

Lily Yeh
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This artist creates public art in communities around the world that are plagued by poverty, crime and despair.

In 2004, I was unhappy as director of the Village of Arts and Humanities, the organization I co-founded in 1986 to transform North Philadelphia communities through art. I spent most of my time raising funds and managing staff. I yearned to be on the frontlines of action again, like I had been in 1994.

That year, I was in Korogocho, a shantytown bordering a huge garbage dump near Nairobi, Kenya, where people experience the violence of poverty and deprivation on so many levels – filth, lack of clean water, air, opportunities and hope. Overwhelmed, I asked myself, ‘What to do?’ My answer came, ‘Bring colors.’

So I organized residents of Korogocho to paint murals in St. John’s Catholic Church, a place where the poor come to worship and find mutual support. More than 1,000 people attended the dedication. On that day I felt the immense power of art. We brought beauty and hope to a vast slum.

* Art projects launched in the U.S., Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Ecuador, Rwanda, China, Taiwan, India, Haiti, Syria and in the West Bank

* Presentations and workshops around the world have inspired people to take action to make the world a better place

A decade later, I launched Barefoot Artists, to spark transformation, healing and social change in places plagued by poverty, crime and despair. Since then, we have carried out projects and training workshops in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas.

We empower people by reconnecting them with their innate creativity. One of our first initiatives was The Rwanda Healing Project. I collaborated with the genocide survivors in Rubavu District in West Rwanda, to transform a rough mass grave into the Rugerero 1994 Genocide Memorial. Under my guidance, participants created beautiful mosaics to cover the bone chamber and turned bleak volcanic rocks into a verdant garden. It became the official genocide memorial for the region.

More recently, we've worked with the indigenous Ah Mei community of Chong An, Taiwan, to re-energize a fading community with art projects and educational workshops. And in the Balata refugee camp in West Bank, we collaborated with the Women's Center, local residents, artists, students and international volunteers to create colorful murals that transform oppressive environments into places of vitality and joy. In the face of cruelty and injustice, we reestablish freedom through creating beauty.

I have come to realize that broken communities are my canvases, people's stories the pigments and their talents, the tools that shape the art we create. Making art in forlorn places is like making a fire in a frozen winter night. It brings light, warmth and hope.