



All photos courtesy Barefoot Artists

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.

