and it's everyone's responsibility."*



— **Caroline Descombris**  
WPDI Executive Director



*"Even in the face of rising conflict, WPDI's work demonstrates that peace is possible. By investing in sustainable development and nurturing young leaders, WPDI is building the foundation for a future where security and peace prevail."*



**– AMINA J. MOHAMMED**  
DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

*"Our mission at Verizon is to create connections that matter—and no connection is more important than the one that brings people together for peace."*



**– HANS VESTBERG**  
CEO OF VERIZON



*"My commitment to peace arises from recognizing how interconnected we all are. What happens to you affects me—if not immediately, then eventually."*



**– FOREST WHITAKER**  
WPDI CEO AND FOUNDER,  
ARTIST, AND  
SOCIAL ACTIVIST





## The *Peacemakers* Roundtable

The **Peacemakers Roundtable** offered a unique and powerful opportunity for the audience to hear from four remarkable individuals who have dedicated their lives to building peace in their communities. These speakers shared their personal stories, experiences, and the profound impact WPDI has had on their work, showcasing how peace can be achieved even in the face of adversity.

*“And though Forest is the drum major —sounding the alarm and rallying peace lovers worldwide to coordinated, compassionate action—the Youth Peacemakers are the heart and soul of this movement.”*



— **WHOOPI GOLDBERG**  
EMMY, GRAMMY, OSCAR,  
TONY AWARD WINNER

### **The Roundtable featured:**

#### **Joseph Dusuman John Ginana**

Born in South Sudan, Joseph experienced the turmoil of the 2013 and 2016 conflicts. After moving to Juba in 2018, he began to work as a porter but soon joined WPDI in 2019. Trained in Conflict Resolution, Entrepreneurship, and ICT, Joseph has since become a Youth Peacemaker, using his skills to bring positive change to his community.

#### **Evelyn Laruni**

Hailing from Northern Uganda, Evelyn brings over 17 years of experience in peacebuilding. As WPDI’s Country Coordinator for Uganda, she has dedicated herself to fostering peace, guiding youth, and supporting sustainable development efforts in conflict-affected areas.

#### **Khadija Mayman**

Growing up in Bonteheuwel, Cape Town, Khadija transformed her experiences with violence into a lifelong mission for peace. Starting as a Youth Peacemaker in 2019, she is now a Conflict Resolution Trainer for WPDI, where she empowers young people to build resilient communities.

#### **Valentina Villarreal**

A student at California State University, Long Beach, majoring in pre-psychology, Valentina became involved with WPDI in 2023. She introduced the Domestic Harmonizer Program to her high school, promoting conflict resolution and mental health advocacy among her peers.



*"We need a collective effort; therefore, I call upon all of you seated in this great hall to join Mr. Whitaker in spinning the wheel of the grassroots community, to be able to inspire solutions so that we are able to inspire solutions among vulnerable communities across the globe."*

**Evelyn Laruni**

**WPDI Uganda Country Coordinator**



*"WPDI gave me hope. I trained intensively with my peers for many months, and after the training, WPDI provided resources and supported us to make a real impact in our community. I am very proud because, with the tools WPDI gave us, I was able to resolve many conflicts in my community."*

**Joseph Dusuman John Ginana**

**Youth Peacemaker in Juba, South Sudan**



*"We've seen young people, specifically young women, create their own businesses that have started employing others in the community. This already addresses one critical need—high levels of unemployment in our communities."*

**Khadija Mayman**

**Conflict Resolution Education Trainer in Cape Town, South Africa**



*"The Domestic Harmonizer Program is a safe outlet for students and parents. I've spoken to multiple people, and sometimes they just don't feel safe enough. It's important to incorporate parents into our trainings so they can become people our students feel comfortable talking to and feel seen."*

**Valentina Villarreal**

**Student Mediator, California**



## Faces of Hope Auction

The evening's live auction was a memorable highlight, bringing the community together in support of WPDI's global programs. Featured items included a stunning necklace designed by French Jeweler **Bäumer**, symbolizing the complexity and aspiration of peace, along with an impressive selection of **paintings, unique art pieces, cinematography memorabilia, and prized sports collectibles.**

*"Every cent raised tonight will go directly to advancing WPDI's mission of peace and development."*



**– WHOOPI GOLDBERG**  
EMMY, GRAMMY, OSCAR,  
TONY AWARD WINNER



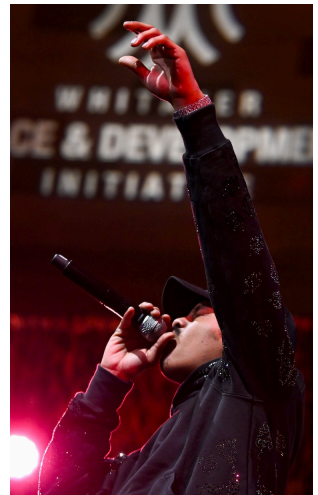




## Performance by *YG Marley*

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The night ended with an uplifting performance by **YG Marley**, a rising artist known for blending soulful reggae beats with powerful lyrics that call for unity and social change. Hailing from a musical lineage and inspired by the legacy of his grandfather, reggae icon Bob Marley, YG uses his voice to advocate for peace and equality. His music perfectly reflected the evening's spirit, encouraging attendees to join WPDI's mission for lasting change. His message resonated deeply, leaving everyone inspired and motivated to continue their support.





## **Closing Remarks by Forest Whitaker**

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As the night drew to a close, Forest Whitaker delivered a heartfelt message of gratitude and hope, **reminding attendees of the power of collective action in achieving peace.**

Whitaker reflected on the journey of the Whitaker Peace & Development Initiative over the past 12 years, **expressing his deep appreciation for the unwavering support of partners, donors, and youth leaders who have helped WPDI transform countless lives.** He emphasized that peacebuilding is a shared responsibility and that the progress WPDI has made is a testament to the strength of the community that believes in its mission. Whitaker highlighted the incredible work of the **Youth Peacemakers**, who have become agents of change in their own communities, and the dedicated partners who have stood by WPDI's side in advancing peace.

*"As we leave tonight, let us carry the stories, connections, and hope we've shared here with us. Together, we can make peace not just possible—but inevitable."*

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– FOREST WHITAKER  
WPDI CEO AND FOUNDER,  
ARTIST, AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST

**We are deeply grateful to our partners and sponsors,** including Verizon, BNP Paribas, Mach49, WWT, Visa, TCS, and many others, whose generous support made this event possible. We also extend our thanks to everyone who participated in the Faces of Hope Auction. Your contributions are invaluable to us. *The Gala's vibrant energy reminds us of the significant impact we can make when united for a common cause.*  
**Let's harness this momentum to foster a brighter future for all.**

## THANK YOU TO OUR FACES OF HOPE GALA SPONSORS

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