

THE QUILTED CONSCIENCE

OVERVIEW

Mission Statement

The Quilted Conscience (TQC) is an arts-based learning experience that fosters inter-generational, cross-cultural bonds between individuals and communities who otherwise might never meet. TQC works with:

- Immigrant / refugee children who are newly arrived in the U.S.
- Traditional-American communities whose families have been here for many generations, but who don't yet know their newest neighbors.

It encourages creativity, respect, and friendship.

TQC partners with ELL (English Language Learning) departments of public schools to create and then share with a large general public mural-size story-quilts of the Dreams & Memories of immigrant children – while teaching basic art and sewing skills to the student-artists. It helps form positive bonds between diverse communities and builds confidence and self-respect in at-risk youth. TQC's primary achievements include:

- Our nationally popular film (**The Quilted Conscience**) for Public Television and
- The rapidly expanding workshop and exhibition programs, which have been developed and disseminated through extensive broadcasts and screenings of the film.

TQC Film

The Quilted Conscience film premiered in June 2013 on NET in celebration of World Refugee Day. After dozens of Nebraska broadcasts and theatrical screenings (including special showings at the San Diego Black Film Festival and the Denver Film Society [Women + Film]), the film was accepted by the National Educational Television Association (NETA) for distribution to Public TV stations across the U.S. Through June 1, 2015, the show aired a total of 311 times in 64 markets in 27 states. These included four of the top 10 markets in the country: Los Angeles (22 telecasts), Chicago, San Francisco (2 telecasts), Washington (12 telecasts); and eleven of the Top 25 markets, including Denver, Orlando, Cleveland, Sacramento, Portland, Raleigh-Durham.

TQC Workshops

In TQC workshops, refugee / immigrant students create Dreams & Memories quilt blocks that are then joined together to form a single mural-size fabric artwork, made to last for many generations. The memory blocks are of cultural memories, answering the question, "What is unique in who I am and in where I come from?" and honoring the traditions and heritage of the students' families and communities, showing what is best and most special to them in their pasts. The dream blocks answer the question, "Who and what do I want to be in my new American life?" These images show the wonderful things that the students will do in their American futures, with subject matter ranging from hopes of being nurses and doctors to careers as lawyers or judges or football players or poets. TQC has already completed twelve successful workshops with Sudanese and Karen refugees, as well as with immigrants from around the world. The TQC-related

Newcomers quilt program has won four blue ribbons and one red ribbon at recent celebrations of the Nebraska State Fair.

TQC Website

TQC Website provides new workshop partners with an authoritative and convenient learning resource to which they may turn for guidance, advice and support. Our detailed, easy-to-follow, printable lesson plans will facilitate the creation of future workshops and are intended to be used by:

- ELL educators.
- Fabric art volunteers.
- Student-artists.

Project History

Major TQC workshops have already engaged with:

- Sudanese- American students (16 girls, ages 10-18, of Nuer, Nuba, and Dinka Tribes)
- Karen-American students (mixed-gender, ages 16-20, from Myanmar/Thailand)
- Mixed Ethnicity Groups in the Newcomers Quilt Project in Grand Island, NE.

They explored such fundamental questions as:

- "Who am I? Am I African? Asian? American? Or African-American or American-Asian?"
- "What is meaningful and unique about my native culture?"
- "Why did my family come to this new country?"
- "How can the lessons and ways of the past help me to be happier in the present and the future?"

The children develop their Dreams & Memories quilt images and discover ways to discover their past lives and potential futures. It is inspiring to see how many of the students want to be doctors or teachers or lawyers, with the goal of helping others. As well, it is joyful to see the students embarking on personal journeys of discovery to encounter their family stories and traditions.

We encourage partnering organizations to engage with adults from the students' communities. For example, in our Sudan project, we collaborated with a Nuba photographer / musician who was documenting the home-country life of Sudan where many relatives of the girls still lived and who brought his people's visual art and music into our events – teaching his traditions to his new neighbors and to the children of his own people. He (and others) discussed the challenges of keeping ancient traditions alive in modern times amid radically and rapidly changing circumstances, including such issues as "How is it possible for a culture that honors and is guided by its elders (i.e., grandparents, etc.) to survive in a land to which none of those elders have immigrated?" For, as he poetically added, "Even if you're born into a fire, you don't want to lose your culture."

In the first of our two Karen projects, we worked closely with a group of the students' mothers, who participated in the workshops, creating a beautiful traditional weaving artwork that became the border for their children's quilt-blocks – so that, in the finished quilt, the children's artwork was literally embraced by that of their mothers. In the process, these women demonstrated the making of their extraordinary creations to the traditional-American quilters who were working with the Karen mothers' children, and one and all witnessed significant sharing of cultural experiences by individuals who, otherwise, almost certainly would never meet, let alone share experiences that some quilters have described as "life-changing."

Our great goal in this work is to acknowledge and explore both the contrasts and the connections between diverse cultures. We encourage the sharing of unique stories and experiences (e.g., the students telling their mentors about life in refugee camps), while facilitating the sharing of common-bond stories and life-moments (e.g. quilters remembering how they grew up in economic hardship, and engaged in fundamental chores such as walking many miles to secure drinking and cooking water from a local river ...

surprising the students, who thought that these were experiences that only they, and not people of the traditional American community, had experienced).

As well, the extended public exhibitions of the quilts offer wonderful opportunities for passers-by and strangers to discover the deeply moving arts and experiences of their new neighbors. In example of the many different audiences that enjoy these artworks: one recently completed Karen quilt has been on constant display since its creation – first at Sheldon Museum, then at the Lux Center for the Arts (both in Lincoln, Nebraska, home of the student-artists). It has also been exhibited at the Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney, and was featured in extended displays at the W. Dale Clark Library (Omaha) and in a very well received exhibition featuring all TQC quilts made during our first seven years of workshops which was held at the International Quilt Study Center (Lincoln). Its permanent home is at the students' school: Lincoln High.

In 2015 TQC produced a major workshop / exhibition / community-outreach series for Omaha, Nebraska (February – April 2015), in collaboration with Joslyn Museum of Art, Kaneko Art Center, Nebraska is Home, Omaha Public Library, and Omaha Public Schools. Our TQC / Omaha project included:

- A Dreams & Memories workshop (Joslyn Museum) with Karen-American students of the Omaha Public Schools.
- A multi-venue exhibition (Joslyn Museum, Kanko Art Center, Omaha Public Library) of past and present TQC quilts.
- Community Engagement Programs (Lutheran Family Services, Nebraska is Home) with docent-guided van tours of the three-venue exhibition to raise awareness of immigration / refugee and children's issues and to foster dialog and communication between diverse communities.

Project Personnel

JOHN SORENSEN (Project Director) is the creator of *The Quilted Conscience* workshops and is the producer / director of *The Quilted Conscience* film, which is currently being broadcast on Public TV stations across the U.S. He is the author of the books *The Grace Abbott Reader* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008) and *Grace Abbott: an Introduction* (UNO, 2010). His newest Abbott book (*A Sister's Memories*) was published by the University of Chicago Press in September 2015. Mr. Sorensen has presented a wide-range of arts and social service programs for the U.S. Dept. of State, the New York Public Library, Chicago Public Radio, New York University, Columbia University, the University of Chicago, the University of Nebraska, Paley Center for Media, Anthology Film Archives, Nebraska Public Radio, the Chicago Humanities Festival, etc.

PEGGIE HARTWELL (Artistic Adviser) is a preeminent American quilt-maker who focuses on the creation of story-quilts to educate and inform the young. She is a founding member of the Women of Color Quilters' Network. Her life and work have been the subject of profiles by the Smithsonian Institute and the TV program, *Reading Rainbow*. Ms. Hartwell has a B.A. in Theater from Queens College, N.Y. and a Certificate of Completion: Artists in Classrooms (Developing Strategies for Working with Students with Disabilities) from the South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind. She is on the roster as a Master Artist for Opus Inc., Hartford, CT and as Artist in the Classroom for the State of South Carolina.

Conclusion

TQC directly impacts the lives of immigrant children and families who are living in America today: building the self-confidence of the children, teaching them important new communications skills, helping their families to integrate with the broader community, and preserving cultural traditions that are in danger of dying out. As well, it provides a unique and powerful opportunity for local citizens – who are members of traditional American communities and are often isolated from the newest immigrants – to meet (and to learn from their shared creative experiences with) the newcomer students and their families. Ultimately,

through public exhibitions and related public awareness campaigns, the broader local communities connect in positive ways with their newest neighbors and potential friends.

Our work honors the living legacy of Nebraska born-and-raised social justice pioneer, Grace Abbott. Grace Abbott was an extraordinary leader in the struggles to improve life for America's children and immigrants. As Chief of the U.S. Children's Bureau and as Director of the Immigrants' Protective League, Grace Abbott is credited with saving thousands of children's and immigrants' lives, and improving those of millions more. She is especially remembered for this famous quote, which serves as TQC's credo:

"Justice for all children is the high ideal in a democracy."
- Grace Abbott