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Reclaiming the Past Through Art

Sara Green '01 founded a nonprofit that helps refugees preserve the cultural traditions of their homelands.

Sara Green '01 stumbled upon her calling during the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia in 1999. Haunting images on TV of child refugees heading for Albania, their faces scared and uncertain as they clutched teddy bears, led Green to envision how she might help these terrified children. Ultimately, she decided to use art to help refugees preserve their cultures and cope with the tragedies of war.

Art was a natural response for Green. A former professional dancer, she toured and performed in Europe and the United States for 10 years after graduating from college. At Columbia, as a participant in the Eugene Lang Entrepreneurship Center's Greenhouse Program, she translated her vision into a business plan for Art for Refugees in Transition (ART), a nonprofit that builds self-sustaining cultural preservation programs in refugee communities around the world.

Today, ART operates on three continents and has offices in New York and Bogotá, Colombia. Green's individual drive and determination — and her desire to help others renew their identities through art —drove the organization's success.

Green will participate in a panel, Three Faces of Nonprofit Leadership, at Reunion 2011, April 15–17. To register and learn more, visit the [reunion website](#).

Why do you think art represents a particularly powerful way for refugees to stay connected to their cultural identities?

Children don't necessarily want to or are not necessarily capable of using words to describe their emotions. When I thought about difficult times in my life, I realized that I always turned to dance. Wouldn't it be amazing, I thought, if these refugee kids had the opportunity to do that too — if they could sing or dance or do whatever they needed to do to express themselves and gain some comfort, and begin to sort through what they've experienced.

So I woke up in the middle of the night and said, 'I want to start arts programs for kids in refugee camps.' Then I thought, well that's a lofty idea, but how am I going to do it?

How did your idea evolve into a business plan?

At Columbia I took a course called Launching New Ventures. I went to my professor, Cliff Schorer, and said, 'this is my idea, but I'm taking a full course load, and I don't think I can do everything by myself. But this is why I came to school; I really want to do this.' And he said to me, 'Sara, have you ever heard of Jiminy Cricket? How are you going to have a dream if you never make your dream come true? If you don't do it here and now, when are you ever going to have the opportunity to do it?'

I began working on a business plan with a few fellow students, and the plan was selected for the Lang Center's Greenhouse Program, where students receive credit and support to work on their start-ups. In the end, I received some seed funding from the center.

We also presented our idea to Professor Ray Horton, who directed us to the then-president of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Ren Levy, who was also teaching part-time at the business school. Ren loved the project and put us in touch with a colleague of his at the IRC, who helped me raise enough money to fund ART for two years. In short, none of this would have happened without Ray's introductions and my Columbia connection.

As an outside entity, how does ART work with local communities?

It's very much a bottom-up process. Refugees can be wary about who's entering their environment, so we partner with NGOs already working with these communities. That creates automatic buy-in to our mission, and the refugees are much more welcoming.

Then we facilitate teacher education. Cultural traditions are usually passed down in an informal setting: you sit around the campfire and sing songs or tell stories, or you watch your grandmother weaving. But those traditional settings vanish when a community is displaced by war, poverty, or disaster. So we help develop classes and workshops, working on teaching skills — not what, but how. The adults will give us a list of what they can teach, and the children choose what they want to learn.

It's important to provide jobs, too. We step away two or three years after launching a program, after having enabled local community members to continue it. The first programs launched by ART in Thailand in 2003 became self-sustaining after two years, and a program we launched in Colombia in 2005 operated independently after three years. Both are still running today. We are currently working to help two programs in South America become self-sustaining as well.

You have traveled around the world to countries where ART runs programs. How has the organization been received? Does a particular experience stand out?

For our first project, I went to a Burmese refugee camp in Thailand, and I was certain that nobody would come to our initial meeting. Instead, hundreds of people showed up. When I asked if anyone wanted to show or demonstrate something, a woman started singing a song about life in Burma. I looked around and saw that hundreds of people, all in their brightly colored traditional dress, had started crying and singing along. Then, out of the jungle the surrounded the camp, musical instruments began to appear. Someone started playing the flute, and others played a gong and drums, and people were dancing.

I asked one of the women what was happening, and she said, 'It's the first time in the 15 years we've been in these camps that anybody has given us permission to feel.' It hit me that maybe that was my biggest achievement — simply giving someone permission to be who they are. I tear up every

time I tell that story, and it's been eight years. It was an incredibly powerful experience that I will never forget.

What advice would you offer business students who are passionate about an idea for a start-up?

It sounds like management-speak but it's true: if you have a passion for something, and you're committed to it, then you can overcome the obstacles that are put in front of you. If you have a vision and are driven, you can make something happen.

At the same time, realize that it's never going to be easy. Times change, and the economy changes. Be willing to have a business model that's flexible enough to change with changing economic times.