WORKS OF HEART
Building Village Through the Arts

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Song of the Wounded Earth

To remember, to mourn, to heal, to celebrate

SUZANNE YOUNG

The glittering mosaics and visual beauty of the Village of Arts and Humanities would be vibrant in any context. But after passing through block after city block of grime-blackened houses in North Philadelphia, the defeated soil of rubble-strewn lots gives way to an enclave. Here the sense of energy and order is startling in its incongruity. Color is everywhere. The heart of the Village, a ten-square-block area deep within North Philadelphia, radiates sparks of energy the way a diamond catches the light. Abandoned lots are reclaimed into gardens; low, undulating walls surround tiled courtyards. Fledgling trees grow in precise rows in a community nursery. Mosaics and wall murals in primary colors announce that a vital spirit is at work.

Founder Lily Yeh, an artist who answered an invitation to create a garden in an abandoned lot here in 1986 and then somehow never left, has nurtured that first garden into an entire Village. In the Village today, more than 250 abandoned lots and structures have become 24 parks, gardens and green spaces. There are at least a half dozen rehabbed houses and six brand new ones, not to mention sustainable enterprises, such
as the nursery with up to 15,000 seedlings and a crafts studio. Since its inception, the Village has grown to include a permanent staff, an annual budget of $1.5 million, and hundreds of volunteers. From its 10-block heart, it serves a 200-block area. But its influence extends even further, through the groups of college students who learn community building firsthand by tackling volunteer projects at the Village and through the community development professionals around the world who come to watch and understand.

Under the inspired direction of Yeh, the staff, student volunteers and a growing core of leading artists help children and teens learn skills, make art and express themselves. In the process, they are rebuilding a shattered community, one mosaic chip at a time.

"In places like North Philadelphia, art is even more powerful," Yeh says. "Here, it is the cement that holds the community together."

In 2002, a year's worth of economic development, skill building and art projects came together in the Village's annual fall Kujenga Pamoja festival. Well before the events of September 11, 2001, Village staff had adopted the theme "Song of the Wounded Earth" for the next year's festival, to acknowledge the vulnerability of the earth, the air and the water. By the time the festival took place in late September 2002, the theme had acquired even deeper resonance.

Although the annual festival always has a spontaneous, even chaotic feel, it is carefully choreographed. The staff develops a detailed plan of event sequences throughout the multi-block festival area, beginning with the 10 a.m. technical and physical set-ups, to the 4 p.m. launch, through its conclusion at around 9 p.m.
During Lily Yeh’s first visit to Nairobi, the Village motto “Together We Build” captured the hearts of the people in one of Nairobi’s poorest neighborhoods. On her return, she dubbed the Village’s annual festival “Kujenga Pamoja,” which is the motto’s Swahili translation.

Kujenga Pamoja 2002 began with the arrival of a drill team from another North Philadelphia neighborhood, who had marched sixteen blocks in formation to the festival to announce to the Village that it was time to begin.

“Their energy was just heart boiling,” Yeh said. “They really started us off.”

Hundreds of villagers mingled with hundreds of visitors “to remember, to mourn, to heal, to celebrate.” Three Village parks, all former lots reclaimed from neglect, carried the festival theme’s three components: earth, air and ocean. Children and parents decorated the parks with crepe paper streamers, fashioned musical instruments out of bean pods, old milk cartons and pots and pans to hang from the trees, made headdresses, painted their faces, and added last-minute touches to the animal costumes.

With the final preparations now finished, the crowd assembled in the Village heart for a “blessing procession.” Among those in the throng were parents, children, community officials including the mayor of Philadelphia and the district’s state senator, and visitors from as far away as Colorado and Taiwan. The assembly promenaded through the Village, past a forest of memorial poles, stopping at a dozen or so houses to bestow blessings and good will.

“May the Great Spirit bless this household,” someone called, and the crowd chanted it back in unison. “And bless these children. And bless this family. And may the Great Spirit bless this village.” A child stepped forward to offer a bright
basket filled with flowers and vegetables to the residents gathered at the front door. Handfuls of glitter and confetti sprayed the air; the crowd cheered and then moved on to the next house. The mayor gamely wore a Village-made flowered headdress and led the blessings for several houses himself.

The entourage made its way to the three parks. The low walls, trees and fountains were now decorated with crepe paper streamers, which the wind set to fluttering, while digital music created by Village teens played in the background. Their blessings honored the work of the construction crew, community volunteers, Village artisans and children who had worked together to create these islands of beauty and order.

In front of a debris-filled lot, the procession stopped in the waning afternoon. Yeh said, “Here we need a really, really big blessing for this land, so we can get the funding to
THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES was Gold Medal winner of the 2001 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence. The biennial Rudy Bruner Award honors places developed with such vision and imagination that they transform urban problems into creative solutions. Award winners are innovative and guided by creative visions of what is possible, often in defiance of existing norms. Many reflect complex collaborations among people who may not have come together before. Awardees, like the Village of Arts and Humanities, often have succeeded, under the most adverse conditions imaginable, in creating places that become the cornerstones of their communities.

The Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence was established in 1986 by Simeon Bruner and named in honor of his late father. Simeon Bruner, himself, has been a leader in urban architecture, pioneering adaptive reuse of historic 19th and early 20th century buildings. His urban renovation projects include the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams.

Each Rudy Bruner Award cycle documents awardees in a set of detailed case studies that include project history, financing, design, impact and other measures of success. Rudy Bruner Award books may be ordered through the Bruner Foundation at www.brunerfoundation.org
restore it." The crowd mustered up even more energy for that blessing.

It was dusk when the procession ended back in the heart of the Village, where participants did what people do at every festival the world over: they ate. After the substantial meal, everyone converged at He Hé Park, the Village's first park, where the children donned costumes. Accompanied by street marshals, the drill team led the now-large crowd across Germantown Avenue, a major thoroughfare, to a large abandoned lot. "An enchanted land," Yeh called it, which had been transformed into a ceremonial ground lit with lanterns. Here, the three-story brick wall of a bordering abandoned building became a 60-foot wide screen for a video show of some of nature's most dramatic scenes, interwoven with footage of the Village's children. Projected in large-scale were crashing waves caught in mid-spray, a field of brilliant wildflowers amid lush grass, mountain peaks and more.

"You know where the word breathtaking comes from when you hear the audience gasp at the images," Yeh said. "The beauty of these huge images literally takes their breath away. They have never seen such beauty in their neighborhood. And yet, here it is, right in front of them."

A low pulse of African drums introduced the Ivory Coast's leading dancer and choreographer, who launched a youth theater piece around the festival's theme of the relationship between people and the earth at this moment in human history. The children, costumed as animals, fish and birds, chanted their theme songs. Children from the poetry workshops recited their poems, against a background of music created by Village youth and arranged by a resident composer. Accompanied by drums, the teens, garbed in white robes with red sashes, moved from the back of the field to the stage down front for the ceremony that mourned the wounded earth.
Here, candles held high against the dark. Village dances
lit a coin tanum were intoned, as the new granaries of the earth, fortresses
of the future; they spoke an oath to protect the land and to
respect the creatures and the peoplen in it.

"Symbolically, we introduce the teen into the phi-
gran with the support of the winners. We are the winners.
h,aid," Kae said. "We are weaving this so tight that they cannot fall
through." The festival culminated with nearly everyone dancing
on stage in happy abandon.

As it turned out, "Song of the Wounded Earth" was
the most successful Kungna Festival ever. To figure out
why, Ya and her staff evaluated every aspect of the festival.
The difference between success and disappointment certainly
wasn't the amount of work that went into it year after year.
Ultimately, they concluded that incorporating the work done
by the people into the performance was a key factor in its suc-

or success. Ya and her assistants then began to plan for
this year's festival.
by various groups during the year into the festival made it a culmination and celebration of the year by many, rather than a special event done by a few. Even those who could not attend were represented by their work on costumes, poetry or music, much of it done in the Village's summer workshops.

"This is an all-inclusive creative process that anyone can interpret and follow their own passion in interpretation. It is multi-layered. Everyone's creative energy is included and honored. And it's a lot of fun and togetherness. It culminates in such imagination and beauty of art," Yeh said.

Yeh says that "community building is not just about housing, although we are doing that. It's not just about gardens, but that's an important backbone here. It's not just about education. It's about all of that but..." she stops and then picks up again in a quiet voice. "We must remember our heart and our soul and our emotion. You create structure for people to express themselves and you do it at a professional level."

Indeed, the artists that have attached themselves to the Village are a notable group that includes dance, theater, film and music professionals, all acclaimed in their fields. "People think community-based art is not good. But we make it the best. At this professional level," Yeh says, "through art we transform the grittiness of everyday life into energy, beauty, joy, strength, to help us face the future."

Slowly, people are returning to the neighborhood because it is safer. An alley where drug dealers once dominated is now dubbed Angel Alley, for the wall-high Ethiopian angels in brilliant mosaics, some with fierce swords, who stand guard over the community. As abandoned houses are rehabbed by the Village or removed and turned into gardens, the drug trade recedes and with it, the crime. The Village's tree nursery in a
once-abandoned field across the street from a high-rise low-income housing project has no fences, yet.

"I don't say that this is not without a struggle," Yeh says. "Building a sustainable program in the inner city is like building a castle on quicksand. It's very hard, but we keep at it. We keep at it. Many times we fall flat on our faces, but when we do it right, there's nothing like it. Nothing like it." ♥

The Village of Arts and Humanities celebrated its 20th anniversary in June 2006 with a gala Kujenga Pamoja / Juntos Construimos / Together We Build Festival.

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IN 2003, LILY YEH FORMED Barefoot Artists, Inc., a non-profit arts organization that uses the power of art to transform impoverished communities. Based on her 18 years of work in the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia, she has taken the concepts and models proven there, and, through Barefoot Artists, applied them in projects in Kenya, Ghana, Ecuador, China and Rwanda, among others.

As the name implies, Barefoot Artists is a volunteer organization without the encumbrance of permanent staff and overhead, for which Yeh is the unpaid founder and lead artist. She contracts for services as needed, and raises funds for specific projects that pair volunteer expertise with local people to advance health, education and economic development.

"Warrior Angel: The Work of Lily Yeh" by Bill Moskin and Jill Jackson, a paper on her methodology of using art to transform and build community, can be found at www.barefootartists.org

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