



Ordinary people doing extraordinary things...

Art therapy for trafficked survivors

interview
Charlotte Young

photo
Lydia Tan

The Art2Healing Project is an Australian non-profit organisation committed to empowering trafficked survivors in Asia through creative art therapies and awareness-based practices such as yoga and meditation. Lydia Tan spent her first sixteen years in Singapore and then made Australia her home. She has travelled extensively throughout South East Asia and worked in Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, Thailand and Burma, working with individuals at risk, particularly women and children. Lydia founded the Art2Healing Project years ago.

How did you get involved in your work?

I was travelling in Cambodia...and I had this really powerful experience with this child. She was about three years old and she was the size of a rabbit and she was malnourished and about to die. Her mother had given up hope and she actually tried to sell her daughter to us. She said, 'You can have my daughter and you can give me money for her.' And it really touched me. Of course we didn't do it because it didn't feel right at the time but that really powerful experience of seeing a child that's dying and the mother not wanting her child, it spurred my heart into action, to say, 'I want to do something'. I had been working with the YWCA before that, with women, and I wanted to continue on that path so I started working with an anti-trafficking organisation. That's how I started my work and working with women who had been sold into sexual slavery, in a rehabilitation program for about a year and that was how it all started. I later started up my organisation which has given me a lot of freedom and integrity to work in the way that I wanted to work.

When you start with a new group, how do they receive you? When you come in with all your art materials, what's their general response?

Art therapy is a pretty new thing in international development so I come in with all my materials and there's always a little bit of hesitancy but once they're in it, once they're creating, you know, they're creating and they don't hold themselves back. It's been a really amazing experience witnessing their expression because they don't actually have very much emphasis on psychological support in these rehabilitation organisations, so if you just give the women a safe space where they can express themselves, they need it so much that they kind of go crazy. They go crazy with their creativity and also with their healing. You know, they need someone to listen to them and usually it's not really in the culture to talk about emotions and to talk about their story, especially if it's

traumatising.

On your website you talk about wanting to love and to serve; were you born with that or did you establish that at some point, very consciously?

I never grew up with this feeling of, 'I'm going to do this work and I'm going to set up this organisation'; it was never a goal in my mind. It was just about responding to a need. I think my journey has been about getting that feeling of, 'Yes, this is right, right now', and just following that. I'd had this experience of this girl and it was really powerful and I decided, 'Okay I'm going to do this because it feels right and that led to other things which felt right.

It's so easy to get caught up in our own lives and forget about what's happening outside. When I was reading some of the stories, I found it so overwhelming to hear about what happened to some of the women and the children. My response was to want to turn away and just not think about it. How do you think—in general—we can get that balance of caring and being in service and living our own lives?

Yeah, I don't know really how we can open up our minds to look at the periphery of life. You know, we're all interconnected and what's happening out there does affect us on the collective level. I can understand how these stories are too much; people want to turn away from them because they're about suffering and pain...but it's important for people to know the truth about what's happening in the world even though it's painful because it's very real. And we can all do something about it even though we have busy lives and even though our purpose or our life is not to go all the way to Nepal and meet with these women, face to face, but just to have them in our consciousness. I think that that's a really important thing and to share whatever we can share. It's where your heart leads you to action. So if you feel that, by service, in your heart it's to be a good

to be in international aid work, then follow that but to always be conscious of what's happening on the planet and always to know what's going on and to have total awareness and wholeness.

Can you talk about your vision of connecting the women of the West and the women of the East.

I feel like these women need to know that they're not alone. So it might be starting up sister groups, sister circles in the West with sister circles in the East and having a dialogue that bridges that gap, you know. They have very little resources and for them to know that we're thinking about them and holding space for them. I think that that's really important on all levels, emotionally and spiritually.

Do you meet resistance from...

...Oh absolutely...

...From all angles? Perhaps from a cultural point of view or in terms of the organisations? Because you've got your organisation but then you're working through the rehabilitation centres, so what kind of resistance have you encountered along the way?

Well we work with a very holistic approach. We teach on an experiential level instead of imparting technical knowledge which is mostly what other organisations—following the Western paradigm—do, so we get quite a lot of resistance there. We do a lot of training too. So we train social workers to use art in their work and not all of them want to do art or explore their issues so we get quite a lot of resistance from them. In the culture, there is discrimination against women who have been trafficked or women who have been sold into prostitution so there's quite a bit of resistance there, changing the way that they view these women. There's this very strong hierarchy in Asia; the cultural mentality of the hierarchy—I've met quite a bit of it. Also the thing of a woman training a man...

How do you find strength in the face of that resistance?

(laughing) Erm. You know I think that sometimes it's like being like water, flowing with what's happening so I guess that's the way I deal with the resistance. Really playing the game but not, at the same time, if you know what I mean. So still staying very true to my integrity as to what I do but doing it in a way which is not in their face. Being strong...Yeah it's like water.

I like it.


You know how you have a rock but then the water flows around it?

Yes. How do you nurture yourself?

When I burnt out in the refugee camps I had to really address my limitations and ask how can I work in a sustainable way? And for me, it's know-



ing that there's nothing that will heal another person but grace and I can do all these action things, you know 'do, do, do', but really at the end of the day it's grace that will support another being and to trust that grace will always be there. I call it grace but it could have another name. So that's the first thing and secondly, I have a solid yoga and meditation practice which helps me to centre myself and is part of my nurturing; how I care for myself. I wouldn't be able to do my work without it. No matter where I am I have to do my practice. Every day I will do something that will bring me back home to myself and back home to my centre and to grace.

It's a lovely word... 

Art2Heal will soon be commencing a one year training program with Shakti Samuha, a grass-roots anti-trafficking Non Government Organization (NGO) based in Nepal. They are in need of urgent donations to support their work with trafficked survivors and those traumatised from sexual slavery in Nepal. For further information please contact Lydia at art2healing@yahoo.com.au, or visit their website at www.theart2healing-project.org.

If you would like to read the full interview with Lydia, please visit our website www.barefootmagazine.com.au