



All photos courtesy, Barefoot Artists

## Painting Hope in the World

⋮ Lily Yeh  
⋮ Barefoot Artists

I was born in China and grew up in Taiwan. My parents nurtured me with firm guidance and support, and I came to the States in the '60s to study art at the University of Pennsylvania. Upon receiving my MFA, I began teaching and started a family, traveled, raised my son, exhibited my work and took care of my father when he got Alzheimer's. Although I faced my share of struggles, my life was sweet and blessed.

Yet I felt that I was looking for something that I could not quite name, something that would anchor me and make my life more authentic.

I searched for it far and wide, in books, places, my work and relationships. It was in the broken land of North Philadelphia that I stepped into the purpose of my life.

**Making art in a distressed community ravaged by violence, poverty and drugs, is like making a fire in the darkness of a winter's night.**

### A Simple Summer's Art Project

In the summer of 1986, I received an invitation from Arthur Hall, a tremendously talented African-American dancer and choreographer, who also headed the Ile-Ife Black Humanitarian Center in inner-city North Philadelphia. He asked me to create an art park on the abandoned lot next to his center. Everyone—friends, family, colleagues—advised me “No. Do not go into the badland. You are an outsider. Kids will destroy everything you build.” I was scared and wanted to withdraw from the project. But I summoned my courage and ventured into North Philadelphia.

Art alone cannot rebuild a community. But making art in a distressed community ravaged by violence, poverty and drugs is like making a fire in the darkness of a winter's night. Giving out light and warmth, it attracts people both from near and far. That was what happened on the vacant lot at the corner of Tenth Street and Germantown Avenue. Sensing new ideas and energy, children responded first. Joseph “JoJo” Williams who lived right next to the lot became my assistant and foreman of the park building project. Through Jojo and the children, the project became rooted in the community.

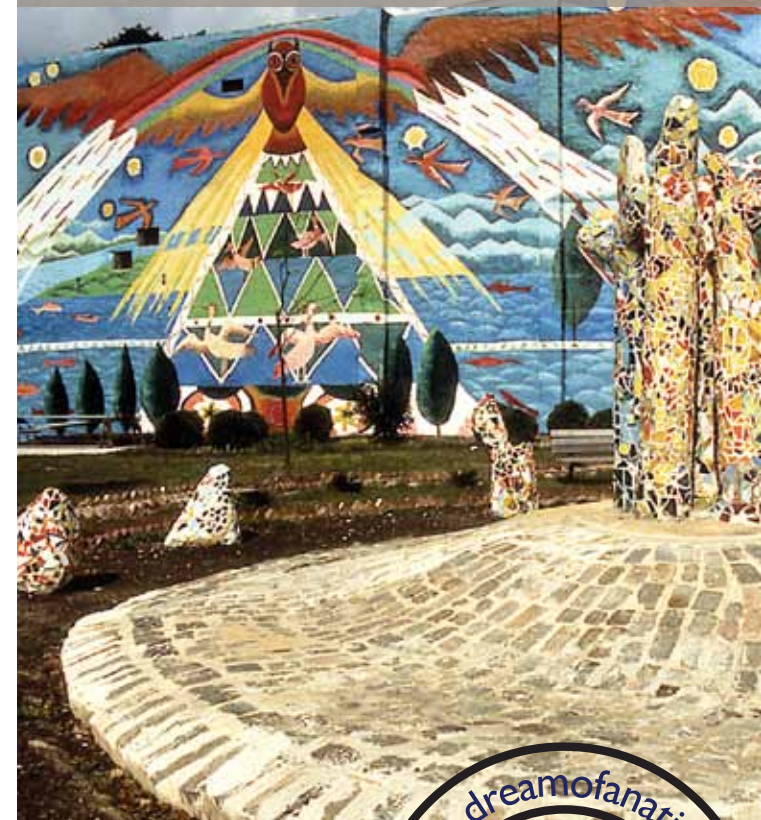
Working in a dilapidated neighborhood with a disenfranchised community impacted me so deeply that I eventually left my tenured professorship and threw myself whole-heartedly into my life's journey to find purpose and meaning.

### The Village of Arts and Humanities (VAH)

During the first three summers, Jojo and I worked mainly with children. It was through them that we gained the trust of the adults in the neighborhood, who gradually joined us in restoring the neighborhood. Our effort also attracted professionals from the fields of construction, the arts, law and education. In 1989,



The first park was named after Arthur Hall's Ile-Ife Black Humanitarian Center. It is located at Germantown Avenue and 10th Street in North Philadelphia. Arthur Hall, the late renowned dancer and choreographer, invited Lily Yeh to build an art park on the abandoned lot next to his building in 1986. Drawn to their activities, many children from the area participated in their park building project.



with the help of Stephen Sayer, lawyer/writer/builder, the summer park building project became a non-profit organization, which, as cofounders, we named the Village of Arts and Humanities. The mission of the Village is to “build community through its innovative arts, educational, social and construction programs.” In all that we do, we aim to do justice to the people we serve.

Working together with residents, Sayer renovated a three-story warehouse into our headquarters where we could hold classes and community meetings. From then on, the Village evolved into a complex entity that included programs and activities for the entire community. From 1986 to 2004, we created 17 art parks and gardens in the Village neighborhood and converted 200 abandoned lots into green spaces including the establishment of a two-acre tree farm.

Concurrently, we ran an extensive building program through which we renovated six dilapidated buildings into office spaces, studios and an apartment. We completed six new three-story homes for first-time low-

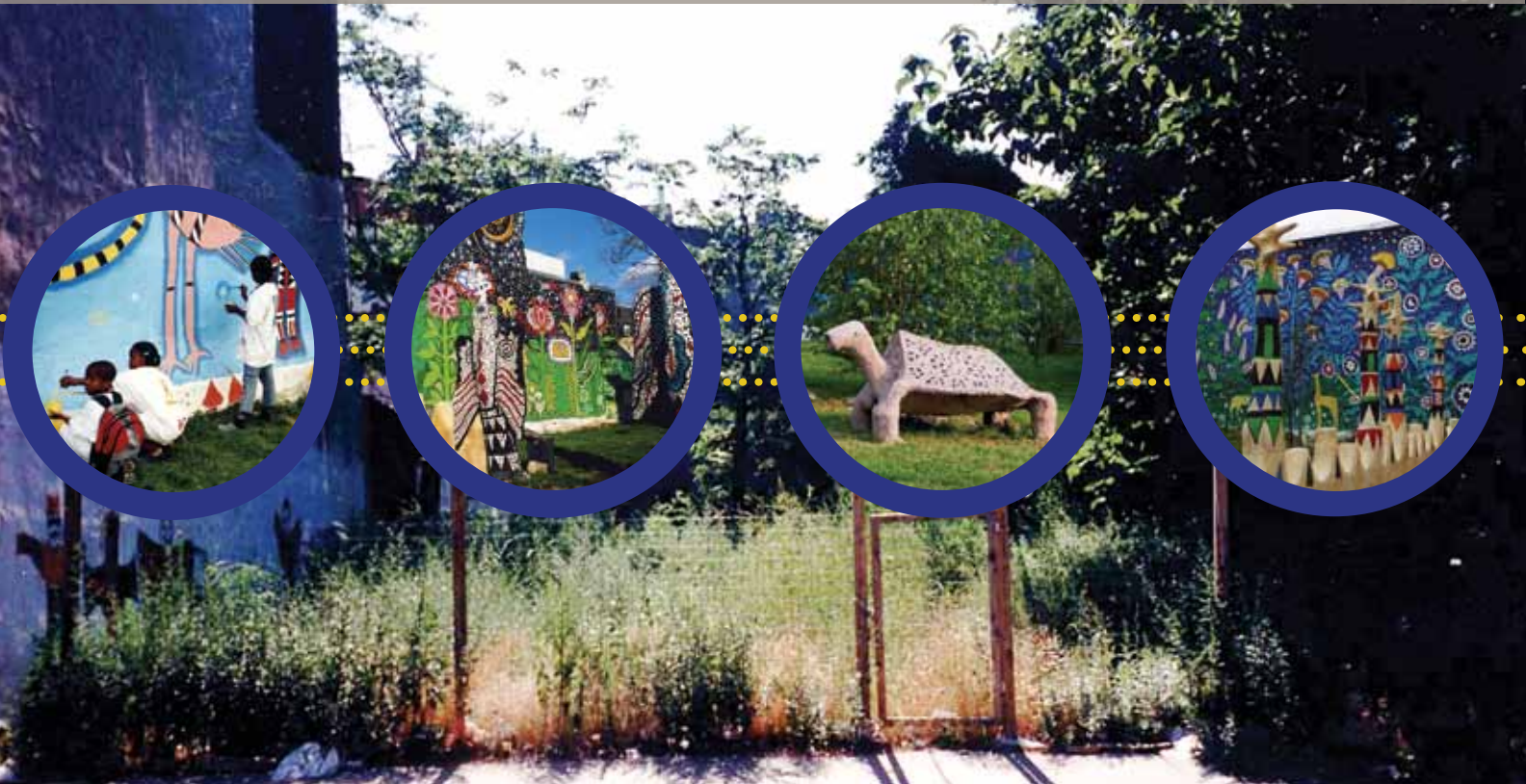
come homebuyers from the neighborhood. Collaborating with schools and public housing agencies in North Philadelphia, the Village on the Move program impacted neighborhoods and communities within the 260-square-block areas in North Philadelphia.

The heart of all our activities laid with our year-round after-school and Saturday programs for children and youth in visual and performing arts, computer skills, spoken word, summer work, nutrition/health and homework help. The Village hosted a youth theater that produced an original play each year, which was performed in Philadelphia and other cities in the States.

Every year in early fall, we celebrated our talent and accomplishments through an art festival in which we paraded through our neighborhood, blessing the land, families and all our children. The pivotal event of the festival was the Rites of Passage designed to help our youth to root in the community. We passed on to them the torches of light, symbols of their own inner light and talent with encouragement and blessings.

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Formerly abandoned lots in north Philadelphia are now works of art and community gathering areas.



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**Through imagination and daring actions, we can create new spaces, into which people can enter on equal footing, each bringing his or her inspiration, talent, and voice.**



This abandoned land once contained six dilapidated homes that eventually were demolished by the city and buried underground. It gradually became a dumping site for trash, debris, and human waste. So when we succeeded in constructing a garden on this site, we named it Magical Garden because the transformation of the place from a true magical and multi-use space.





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Lily Yeh, Joseph Habineza (Rwandan Minister of Sport and Culture) and two local dignitaries attend the dedication of the new Rugegero Genocide Memorial.

This is how a simple summer art project evolved into a complex organization that has been impacting the lives of tens and thousands of people on different levels and became a celebratory model nationwide of successful community building through the arts.

Success demands its own price. The fast expansion of the Village gradually burdened me with more responsibility in fundraising and staff management. I felt the need to return to my original role as an artist to work directly with people. I understood that my canvas lay in the dilapidated places; my pigments are people's talent and stories. My mission is to bring the transformative power of art to

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broken communities to create with residents something that would honor their sensitivity and cultural heritage, something that would express our shared quest for freedom, equality, justice and compassion.

### **Barefoot Artists, Inc.**

In 2004, I left the Village of Arts and Humanities and became the lead artist and founding director of Barefoot Artists, Inc. Inspired by the model of barefoot doctors in China during the 1950s, the goal of Barefoot Artists is simple: Go to places in need, practice one's art of healing and community building; jump-start projects through art making; pass on methodology in self-empowerment and innovative solutions; move on to other places in need.

Under the auspices of Barefoot Artists, I've been able to launch several projects in China and Africa. Working with and learning from the communities working to rebuild after genocide in West Rwanda has been profound and confirms that the journey of my life is still unfolding.

**Whatever our talent & expertise, they are tools for action. When our action serves the public, it has the power to transform. Mother Teresa said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love."**

### **Painting the Colors of Unity, Renewal and Hope**

Sometimes the problems we are facing in the world seem so overwhelming because of the conflicting situations, vast scale and complexity. Twenty-four years of working with communities overwrought in negativity, poverty and hopelessness taught me that, through imagination and daring actions, we can create new spaces into which people can enter on equal footing, each bringing his/her inspiration, talent and voice. Through these long years of practices emerged a kind of living social art that was created for the people at the beginning, then with the people and by the people along the way and then, at the end, belonged to the people. This kind of art has no commercial value, yet it is valueless in its transformative impact on individual, family and communal life.

Because I am an artist, my vehicle is art. I define art not only by its literary, performing and visual expressions, but also and more importantly as creativity in thinking, methodology and implementation. Whatever our talent and expertise, they are our tools for action. When our action serves the public, it has the power to transform. Mother Teresa said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love."

In my quest for authenticity, my life's journey has unfolded in ways that I never could have dreamed. In



Yeh and children in Accra, Ghana. This project took place in an impoverished neighborhood in Jamestown, located in the old section of the city. The undertaking engaged hundreds of children and adults in transforming a bleak courtyard into a public space full of patterns and colors.

addition to making art, being an artist to me is a way of life, a life dedicated to the realization of one's vision, sharing one's talent and doing the right thing without sparing oneself.

We all are blessed with the innate illumination of creativity and imagination. When guided by our vision for a more compassionate, just and sustainable future, we have the power to imagine, create and take action together that will drive away the darkness of ignorance, neglect, bigotry and greed. I believe that here lies the hope for our future.

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*Lily Yeh is an internationally celebrated artist whose work has taken her to communities throughout the world. As founder and executive director of the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia from 1986 to 2004, she helped create a national model of community building through the arts. In 2004, Yeh pursued her work internationally, founding Barefoot Artists, Inc. (www.barefootartists.org) to bring the transformative power of art to impoverished communities around the globe through participatory, multifaceted projects that foster community empowerment, improve the physical environment, promote economic development and preserve indigenous art and culture.*

