

The A.R.T. of giving hope

JULIA HARRIS learned how refugees are using the creative arts to rebuild their individual and community identities.

Sara Green could be considered an overachiever. But when you're a woman on a mission, it helps to have a Type A personality.

That's A as in A.R.T.—Art for Refugees in Transition—a program Green launched in 2003 to help refugees hold on to their cultural traditions.

Green came to Ohio State from New York because of the outstanding reputation of its dance program. She earned undergraduate degrees in both dance and history, then performed professionally in the U.S. and abroad for 10 years.

In the winter of 1999, she had an epiphany. “My body was getting older, and I knew it was time to bow out of dancing. It was when the war in the Balkans was very bad, and there were images everywhere of refugees fleeing through the snow,” she said.

“I felt so bad for these kids who had lost their childhoods and had no way to process their experiences or express themselves on their own terms. That’s when I knew I wanted to start art programs for kids in refugee camps.”

In puzzling out how best to achieve her goal, Green decided to pursue an M.B.A. at Columbia University. She saw it as a way to gain the basic tools of business, the credentials the degree would bring, and the extensive network of contacts available at a top-notch school.

While at Columbia, she spent time with refugees in Kosovo to learn what it’s like for children in a war-torn country. People there

were receptive to her idea of a program through which both children and adults could participate in visual, performing, and creative arts that strengthened and celebrated their cultures.

From Kosovo, Green took A.R.T. to two camps in northern Thailand, where more than 23,000 Burmese refugees are trying to make a home. In collaboration with the International Rescue Committee, Green and other A.R.T. staff members worked with community elders to teach some 600 youngsters how to make and play traditional Burmese instruments. They also offered community classes in areas such as weaving, folklore, and dancing.

More than two years have passed since A.R.T.’s initial foray into Thailand, and the program is flourishing. What’s more, it’s being run entirely by the refugees themselves.

Flush with A.R.T.’s success in Thailand, Green turned to a different corner of the globe: Colombia. “This country is in the middle of a 45-year civil war; it’s rife with paramilitary and drug lords and child soldiers, and it has the second-highest number of kidnappings in the world,” Green said. “More than 3 million of its 36 million inhabitants have become refugees.”

A.R.T. has brought a measure of hope to some of those refugees. The first site, located in Bogota, teams interns from the University of the Andes with A.R.T. staffers to implement and evaluate a traditional arts program, working with charter schools and church com-



Girls in an A.R.T. program in Bogota, Colombia, weave sisal fiber.



Sara Green



Members of the Karenni tribe perform traditional dances as part of A.R.T.’s program in a refugee camp in Thailand.

munity centers to draw participants. Plans are under way to expand to a rural town outside Medellin, known informally as the drug capital of the country. There, Green hopes to launch an after-school program where community elders will teach children their cultural traditions.

“We hope that by keeping them in school longer, helping them to get in touch with their roots, the kids will be less likely to be abducted or lured into becoming child soldiers,” Green said.

Finally, Green has teamed up with the Interfaith Refugee Ministry to

help resettled refugees in New Haven, Conn. The families come from Afghanistan, Liberia, Somalia, and the Ivory Coast, among other places.

The challenge is to help members of such a heterogeneous community understand and appreciate not only their own heritage but also the cultures of their new neighbors.

“We’re hoping to create some kind of performance that could be taken into the schools,” Green said. “It would give the kids the chance to show their peers what their life’s about and to feel some pride about who and what they are. It would

also help them stay connected to their parents and the culture they come from.”

Green hopes to see the Connecticut model expanded and implemented in other resettlement communities across the country.

“The true reward in this work is the response I receive from the refugees themselves,” Green said. “Tearful elders tell me that without A.R.T., their traditions would have died with them. As long as we’re helping people, that’s what’s important.” ■

Learn more: www.artforrefugees.org