

10/19/2007

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Lily Yeh joins us from Philadelphia. She is a visual artist, Executive Director of village of arts and humanity. She combines public art and community action. The village is a group of workers that change abandoned parks to beautiful structures within northern Philadelphia; Yeh has taken her work to Nairobi, and has plans for projects in Ecuador and China.

Janet Smith – from the Chicago center for cultural affairs. On behalf of the Chicago center for cultural affairs, we have to broaden the arts. Not just what the arts can do for business, but that they are good for educating our children, the arts help to build communities. What we also have to recognize is the type of burden that has been put on artists. What is more important is how the art can create a peaceful world for all of us. Spoke to encourage us to continue fostering change through the art process.

Wendy read a poem by Apple computer, book title “Teaching with Fire”

Session Notes:

In her session Lily displayed a slide show that allowed participants to visualize the process of doing community art. Lily went through her career history, and the history of the village.

In 1986 Lily entered into northern Philadelphia as a visual artist. Her first experience was in developing a village garden. She was told that kids will ruin her project, that she was Chinese and no one would listen or respect her. With this quote, “the best of you will die, and the rest of you will not amount to anything”, Lily took her first steps into her life’s journey.

Lily shared that taking this project on was not about community building; it was about Lily being able to find herself. From finding her center she was able to find from where she wanted to grow. She received help from community members, the children, Jojo, a community member with a drug ridden past, who she later referred to as “big man” and her partner in beautifying the parks. Her first crew was from age 3 ½ to 13 years.

Individuals, community boards, and members did not help at all, they just laughed. Although the participants did not know what they were doing; in their head, they were driven by what was in their hearts, similar to Lily.

With their determination, they were able to take empty space and the children, and other participating community members were able to change it to a beautiful park.

Lily spoke of Jojo, “big man”, an individual with no art background, a recovered drug addict, had become an artist. He was able to transform the community in more ways than just artistically. He displayed a black man that was making a difference, a man that could change the way he affected his community.

Yeh, welcomed everyone to help her change community gardens. She was able to bring people together, bring ideas together, and work together. Gardens were developed to be welcoming, the walls were to be welcoming. Yeh stated, “everything should have music and beauty to it”.

A good example of bringing an emotion/ feeling to a park is **Meditation Park** – called this because in the inner city the tension is so strong, it results in a lot of conflict. This place was developed to allow individuals to come re-center, and find peace. It consists of African architecture, Islamic decorations, Chinese gardens; all of these ideas were brought together to make a beautiful peaceful place.

With her determination and the help of community members, Yeh was able to transform two acres of industrial land filled with cement, to a tree farm. This tree farm is not only a farm but also a tree sapling business. Similar to all Yeh’s parks, this tree park is an open area for everyone to visit and enjoy. But to protect the trees from being stolen or vandalized Yeh has put of beautiful mosaic animals to protect the space.

All of the gardens are open but they are guarded with beauty. These beautiful figures are seen by individuals from northern Philadelphia, the same individuals and minds that develop the beautiful art.

In Yeh’s parks many of the images come from folk art individualized by the artist. Yeh found that sustainability could be found in our “treasure house” also known as the minds of our children.

Along with parks, Yeh worked to create a Youth Theater. Created as a place where students learned about African folk tales and spoke about their environment. They spoke of the drugs that are invading their space, and the issues they face. After bearing their hearts the children are able to find their center and it allows us to find our future.

From Yeh's immigrant experience, she learned that we could become invisible, adopted into mainstream culture. We look at ourselves, and define our beauty by others credentials, and not the beauty within our own community and ourselves. When we can find beauty within ourselves, we can become a self-sustaining community, we will be able to garden and live from our own vegetable gardens.

Within communities, Yeh empowered children and parents to come together and find their inner beauty. To allow children to know, that it is for them that we work so hard, to be their foundation. The festivals became a community tool. It became an opportunity for parents to pledge to their children, "we will be your foundation". In return the teens promise to "respect and honor" the adults. It became a right of passage.

I come to light the fire, the torch. We are all artists; art is creativity in thinking, methodology, and implementation. We all have that light; once we are in touch with that light we are guided. That light that guides us, it is the same force that makes the world rotate.

99 blocks with UPenn and Temple we came together and build a model to tell the city how we want to build our future.

In 2004, Yeh left The Village, to stay at the front line; she created the Barefoot Artist, doing projects in Africa. Upon traveling to Africa, she came in contact with the mass grave. It was not with beauty or dignity; Yeh proposed that beauty was brought to the site. Supported by the government, she went back, and brought help. As a community, they dug up bone chambers, so they could properly bury the dead. The genocide memorial was put completely in community hands. The word is "remember", that we will *never forget* the genocide, that we will *never forget* how they died. In 2006, 5,000 people came to the memorial to remember the dead. This year is the opening ceremony, during which the memorial will be given to the community and the government. So that they may never forget.

When working on the memorial, Yeh and her partners had a thought, “how do we deal with the dead and the living?” As a result the project grew, and more people joined. The construction of the survivor’s village was a dynamic process.

We must also look and face on. Community members need to find and use space, we need to take action, to organize children, and adults. These are the individuals that bring color, and make beauty. We take the designs of children, and we create unique art. The children drew cows, to display the source of milk, they made the cows very large so that milk may go in all seven directions, to all ends of the world.

Along with finding a way to empower community members to take action, Yeh spoke of the importance of recognizing. Yeh spoke of how they brought photos of the community members so that they may see the beauty in themselves, so they may see themselves as beautiful members of the community, as artwork.

Yeh shares her idea of community development by saying, “Community development is moving different ways, it is a continuous dance.” She encouraged her listeners to find their circle.

Yeh closed her session by sharing a quote,

“When guided by a clear mission this entity of multi-faceted, multi- leveled and interconnected programs and activities can become a powerful instrument in building assets and revitalizing community.

When the programs and activities bring people hope, energy, and a sense of deep rooting in their own cultural identity and opportunities for innovation and growth, they are in the process for creating a self-energizing and sustainable community.”

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