

## 9/11 ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS: FROM ORAL HISTORY TO VISUAL ART, MEDIA ART AND PERFORMANCE ART

Oral History and Performance Conference  
Columbia University  
March 14, 2008

Grace Yun, PhD  
University of Connecticut, Stamford  
InterRelations Collaborative, New York City

This presentation reports on the InterRelations Collaborative's Post-9/11 PeaceMaking Initiative's use of oral history facilitated by the visual, media and performance arts as community-building "educational tools" to engage multicultural audiences.

The InterRelations Collaborative, Inc. is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) educational organization established in 1991 with a start-up grant from the United Way of New York City to promote cross-cultural relations among rapidly diversifying populations in New York City.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset, the IRC conducted nationwide research documenting cross-cultural community-building models in major U.S. "gateway cities" (e.g. New York, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Los Angeles, San Francisco).<sup>2</sup>

Among our research models, we identified a cross-cultural arts model which used the power of story and art to build cross-cultural understanding. Distinguished Professor of Art at the University of California, San Diego, Faith Ringgold, and New York City visual artist, Lisa Yi, collaborated on a "story quilt" (genre of art uniquely originated by Ms. Ringgold) titled "My Best Friend." The Ringgold-Yi cross-cultural story quilt incorporated aspects of their respective African American and Asian American experiences using friendship as a unifying theme. In Yi's words: "We created a bridge of time and place."<sup>3</sup>

Following tragic events on September 11, 2001 -- responding to an alarming rise in ethnic intolerance -- the InterRelations Collaborative implemented its Post-911 PeaceMaking Initiative and, adapting the Ringgold-Yi cross-cultural model, brought together young people from communities across New York City to document in their own words their experiences on 9/11. Students, ages 11-19, generated a collective oral history capturing the "indigenous voice" and preserving customary ethnic idioms and cultural usage of English. Student interviews were conducted using an interview schedule which were video-documented, transcribed, and superimposed using an "overlay method" to preserve both shared and differing experiences of young New Yorkers on 9/11. Their collaborative narrative, therefore, was not strictly linear in nature allowing greater latitude and reading more like poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Complementing their oral history, the students also produced images communicating the impact of 9/11 which were dove-tailed with their textual account and published in a book titled, What Will You Do For Peace? Impact of 9/11 on New York City Youth. Their moving narrative and compelling artwork caught the attention of Faith Ringgold, noted Harlem artist, and they were honored to publish their book in association with her. The young authors were successful in getting their voices out and sending their message of hope and healing across their stricken city. The “Peace Book” now resides in more than 100 branches of the New York Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library and Queens Borough Public Library.<sup>5</sup>

In 2006, capturing the power of oral history using the medium of the visual arts, the InterRelations Collaborative commissioned Faith Ringgold to design a 9/11 Peace Story Quilt inspired by the Peace Book to be constructed in collaboration with students, ages 8-19, participating in IRC’s PeaceMaking Initiative. During a series of master classes, Ms. Ringgold mentored the Peace QuiltMakers on how to transfer their 9/11 oral history and accompanying images from hardcopy to canvas. The Peace Story Quilt, composed of three panels, each measuring 72” x 50,” was completed for the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. The 9/11 Peace Story Quilt was exhibited at ACA Galleries in Lower Manhattan and launched on its journey to spread young New Yorkers’ call to peace and understanding across their “global city.”<sup>6</sup> The Peace Quilt’s itinerary is posted at: <http://www.inter-relations.org>

In 2008, we are also harnessing the power of oral history using the media arts by adapting the Peace Book to visual format to be used as an “audiovisual tool” to capture the attention of young audiences and set a tone for cross-cultural dialogues. We are pleased to premiere a digitally upgraded version of the “Peace Video” at our session today.<sup>7</sup>

Also at this session, we are pleased to demonstrate the power of oral history utilizing performance art as an “educational tool” which we are using for our increasingly multicultural audiences. The highlight today is our presentation of a “Peace Banner” or mini-peace quilt (prototype of the Peace Quilt) produced at a workshop preceding this session which was conducted in collaboration with Patricia Maunder, Director of Stories Through Art.<sup>8</sup>

This multicultural community-building module taps the power of shared public history -- not only by employing the visual and media arts -- but also empowered by audience participation using extemporaneous performance as a “mobilizing tool” to facilitate interpersonal interaction and cross-cultural exchange. This spontaneous, shared performance is designed to carve out creative space in which multicultural audience members can come together, build bridges of understanding, and discover the common ground that they as New Yorkers share.<sup>9</sup>

The larger vision also includes a songwriting component where young New Yorkers from many communities and cultures will compose both lyrics and score for their own “peace songs.” As well, during a scriptwriting component, the Peace Book will be adapted to

“peace script” to lead to a peace performance by a multicultural cast to be performed to build cross-cultural understanding in educational venues in fast-diversifying immigrant and multi-ethnic communities throughout New York City.

For more information about the InterRelations Collaborative’s Post 9/11 PeaceMaking Initiative,<sup>10</sup> you are invited to visit IRC’s website at: <http://www.inter-relations.org>

## NOTATIONS

<sup>1</sup> The InterRelations Collaborative’s organizational vision was conceived by M.D. Taracido, Esq and Setsuko Nishi, PhD. IRC’s research and program development have been coordinated by Angela Anselmo, PhD; Rev. Marva Jenkins, MSW, M Div; and Grace Yun, PhD.

<sup>2</sup> Intergroup Cooperation in Cities. New York: InterRelations Collaborative, Inc., 1993. Report of IRC’s nationwide research examining socioeconomic factors associated with urban intergroup conflict and documenting models of intergroup cooperation.

<sup>3</sup> Resolving Intergroup Conflicts in New York City, New York State Advisory Committee Report, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, August 1994.

<sup>4</sup> What Will You Do For Peace? Impact of 9/11 on New York City Youth. New York: InterRelations Collaborative, Inc., 2004.

<sup>5</sup> “Kids Question Needs Adult Answer,” The New York Daily News, March 27, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> The Peace Story Quilt’s journey includes ACA Galleries, Grand Hyatt, International Festival of Arts & Ideas, Long Island Children’s Museum, New York City Art Teachers Association, Marymount Manhattan College, Godwin-Ternnbach Museum at Queens College, Teachers College, United Nations, Battell Chapel at Yale University, Marquand Chapel at Yale Divinity School.

<sup>7</sup> The Peace Video was produced in collaboration with Rafaela Capellan of Areyto Productions.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Maunder, Director of Stories Through Art, collaboratively facilitates IRC’s Peace QuiltMaking Workshops at collaborating community organizations and participating public schools in New York City.

<sup>9</sup> The Peace Banner was designed for the Oral History Conference on March 14, 2008 by Peace Book Authors/Peace Quilt Artists, Vielka Gomez and Jennifer Zhao, and collaborating community organizational coordinators: Ana-Ofelia Rodriguez of Broadway Housing Communities, Lois Lee of the Chinese American Planning Council, Angela Baek of YWCA of Queens, Sarina Mohan of Children’s Art Carnival and Monique Gilliam of AmeriCorps.

<sup>10</sup> For the InterRelations Collaborative's 9/11 Oral History Project resulting in the publication of the book, What Will You Do For Peace? Impact of 9/11 on New York City Youth, construction of the Peace Story Quilt , and production of the Peace Video, we gratefully acknowledge the generous support of The United Way of New York City, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and The FAR Fund.