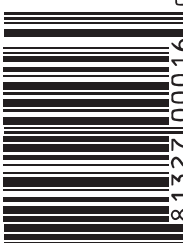


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Honor Award:

Helping Rwanda Heal

Barefoot Artists help genocide survivors mark their village as their own, and build hope and community spirit in the process.

by Pat Matson Knapp

When Alan Jacobson stood in front of the SEGD Annual Conference participants in 2004 and urged them to use their talents to make a difference in the world, at least one person in the crowd was listening.

It was Jacobson.

Two years later, Jacobson is making his second trip to Rwanda, where he, Lily Yeh, and the rest of a team called Barefoot Artists started the Rwanda Healing Project, a two-year, multi-dimensional initiative that “expands the boundaries of art and design in the environment as a vehicle for social change.”

In September 2005, the team made its first trip to the Survivors Village in Cyanzarwe District, Rwanda, where they worked with villagers on a painting project intended to not only visually transform the village, but to foster community pride and help the survivors acquire skills that will allow them to improve their lives. The Rwandan government established the Survivors Village as part of efforts to resettle residents who fled the country during the 1994 genocide that killed up to 1 million people in 100 days.

Jacobson, President of AGS and Principal of ex;it, became involved after Yeh, founder of Philadelphia's Village of the Arts and Humanities, was a featured speaker at the 2004 conference that Jacobson chaired. Twenty years ago, Yeh was asked to direct a park building project in an inner city neighborhood blighted by abandoned lots and crack houses. Yeh nurtured it into a program that includes parks, gardens, studios, and workshops providing arts, education, and neighborhood development services to its residents.

The Rwanda project emerged after Yeh began searching for a way to bring her arts/community building programs to the rest of the world. Meeting Rwandan Red Cross worker Jean Bosco Rukirande



An estimated 100,000 children were orphaned during the 1994 genocide.

at an international conference inspired her to choose his war-torn country as an initial project site. The Barefoot Artists team also includes Terry Tempest Williams, a writer, and Meghan Morris, a graduate student completing her thesis on refugee children. "Making art in stark environments like these generates a powerful and positive energy, the likes of which I have not experienced anywhere else," says Yeh.

Environmental graphics?

The Rwanda Healing Project can be called "environmental graphics" in the sense that Yeh, Jacobson, and the team have helped the villagers create a unique sense of place and the pride that identity



Opposite and Above: Designs of flowers, animals, and geometric shapes were derived from the villagers' stories and drawings, often interpreted by Alan Jacobson.



The Barefoot Artists team distributed hundreds of pens and notebooks to villagers, asking them to record their stories in words and images.

“A big goal was to help them feel valuable and powerful, and help them realize they have the power to make change for themselves,” Jacobson notes.”

THE RWANDA HEALING PROJECT

Design

Barefoot Artists, Friends of the Survivors Village in Cyanzarwe District, Rwanda

Design Team

Alan Jacobson, Lily Yeh (Principals in Charge), Meghan Brenna Morris, Terry Tempest Williams

Photos

Alan Jacobson

engenders. It’s also an example of how art can help individuals and communities heal, says Jacobson. “Art is a wonderful way to engage people, because it appeals to the three-year-old and the 88-year-old. It’s an emotive language we can all understand and it has real impact on the quality of our lives.”

But Jacobson believes the real impact of the project was in the team’s engagement with the villagers. During the team’s initial three-week visit, they conducted drawing and mural painting workshops focused on helping the villagers tell stories in words and images by remembering their past, imagining the future, and connecting with their immediate environment. The stories and pictures that emerged from the workshops were incorporated into the artwork painted on the villagers’ mud and plaster homes.

The team also trained the villagers to develop new designs, chart them on houses, and paint. Some were trained to supervise the work of others. In total, more than 200 villagers and volunteers participated. “Quality control was a huge issue,” laughs Jacobson. “But we had to realize that we didn’t own this project, they did.” Ten houses were painted during the initial visit and, since then, villagers have painted 17 more. The team will return to the village periodically to ensure the project’s sustainability.

Just a beginning

More than visually changing their environment, the project was designed to help villagers develop skills that could be applied to other home improvement and community projects. “A big goal was to help them feel valuable and powerful, and help them realize they have the power to make change for themselves,” Jacobson notes.

It’s just a beginning. “It’s life and it’s color, and it is fascinating what changing the environment does to people. But it doesn’t put food on the table,” he admits. “If we could put floors in those houses so people didn’t have to live in mud, that would really impact the quality of their lives. I think about that every day.”

Poverty, a huge number of genocide orphans, and AIDS are Rwanda’s biggest enemies, combined with the social rifts caused by the genocide. “As a policy, the Rwandan government required killers and survivors to live in close proximity as a means of restoring unity and order,” Jacobson explains. “They have to deal with what happened to them and their families every day.” Ongoing reconciliation trials are being conducted in attempts to heal the wounds, but the process will take lifetimes.

Team members talked with many Rwandans about the genocide and visited memorials built to honor its victims. In addition to the village transformation project, they also jump-started the construction of a genocide memorial near the village. Yeh developed a design and the work was started during the initial visit. Part of Jacobson’s role was to help design an underground storage room for the thousands of bones that continue to be recovered in the area and throughout Rwanda. The memorial will be finished soon, and the team will return for its dedication.

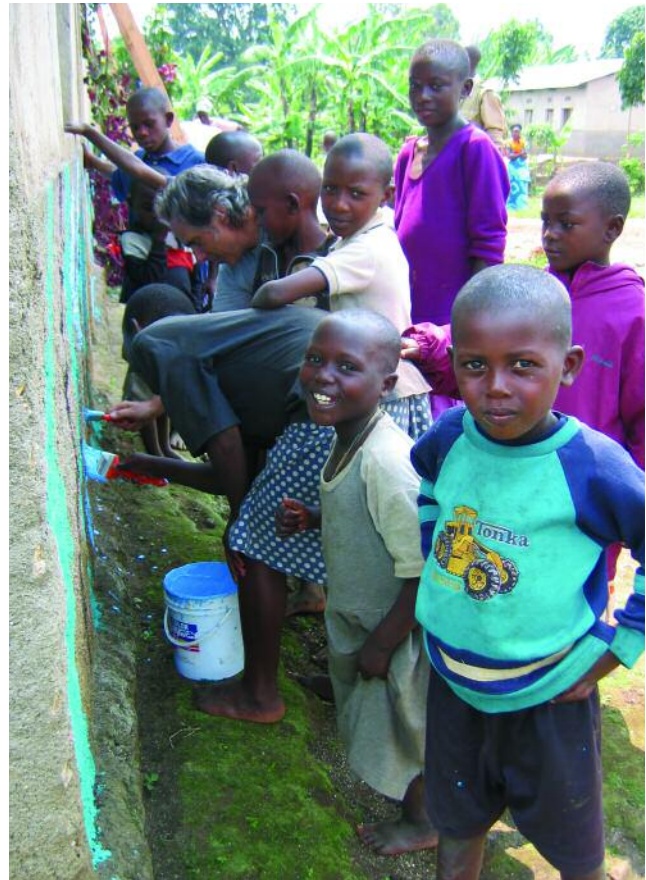
In the end, says Jacobson, Rwanda’s hopes for a better future lie in the beautiful spirit of its people. He and Williams hope to develop an educational foundation for the children of the village. “We need to get these kids off to school. If they don’t get to school, they can’t help themselves. Ultimately, we want the art project to be a catalyst for more change.”

He no longer considers his work in Rwanda a “project” with a finite beginning and ending. “My biggest concern now is sustaining this spark of hope and positive energy. Some of the villagers told us they had lived there for ten years, but never felt like it was their home. Now they do.”

As Jacobson talks with other SEGD members about the efforts, he realizes many of his colleagues are frustrated with the impact of their professional work and yearn to make a difference. “I’ve started to see what people in this field are missing, which is more meaning and depth. They want more than being paid for a scope of work or being able to put their kids through college. They really want to take some sort of action.”

“My message to them is: do it! We all have incredible power as individuals to actually act on the things we feel are important. There’s a big difference between feeling and acting on it. That’s all there is to it.” ☒

Pat Matson Knapp focuses on design and its effects on business, culture, and quality of life. The former editor of *IDENTITY* magazine, she writes for a wide range of design publications and is the author of two books: *Designing Corporate Identity* and *Designers in Handcuffs*.



Even the village’s youngest inhabitants helped out with the painting project. After designs were charted on the mud and plaster walls, painters filled in blocks of color. Older villagers were trained to supervise the work.



Simple drawings were created using the same four colors found in virtually every Rwandan paint store. Here, the drawing reflects the brightly colored fabrics worn by Rwandan women.