



Tamalpa Institute

Living more artfully in all aspects of life

ArtCorps Newsletter Fall 2018



Building Our Future Through Creativity

Weaving Portraits, Movements and Stories

By Danielle Sadhana Sokol

I hoped to be given the privilege to hear what they had to say, and in the process, witness these young people explore and experience affirmation through the arts.

Introduction

This project is a search for joy, beauty, trust, connection and expression. It forced me to confront my own ignorance and feelings of discomfort and hopelessness when faced with the complexity and suffering of human trafficking.

The Tamalpa ArtCorps program in Kolkata, India exists in partnership with the Blossomy Project for the last five years and works with children and teens ranging in age from 8 to 21 years old, who are survivors of human trafficking or considered at risk for trafficking as their mothers are sex workers. For a period of four weeks, I facilitated this 2018 ArtCorps program, offering expressive arts therapy sessions to five different groups of youth in three locations in Kolkata: a shelter home for survivors, a Drop-in Center located in one of the Red-Light districts and at a community center in a slum area of Kolkata.



These children and teens have all experienced unimaginable struggle, hardship and inequality in their young lives. They long to be seen and heard by others, respected, valued and loved. I observed a shared desire for self-expression and connection. Whether they were living in the shelter home, the Red-Light district, or the slum, it is not common for these young

people to have not been asked how they feel, what their dreams are or who they want to be. I wanted to ask them meaningful questions in a way that was compassionate, genuine, safe and creative. I hoped to be given the privilege to hear what they had to say, and in the process, witness these young people explore and experience affirmation through the arts.

The Shelter



I was flooded with emotion on my first day at the shelter. I felt nervous and excited at the same time. Nearing the shelter, the massive walls caught my attention. I breathed deeply as I realized that the girls were locked up inside the home. They were so excited to see us and called out “Auntie” and said many things that I didn’t understand in Hindi or Bengali.

All I could focus on at that moment was that these girls were behind bars. Their big eyes, contagious smiles and questions helped me to relax and soften as the doors were unlocked and the girls came flying out to greet me for our first session together.

I began with a visualization and movement activity. I asked the participants to imagine that they were seeds that would soon grow into unique flowers or plants that the world had never seen before and I invited them to move however they felt called to. They embodied their imagined plants as they danced, then drew their experiences of blooming onto paper. They shared:

I felt afraid of what would happen to the flower if someone wanted to destroy it. I thought "how can I protect it?".

Because I brought up this flower with love and care, it shouldn't break. I felt happy. I remembered my beautiful home. My sweet home.

Over the course of the four weeks, the girls became more comfortable. It was remarkable how, given the time and chance, they began to show how they were feeling through movement. In our third week together at the community center, we did several activities with the intention of continuing to promote trust within the group, including a "Trust Walk". Then we shared some of their reflections on the last three weeks of our journey.

Now I know how to explain my feelings, how to meet people and to express my feelings outwardly- anger, happiness, whatever. I can express myself here. I love to work together with the group. I want to learn more things.

When I first came here I was very quiet and shy, now I am feeling more open. I like this class because I can share my feelings. I have opened myself.



Drop-In Center

I worked with two groups at the center; children from age 7 to 12 and a group of teenagers. I asked "Who are you?" and "What do you like most about yourself?". They drew self portraits, gave the drawing a title and included one positive affirmation about themselves.

In my drawing there is a sun between the hills. It is sunrise and these are the rays. It is similar to my life because I always reach, reach and reach. I am a very good tailor. I am good at stitching and I want to study fashion design. My strength is that I am very positive.

This is the first time I did something like this in my life. I am very thankful because self-expression can come out. My strength is that I am very honest.

I wondered what difficulties, stigma and discrimination the teens may have suffered as sons and daughters of sex workers. I was inspired by the strength and resilience I perceived in each one of them. Nearly all were extremely eager to share their experiences. I appreciated their courage and felt grateful and honored to be given the privilege to hear their stories and be welcomed into their lives.

Each of these young people continues to face so many barriers and obstacles in their everyday lives. It is important for them to have hope and dreams for the future in the face of these difficulties.

One of the basic precepts of the work is that as we work on something in art, we are also working on something in our lives, so that our art making is connected to our real-life issues. In one of our classes, we focused on the theme of legs and feet. We brainstormed movements and discussed why our feet and legs are so important to us, then created a poem which became a dance that they performed and witnessed in groups. This activity was one of collective creativity, as well as being a moment for each individual to be seen and to witness their peers.

They created individual images honoring our feet and legs. We discussed all that our legs and feet support us in doing in our lives. In particular, we spoke of how our feet and legs help us to move towards our goals.

Sitting back in the car after many hugs and pictures, everyone's reflections on our time together echoed in my head. I felt so inspired by these young people speaking confidently about reaching their goals, following their dreams and doing right with their lives. A smile came to my face as I recalled them speaking about how they felt more empowered to express themselves and how they were feeling more positive about their future. I felt a fullness in my chest as we pulled away from the Drop-In Center and drove off down the narrow and crowded streets.



I felt so inspired by these young people speaking confidently about reaching their goals, following their dreams and doing right with their lives.

Community Center

We worked with one group of teenage girls three times a week who are part of the community center's youth program. The girls came primarily from Muslim families and arrived to class with their heads covered; some wore niqab veils revealing only their eyes and others wore veils that covered their heads, ears, and neck but you could see their faces.

The director of the program invited the girls to take off their veils during the class.

I reminded them that they could choose to keep their scarves on and could simply do whatever they felt most comfortable with. My priority was to create an environment where the girls felt safe and relaxed, however, I didn't want them to feel like they were being forced to take off their scarves if they preferred wearing them. The director reassured me that it was important for them to have a space where they could take their scarves off outside of their homes.

We took a thread of yarn and weaved it around a body part or piece of clothing and then passed it on. Then began the unthreading process, one girl at a time. As each person unthreaded themselves, I asked them to share one thing that they learned about themselves or one thing they experienced together that they would like to integrate into their everyday life.



I learned how to express my own feelings. Dancing! Dancing as a group!

I really love Movement Ritual. I am actually already practicing at home. It really relaxes me. I would like to teach my friends and family.

I can now define very clearly what love is. I know what it feels like...

I feel so much happiness when we were here working together. After this class I feel like I can focus on my own goals.

After doing the Tamalpa Workshop, I got to learn about the spirit of teamwork and the virtue of trust. I had almost lost my aim in life, I didn't know how to focus back but this workshop made me realize the importance of life and the way to find my goal ahead.

We did a "tightrope balance activity" where we walked across strings on the ground, one foot in front of the other, hands and arms outstretched, eyes focused ahead. I asked them to imagine themselves walking toward something they would like to bring into their life. After the movement exploration, they continued their dance on paper in the form of a drawing. They titled their drawings and shared their goals they were walking towards.

This is my world. These are my legs and they help me with my goals. Just like from birth or when you are a baby, we must go step by step to reach our goals. As I was moving, I imagined I was flying. One step at a time and then I can fly in life.



Our last day at the shelter home was not an easy day. A huge fight broke out and there was a “lock down” in the home. The screaming lasted for hours. Some girls were visibly upset, and one girl was crying a lot, so instead of doing what was planned we sat together, held hands and breathed together, did Movement Ritual and talked about the importance of supporting, respecting and loving one another. We spoke a lot about respect and how the Planetary Dance is a dance for peace and how we could use this opportunity to dance for peace within the community of the shelter home.

Even though it was an unusually challenging day, it was also a very profound and positive experience. By the end of the day there was a completely different energy in the space than a few hours before. As the celebration came to a close, there were many hugs and tears shed.



Conclusion



It was amazing to see the development of their capacities of imagination over the course of the four weeks. Through the art making process many of the young girls from the shelter found ways to talk about the longing they felt for their homes and their families without directly focusing on their experience of being trafficked. The teens in the Red-Light District group wanted to discuss their goals and dreams and their hope to transform their future. In the community center, the girls were very uneasy about removing their veils and then toward the end of our workshop time, they would enter the room ripping them off so that they could dance and speak freely. In fact when we were doing video testimonials they didn't want to put the veils on, although I required them to do so for safety reasons, a real reminder of the realities and challenges they live with.

The participants explored the relationship between their bodies, feelings and imagination, dancing, painting, creating poetry, sharing with each other. As they did they reclaimed their bodies as instruments of expression and communication. The feeling of being seen and witnessing in the daily check-in circles encouraged a sense of greater self-confidence. The workshops supported the expansion of participants' creativity in a playful environment while team-building activities encouraged trust. Group discussions seemed to help these young people begin to reflect on their dreams and encouraged them to plant seeds of hope for building a different and promising future.

Seeds of hope need to be cultivated and cared for. I am happy that we explored what these hopes and dreams can look like. This project raises many questions: how can we broaden the vision of dance and the expressive arts as tools to support people and groups that have experienced trauma? How can these projects become more permanent and sustainable within these communities? How can programs be developed that involve not only the clients of these organizations but also the staff in order to support the often exhausted staff members while also bridging the gap between what the participants experience within the workshops and outside of the sessions?



I am no longer in Kolkata but continue to find myself processing all that I experienced and learned during my time there, about myself, the Tamalpa work, the challenges that these participants face in their daily lives, the healing power of art and the incredible resilience of the human soul. My hope is to continue to plant such seeds and bring this work out into the world.

Danielle Sadhana Sokol is a Tamalpa graduate/practitioner, educator, and world traveler who designed and facilitated the month long workshop, Building Our Future Through Creativity in Kolkata, India.