

"Colombian children are being tempted by 'easy money' to join the army. Resurrecting a sense of pride in their cultural heritage can help rebuild a sense of community and personal identit..."

Sara Green, *Founder of Art for Refugees in Transition (A.R.T.)*, June 2008

Rebuilding cultural identity for vulnerable populations in Colombia

Antioquia's ceramic community

On her second day in El Carmen de Viboral, a community just outside Medellin, Lina Sanchez was struck by the transformation of "Calle de la Ceramica" (Ceramic Street). Once a noisy hub of activity filled with dirt and garbage, there were now colorful home fronts, decorated in mosaics and new light posts supported by a ceramic base.



Sanchez arrived as project coordinator for *Art for Refugees in Transition (A.R.T.)*. The US-based organization helps rebuild cultural identity through the revitalization of indigenous art forms. Here in El Carmen, Sanchez spent 2 months alongside the International Organization for Migration (OIM), La Casa de la Cultura, the mayor's office and some local ceramists in El Carmen. Together they developed a specific plan to revitalize the local tradition of ceramics- Columbia's richest folk craft- and target the program to the youth.

Children, violence, and preserving cultural heritage

El Carmen is one of the most violent places in Colombia with the highest number of child soldiers in the country. The fourth largest South American country, Colombia has long been afflicted with civil conflict- left winged insurgents fighting right-wing paramilitary groups. It also has the world's highest internal refugee population. Astronomical numbers of indigenous groups have been forced to abandon their homes or live under hostile conditions within their own communities. In El Carmen specifically, intense drug-trafficking problems (drug related crimes are the most common cause of death after cancer in Colombia) have placed the population under particularly vulnerable conditions. The continued presence of paramilitary and guerilla groups means the people must cope, on a daily basis, with living a "culture of violence". In particular, the children are targeted by the militia and offered "really good pay" to do illegal business.

Less people are interested in cultural and artistic activities and children are growing away from healthy ways of life," Sanchez explains. "There is a loss of one of the main traditions in town - ceramics - because of the

non-competitive trade and the decrease in the social valuation of their hand-made work."

A.R.T.'s mission has been not only to keep children from joining the army, but also to help rebuild a sense of community and resurrect a sense of pride in their cultural heritage.

Many children have to beg in the streets or are forced to recycle cardboard, plastics and paper to help their families," explains *A.R.T.* founder Sara Green. "By introducing the children to their cultural traditions, they begin to identify with their community and realize that their lives are bigger than just themselves, they have a history and people who care about them."

Practical *A.R.T.* programs

A.R.T. strongly believes that people are responsible for preserving their own culture. When they arrive in a new community, such as El Carmen, the entire community is invited to the workshops and methodologies.

As Green explains, "*A.R.T.* is not an imposed model...(We) try to adapt to local realities and do not interfere with their dynamics... We provide the material and practical tools, and monitor the program every six months making changes as necessary."



The El Carmen after-school program has been attractive enough to entice the young, and because many of the beneficiaries come with low self-esteem, *A.R.T.* also ensures they are motivated to be there. By facilitating the practical aspects- art material, location, teachers- they help encourage participant involvement. Experienced local ceramists further teach the workshops. This further reinforces "ownership" of their project and helps bridge the generational gap between youth and elders.

"It is not art-therapy," explains Green. "We do not give psychological support... *A.R.T.* acts merely as a facilitator, with the interests of the children being primary focus...children and adults find a way to articulate – and thus begin to resolve - their fears and anger..."

Rebuilding identity in cultures of violence

Preserving material culture is often overlooked in the relocation or rebuilding processes. More utilitarian life necessities- food, clothing, shelter, medical care, safety, and health- take priority. However, over time one's sense of cultural and personal identity gradually becomes more important as people settle into new surroundings and new atmospheres. Rekindling and re-introducing traditional art forms becomes increasingly

vital as part of mental and emotional preservation.

"Many times (displaced persons) have to "erase" their culture to adapt to the new environment, explains Green. "They are also coping with the trauma that caused their displacement... We must work to give value to their knowledge and to teach them the importance of their culture so they will want to preserve it and share it."

Amanda Fortier

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- [Colombia Reports](#)
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