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ARTS NEWS

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Permission to sing: Sara Green

by [Venessa Paech](#)
Arts Hub

Wednesday, November 21, 2007



Do your bit to help those in need! Renew your standard Arts Hub subscription in November and December, and Arts Hub will donate \$5 from every renewal to Art for Refugees in Transition. Help us hit our target of \$1500. And now, meet the woman behind this inspiring idea!

Sara Green had what many Australian practitioners would consider an enviable start to her creative life. She grew up in New York and, having danced since she was about three, lived the dream by attending the New York Performing Arts High School, made famous by the movie *Fame*.

"The movie came out the summer right before I started high school, which was a little overwhelming," she says. So, was it all lunch time jam sessions and production numbers? Sometimes, she says, amidst alot of hard work. "The first half of your day is your studio training, and the second half is your academic work. I trained in ballet and in modern (Martha Graham)."

After graduating from high school Sara attended Ohio State University, earning a degree in Dance and a degree in American History. Then after she left college, aged 21, and

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moved to France where she danced with a company in the south of the country for around six months.

After that it was back to the States, "to Minneapolis, where I danced for a year with a company called New Dance Ensemble." Eventually, the Big Apple beckoned her back, and in 1991 she headed for Manhattan, teaming up with a college friend who started [her own company](#), "as everybody does when they come to New York." Sara stayed with Pam Tanowitz Dance for nearly a decade. "We performed all over the downtown scene and overseas."

Then, in 1999, Sara says she felt a pull in another direction. "I was getting ready to make that change, trying to figure out what I wanted to do, how to do it, and what the options were. Having traveled all over the world with dance and family, I was drawn to doing something international."

It was in the winter of that year when the penny dropped and she woke, literally, in the middle of the night, epiphanous and inspired.

"The war in the Balkans was very bad and NATO was about to start bombing," she recalls. "All I saw in the media were images of these Kosovo refugees, families, kids, crossing through the mountains and the snow. I kept thinking firstly, of course, how upsetting and terrible all of this is, but also that these people – especially these children - are leaving their homes, and the real weight of that. They don't know when they're going to be back, if ever. They've seen atrocities that we hope never to see in our own lives, they're scared to death, have no idea where they're going or if they'll get there. And maybe these kids have got a teddy bear, if they were lucky, but maybe they didn't have a chance to grab anything."

In such an extraordinary situation, you struggle for safe haven wherever you can find it. In Sara's own life, this sanctuary was the world of dance. "If you put me on class, on stage, in rehearsal, I was physically able to work through whatever was going on.

"So I thought, since that worked for me, wouldn't it be amazing for these kids to have a place where they could run,

dance, do something creative and not be compared to anyone or thing, just be free. Where it's not about 'does your drawing look good enough to be put on the wall', but just about expression.

"So I woke up at about 4am and said, 'I want to start arts programs for kids in refugee camps'. Then I stopped and said, ok, that's very lofty, but how the hell do I do that?"

She says she thought it through and decided the best way to make her vision a reality would be to go to business school, a far cry from where she'd ever imagined herself.

"I had worked for a number of not-for-profit organizations doing fundraising and hated it, really hated it," she says. "But it taught me incredible things about non-profits and how they work. I knew to run one I would need skills, technical and finance expertise, credibility and a network. So business school seemed the right way ahead, and I ended up doing my MBA at Columbia, starting in January 2000."

It was at this point she finally made the break from dance, on a formal level.

"I realized I couldn't go to school and take class, and I needed to make that transition. What made it successful for me was being completely immersed in something else – school, in this case. I didn't have time to think that I was missing class or rehearsals, because I was too involved."

While at Columbia she took part in an entrepreneur incubator program which provides seed funding for select projects. "Out of that I went to Kosovo with the [International Rescue Committee](#) looking at programs and policies for youth in armed conflict. That experience gave me an introduction to the refugee world which I didn't have before. I started ART - Art for Refugees in Transition - a year later."

ART is designed to rebuild the sense of community in refugee camps through the transmission of Indigenous art forms and cultural traditions, such as weaving, instrument making, singing, dance and drumming. ART provides a curriculum for training the adult refugees, who then take the teaching into

their own hands, sharing wisdom with the community.



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The scheme was launched in Thailand, where its first massive task was to work with over 21,000 Burmese refugees.

But before that, Sara had to raise money. Lots of money. "It wasn't easy, because foundations don't usually give start up money," she says. "So it starts with family and friends, and then becomes through word of mouth. Now, people have started to come to us with offers of help, like *Arts Hub*, which is quite lovely. We're still in dire need of funds of course, and that will probably never cease to be an issue for us."

Sara's other major issue raising money is one familiar to artists everywhere. Being taken seriously, when there's so much else - and so much of it horrible - making up the bigger picture.

"Once people understand the concept of ART they think it's beautiful and wonderful," she says. "The problem is, there are so many other things going on in the world that are closer to home for people. People would say, 'don't you think you should be focused on getting food and medical supplies to people in refugee camps, instead of doing something like the arts?' I completely agree, and ART is by no means intended

to substitute for those things."

As Sara explains, ART doesn't do immediate response. It sits conscientiously further along the timeline. When basics like food, clothing, shelter, health and safety are attended to, ART can address other, more nuanced ways refugees might be hurting, offering a means to healing and hope.

"ART can address the psycho-social aspect of what these people require," she says. "It can help make sure their mental and emotional health isn't forgotten."

And ART is uniquely positioned to do so.

"Because we're small we can be uniquely effective and avoid political situations," explains Sara. "We partner with existing organizations that have an infrastructure, which gives us very low overhead, which in turn helps when you're trying to raise funds."

"In Thailand we partnered with the International Rescue Committee and in Connecticut we're working with a resettlement agency. They already have the resources, many of the refugees are already there, and they trust this organisation. So we go in with that, with a very specific purpose. That strategy helps us survive."

After that legwork is done to get them where they're going (ART may piggyback on NGO transport, or share a space with other aid groups), Sara and her team begin by gathering the elder refugees to tell them about what ART is all about. The ART team learn about their traditions, ask if they'd like to see them continued, and discover what else is most important to them culturally and emotionally at that moment.

"It's important they understand they are the ones that will be teaching, leading, and passing on their traditions, not us."

Sara's working days are a cocktail of heady emotion, grave responsibility, and red-tape juggling. Having a great team is half the battle won, she concedes.

"We have an office in Bogota Columbia, where we have one

full time person. We have a board of three directors who is very involved, very much hands on. We have an advisory board in the US, and there are several artists on the board – dancers, musicians, others who've worked in non-profits. We have a couple of universities in Bogota that give us students who do internships with us for college credit. In New York, I have a program manager working with me part-time who started this summer. She's Columbian and has a background in anthropology.

"We have deadlines, where we'll have to work toward getting a proposal out on time, getting a report to a foundation that has funded us in on time, preparing for a board meeting, preparing for an event. We usually have weekly conference calls - but there's no typical day."

However, there's certainly special ones.

She recounts a transformative experience on their first Thailand excursion:

"We sent out a notice and called over the PA for the elders to come and learn about this new program that would be available to them. So there I was, I was standing in the middle of the jungle. The camp is an hour outside of any town, on the Burmese border, no electricity, no running water. And I was thinking, this is a really great idea, but what if nobody comes – one of those self doubt moments.

"Slowly, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of elderly refugees came to the meeting spot. I explained with a translator what we were doing, and after the talking I asked if anybody wanted to get up and show anything – tell a story, sing a song? This older woman got up and started singing a folk song in a Burmese dialect, and I looked around, and people were starting to cry. Then out of the jungle comes these flutes, and drums, and gongs, people were getting up and dancing. These old people who could barely stand were dancing, and everybody's crying.

"I walked over to one of the women to ask what was going on. And she said, 'you know, we've been in the camps for over 15 years, and this is the first time anyone has given us

permission to feel.' At that point of course I was trying not to cry."

Sara says it was a revelation how one simple thing could yield such rich reward. "It was so empowering to them. We didn't give them equipment, we didn't tell them what to sing. We just said they could. They found they had all of this inside of them. It was really quite astounding.

"A year later when I went back I was talking to one of the teachers – actually, the woman who'd started singing. And I asked her what changes if any she'd seen in the community since we'd started this. She said that for the first time the younger generations participated in the ceremonies and annual festivals they have, and the community were thrilled these traditions seemed like they might now continue."

This renewed engagement between young and old doesn't just assuage the aged, it's proved enlightening for the kids, instilling a respect that grounds them.

"The old people in these camps have nothing to do, they just lie around," says Sara. "And that's what the kids see. They don't see that these were the people back home, that held their communities together. 'Grandma actually has something valuable to teach me! Who knew?!'

"I asked one older woman why they stopped singing these songs that they're now teaching. She said they would sing these songs walking to and from the rice patties in Burma. 'But now that we don't walk to the patties, we don't sing anymore'. And it's just as simple as that.

Another small victory illustrates the power of letting the refugees 'own' the program.

"When we started working in Bogata we held a meeting of the elders in the community. There was this one old man who came to the meeting and sat up the back with his hat down and cried. The next day we had another meeting. He came again, and cried, maybe just a little bit closer. And he would keep coming, keep crying, till one day something clicked for him and he stood up. Now he's one of our best teachers."

It might seem that Sara has vocationally shape-shifted - that she's become something different from what she began. But it's another creation, this eco-system she has forged, from a prolific creator.

"As you know, once an artist, always an artist. Whether you stop dancing or not you're still a dancer," she says. "For me at least, it's part of who I am, part of what makes me unique, even if I'm not physically dancing." The soul of her dance is the narrative through-line of her current work, underscoring every move she makes with those in need. "I just channeled it in a different way."

When I suggest someone should film ART in action, Sara tells me that some filmmakers did recently shoot a short documentary of the gang in the field. "Actually there was some mild controversy. I've been told the finished product focuses too much on the refugees and not enough on me and what ART is doing in the background. But that's the whole point. It's all about them, we should be in background. We want to be."

A short documentary about the work of ART.

As if running a ground-breaking, not-for-profit cultural charity wasn't enough, Sara recently gave birth to her first child, a son. "My doctor said to me, you can go pretty much anywhere, *except* Bogata, Columbia," she chuckles. "So we spent a lot of time on the phone during that period."

She says taking a side-step to start a family of her own helped with an important lesson. "It has made me realize that

ART can survive without me. That's the true test of something. That as you're growing, you can survive without the founder. I still pinch myself that this is actually happening."

To learn more about ART, visit www.artforrefugees.org

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Venessa Paech

Venessa Paech has worked as an actor, producer, choreographer, director and writer in the NT and VIC. She earned her BFA in Theatre from New York University (Tisch School of the Arts), and after basing in Manhattan for a bit, returned home for more arts-shaped adventures. She served on the Steering Committee and Board of Australian Musicals Development Inc., the Executive Committee of the Green Room Awards Association and the Academic Advisory Board for the Writing Department of Deakin University. Venessa is Editor and Social Media Manager of *Arts Hub Australia* and the Founder and Editor of *Geek Illustrated* (www.geekillustrated.com)

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