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## **Learning A New Way: Non-Violent Conflict Resolution and Community-Based Art Projects**

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CHAPTER  
SIX



*Renée M. Martínez*

*Learning A New Way:  
Non-Violent Conflict Resolution and  
Community-Based Art Projects*

As I contemplated giving this presentation, I was reminded of what ten years ago would have been my own healthy skepticism regarding the topic of teaching non-violent conflict resolution through community-based art projects. Before becoming an artist, the activist, policy analyst and educator in me might have questioned the wisdom of directing human and other resources toward art — and to do so with such lofty goals as helping achieve peace. Yet these days, especially as an artist, and I am guessing others in this room might concur, I believe in and know the incredible power of art, and base this on what perhaps only could be called “the authority of the Soul.”

Activist, academician and artist Audre Lorde eloquently voices such conviction in her essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” where she implores Black women to use this art form as the “revelatory distillation of experience.” (Lorde, p.37) Lorde asserts that poetry (or more broadly, art), “...is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the

light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experience of our daily lives.” (Lorde, p. 37)

Lorde argues that this art provides not only the language to dream of change and revolution, but also the language to demand and implement them. And yet in this persuasive essay she also acknowledges that our children cannot survive on our dreams alone. Lorde reminds us that the children shout out, “If you want us to change the world someday, we at least have to live long enough to grow up!” (Lorde, p.38).

For me, this imperative brings us to the issue of the violence faced by our youth. According the Children’s Defense fund and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 1995 in the U.S. a child died from gunshot wounds every 2 hours, and 3 million children each year were reported abused or neglected. “In 1993, over one-third of male high school youth, and nearly 1 in 10 female students, reported that they had carried a weapon at least once during the previous 30 days. One in 7 male high school students reported carrying a gun within the prior month.” (Weitz, /chapter 1.html).

Violence is just one of many serious challenges and life conditions facing our young people. Referred to in the psychological and social policy literature as stress or risk factors, others include poverty, racism, discrimination, and unemployment. I focus on violence because it deeply permeates our children’s lives, and also because the stakes are very high. Society is just recently beginning to see this crisis of violence, especially as it impacts our children. For the past decade, one important voice of leadership in this arena has come from Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, M.D., Assistant Dean for Government and Community Programs at the Harvard School of Public Health, and author of *Deadly Consequences: How Violence Is Destroying Our Teenage Population and a Plan To Begin Solving the Problem*.

She advocates a public health analysis of youth violence, and strategies that develop alternative and proactive intervention. Prothrow-Stith sees a need for more primary responses, such as prevention and education, and also secondary responses such as early intervention and behavior modification. These contrast with common societal tertiary responses, which for the most part are reactive and involve the criminal justice system, often emphasizing punishment and retribution. She points out that our society's de facto response to youth violence would be comparable to dealing with the public health issue of smoking-related lung cancer solely by surgically removing tumors in advanced cancer patients (a tertiary response with questionable success rates), rather than trying to prevent people from becoming smokers (a primary response), or helping them quit smoking (a secondary response). Prothrow-Stith and others argue for strategies that help cultivate a culture of non-violent alternatives for our children, and do so especially for those most at risk—young Men of Color living in poverty.

In the midst of our society's almost exclusive reliance on the criminal justice system to punitively address the issue of youth violence, more and more people, from a variety of perspectives, are advocating alternatives to such current limited strategies. For many of us, this recent trend is a welcome and long overdue change. Because for us, not only has it often felt as if an entire generation has been written off and vilified as so-called "super predators," but it seems a war has been waged against our youth. We know this even without horror stories of attempted summary executions of Latino youth by the Los Angeles Police Department.

Given the epidemic proportions of violence among youth, more and more individuals, communities, organizations and policy makers are anxious to find solutions to the crisis. Fortunately, the discussions are becoming more sophisticated in understanding the roots of risk, accounting for larger social contextual issues and the synergistic relationship of stress factors which shape our young people's adolescent development. The psychological literature is often cited for successful examples of "resiliency" or children's ability to survive adversity. As

the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development notes, community commitment is fundamental to any efforts for helping youth survive:

They must have sustained, caring relationships with adults; receive guidance in facing serious challenges; become a valued member of a constructive peer group; feel a sense of worth as a person; become socially competent; know how to use the support systems available to them; achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices; find constructive expression of the curiosity and exploration that strongly characterizes their ages; believe in a promising future with real opportunities; and find ways of being useful to others.

(Weitz, /chapter 1-1.html).

Increasingly, community-based art programs are becoming popular alternatives to helping provide our young people with creative non-violent spaces and activities. For many youngsters whose lives are touched by and at times engulfed in violence and destruction, such programs have the potential to provide avenues for creativity, self-expression, and non-violence. In doing so these programs can perhaps help make room for our children's energies and self-definition to be part of a constructive process, empowering them to voice their hopes and dreams.

The vital importance of art, and the value of teaching it to our children is not a new concept in Chicano communities. The transformative and educational properties of art are deeply embedded in the Chicano Movement and Chicano culture. Whether in the work of Teatro Campesino, or such art organizations as Los Angeles' Self Help Graphics (modeled in part after México City's socialist Taller Topografica Popular), or Chicano muralism, community-based art is part of our collective history and identity. What is now new, is the broad array of voices converging around a call for using art to address the many issues confronting our nation's youth.

In what might best be described as a classic situation of "politics makes strange bedfellows," interesting and previously unexpected partnerships

have popped up across the country. From this we find a national trend, supported on local and state levels, advocating the development and funding of youth art programs. While each voice has its own agenda, priorities and point of origin, the current common thread is art advocacy. From one corner we hear the community-based organizations who have and continue to offer successful art programs that usually provide ethnic/racial identity affirmation, coping skills development, personal empowerment and social service components. Add to this, voices outside but supportive of the community, which might be characterized as social planning in the settlement house tradition of using arts education as part of an individual's personal and social development; here too are voices of allies for equity in access to arts. There also are voices, generally philanthropic, which long ago brought this country our public libraries, parks and schools, with the intent of exposing the masses to "Culture" (with a capital "C"), and come from a well-intentioned but essentially ethnocentric and assimilationist missionary position.

The newer voices in this discussion are those of federal and local juvenile justice systems — perhaps for good and caring intentions, maybe out of desperation, or simply a realistic cost benefit analysis (where it is argued that an art program can have a per participant annual cost of \$850, versus a youth detention "boot camp" program with a \$28,000 annual price tag per person). Federal, state and local politicians have joined the mix, generally seeing art programs as possible solutions to what they often define as the problems of youth delinquency — which can include everything from gangs, drugs, violence and property crime. Concurrent with such arts program advocacy, and not entirely separate, are the increasing efforts in schools and communities toward teaching non-violent conflict resolution, anger management, empathy, tolerance, multicultural and diversity education, as well as other innovative endeavors, such as restorative justice efforts.

Like any coalition building, the most successful relationships are based upon knowing what each partner brings to the undertaking, and being very clear about what they can or can't be relied upon to do. In many

instances we and our community-based organizations are ahead of the trend, and bring well-honed experience and expertise. Our perspectives are essential, if only to help inform and balance those of partners who may be from outside our culture or communities, or those who may not share the profoundly personal commitment we have to our children. As the interest and funding for youth arts programs expands, community involvement must be part of project design and implementation.

A pivotal moment in the movement focusing attention on youth art programs came in 1994 when the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities was appointed and charged to "offer ideas about how we can provide children with safe havens to develop and explore their own creative and intellectual potentials." (Weitz, /introduction-1.html). The Committee issued the landmark report, *Coming Up Taller: Arts and Humanities Programs for Children and Youth At Risk*. It convincingly documents the transformative power of the arts in improving children's learning, and their social, academic and emotional development. (Weitz, /introduction-1.html, /introduction-2.html). As honorary Committee chair Hillary Rodham Clinton notes, "We know that the arts have the potential for obliterating the limits that are too often imposed on our lives. We know that they can take anyone, but particularly a child, and transport that child beyond the limits that circumstance has prescribed." (Weitz, /introduction-1.html)

*Coming Up Taller* discusses the need for technical assistance, financial support, and community links to public agencies. (Weitz, /chapter 5.html). The Committee also called for better assessment and evaluation of programs. In addition to conducting an in depth study of nine programs, they compiled a list of over two hundred successful community-based art programs across the nation. (Weitz, /appendix.html)

This report spawned many efforts including the annual *Coming Up Taller Awards* (co-sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts), which recognize successful programs. (*Coming Up Taller*, /awards.html). So too, it helped inspire many related arts efforts, influencing the growth of Americans for the Arts which helps provide resources,

public policy development, and serves as an information clearing house. One of the primary focal points of this consortium is promoting the arts to “rescue youth and deter crime.” (Americans for the Arts, /education/youth.html). They also helped develop the Institute for Community Development and the Arts, which promotes local public and private funding for the arts. The Institute represents a partnership of cities, counties, state legislatures, the NEA, President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities and the Bravo Film and Arts Network. (Americans for the Arts, /education/youth.html).

Another important NEA partnership that followed the directive of the Coming Up Taller proposal, was an effort to quantifiably document the success of youth arts programs. In spring of 1999, National Endowment for the Arts chair Bill Ivey gave testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives. He referred to the YouthARTS Art Program for at Youth At Risk, a research effort co-funded by the NEA, Department of Justice, Americans for Arts, and local arts councils in the cities of San Antonio, Portland (OR), and Atlanta. Citing preliminary data, he noted the impressive improvement in participants’ communication skills, ability to complete tasks, attitudes, self-esteem, school interest, resistance to negative peer pressure, and having fewer court referrals. He also announced the production of a multimedia tool kit to provide communities with information on art programs for at-risk youth. (National Endowment of the Arts, a.). These research results and the tool kit can be helpful in building new partnerships and identifying potential funding sources.

While violence prevention and non-conflict resolution may not be the explicit or central focus of most youth arts programs, all programs generally involve some component of team building or developing group communication skills. This may be done out of necessity — simply to manage group dynamics, or to facilitate working on a group product — or as a specific learning goal.

However in 1997, the NEA initiated an innovative program called the Partnership for Conflict Resolution Education in the Arts. Co-sponsored

with the Department of Juvenile Justice, it is part of a national education and training effort to advance the principle of conflict resolution, and the development of conflict education programs in youth initiatives. The partnership “seeks to benefit youth and their families by providing community arts programs that integrate conflict resolution principles in a personal, accountable, holistic and coordinated manner.” (NEA, c.). They contracted the National Center for Conflict Resolution Education to provide two-day workshops for arts-based youth programs. Program staff and artists, and representatives from collaborating community organizations participate in workshops. Thus far they have worked with roughly twenty programs nationwide. I very much hope that this type of training will become increasingly accessible to youth arts organizations.

We have hundreds of incredibly vital and successful community-based art programs currently serving our youth. I believe their work can only be enhanced by integrating non-violent conflict resolution into their existing efforts. And as new programs are initiated, I hope that this emphasis becomes an integral part of how we teach our children.

In “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde reminds us that:

*...it is our dreams that point the way to freedom.  
Those dreams are made realizable through our  
poems that give us the strength and courage to see,  
to feel, to speak, and to dare.*

*If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most  
deeply and directly toward and through promise is  
discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core—  
the foundation—of our power...we give up the  
future of our worlds. (Lorde, p.39)*

Our young people are our most precious resource—the degree of risk they face in their lives is not exaggerated, and should never be underestimated. We must provide safe and supportive places for our

children to explore and grow into themselves, into their future selves. Providing opportunities for creativity and art may be one of our best hopes to offer our children safe passage to their future.



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\* Links in resources page may no longer be active.