



# WASHINGTON JEWISH WEEK *online edition*

## John Marks

When it comes to peace in the Middle East, John Marks is an optimist.

"You don't start an organization like Common Ground if you're not," says Marks, the president of Search for Common Ground, a nongovernmental organization that focuses on conflict resolution and conflict prevention.

He created the nonprofit in 1982 with one other employee in a small Washington, D.C., office. It's since grown to 350 staffers with additional offices in 16 other countries.

His route toward the world of NGOs started after he majored in government at Cornell University. Some years later, he completed a fellowship at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, where he became interested in conflict resolution.

Marks, who grew up in New Jersey, had joined the Foreign Service in 1966. His first posting: Vietnam, which he called a "pretty heady" experience for a 23-year-old.

It also had a profound effect on him. "It changed the way I saw the world," says Marks, 64. "I saw the way we were doing things wasn't working."

He stayed in Vietnam for 18 months, returning to a D.C. posting in 1968. He left the Foreign Service in 1970, he says, protesting U.S. military involvement in Cambodia.

"I didn't think we should be invading new countries," he explains.

He then joined Sen. Clifford Case's staff, where he worked for three years. A Republican from New Jersey, Case was calling for the U.S. to pull out of Vietnam. The Case-Church Amendment, passed in 1973, cut off funding for further military action in Southeast Asia.

Marks then turned his attention to writing: He co-wrote *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* and later wrote *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*, both exposes on the CIA.

"Doing that work, I was very much in an opposition phase," Marks recalls, but he then decided that "instead of tearing down the existing system, I want to build a new system."

That led to the creation of Common Ground.

"I didn't want to be defined by what I was against. I wanted to build a new world," he says.

He may not have created a new world, but asked to name three of Common Ground's biggest success stories, he points to "prenegotiations" that the NGO had with retired generals from Israel and Jordan before those two nations signed a peace treaty; the role that he believes his organization played in reconciliation in Burundi and "bringing the country back from the edge of genocide"; and "pioneering the use of TV and radio for conflict resolution."

As an example of the latter, he cites a 52-part TV drama series that ran in Nigeria, Egypt, Macedonia and the Palestinian territories focusing on a fictional television newsroom, where the staffers represent various ethnic groups.

"It's soap opera for social change," Marks says.

Marks lived in Jerusalem for two years (2002-2004) "to run our program out there," and wrote and produced a four-part series, *Shape of the Future*," which, he says, was the first original programming to air simultaneously in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Living in Jerusalem gave this self-defined secular Jew his first experience with traditional Shabbat dinners. "I loved the singing," he remembers.

When he's not trying to bring peace to the world, Marks finds peace in a rural cabin, heated by a wood-burning stove, in Orlean, about 60 miles west of the District in Virginia, where he and his wife, Susan (who's is senior vice president of Common Ground), own 30 acres of property on the Rappahannok River.

He enjoys tending a garden, mostly potatoes and onions, though he did once successfully grow a melon. "I kind of think I run a groundhog benefactory," he quips. - Debra Rubin

Suggestions for profiles may be sent to [infocus@washingtonjewishweek.com](mailto:infocus@washingtonjewishweek.com).

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Favorite Jewish food: bagel

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