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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,

Painting Hope in the World

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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.

Go to dreamofanation.org to get the book!
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-income 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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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.
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.

What’s my mission? It is to bring the transformative power of art to broken communities to create something that would express our shared quest for freedom, equality, justice and compassion. 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. I turned to my original role as an artist to work directly with people's talent and stories. My pigments are people's talent and stories. My people. I understood that my canvas lay in the dilapidated community, not in the city or the studio. A 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 community building; turn to my original role as an artist to work directly with people's talent and expertise; thereby, they are our tools for action. Whatever our talent and expertise, they are our tools for action. When our action serves the public, it has the power to imagine, create and take action to transform. Mother Theresa 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 the end, belonged to the people. This kind of art has no commercial value, yet it is valuable 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 Theresa 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 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.

Lily Yeh and children in Accra, Ghana. This project took place in a somewhat neglected neighborhood in Jamaica, 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. In the end, belonged to the people. This kind of art has no commercial value, yet it is valuable in its transformative impact on individual, family and communal life.

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 invaluable in its transformative impact on individual, family and communal life.

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