“Awakened” is how one community member described the youth in a Malian refugee camp in West Africa after they completed the Colors of Connection program. After several months of making art, and engaging in self and collective expression, the participants had experienced a change in themselves, one that allowed them to believe more was possible.

Colors of Connection offers conflict-affected youth the opportunity to engage with art in a way that builds inner resources and allows them to move forward with resilience, confidence and a sense of purpose. We have completed eight projects, working with 205 youth to create 16 public murals, which have reached an estimated 200,000 residents in refugee camps and post-war areas in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Imagine the devastation of violent conflict - destroyed homes and buildings, lost family members and friends, the empty time and space that school and jobs used to occupy, having to relocate to a safer place, and the chaos of daily life that has lost its natural rhythm. Disrupted too are the everyday expressions of the creative self and community, such as music, traditions of food, and opportunities for social engagement. Only thegrim tasks of survival remain. Now, imagine the impact of creating art in this environment – the expression of something bright and beautiful, new and hopeful. Imagine the power of finding your voice again and being able to express who you are alongside others like you, and what you want to rebuild from the ruins.

During our programs, youth tap into ways to creatively express themselves through painting, drawing, movement and dialogue. Together, they paint large murals in their community that transform public spaces into a vision for the future that they have decided to collectively portray. It’s a rare opportunity for youth to engage in and transform the world around them. We believe that everyone has a unique potential to change this world for good, and just one opportunity can spark that potential into a force that will make a great impact.

Right now, too many youth, whose lives have been devastated by conflict, are not being given an opportunity to develop their potential, and we are all worse off because of it. There are many young citizens who need a chance to step forward, particularly those who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, written off as only good for manual labor, survivors and victims of abuse and violence, and pushed to the margins of a society that is struggling to survive.

Colors of Connection has developed a powerful way to spark lasting positive change in the lives of these youth and their communities that has far-reaching effects, but we need your help to do it. Because of the support of people like you, more youth will be able to engage art to amplify their visions of hope for the future, and become agents of change in their communities.

The time to grow our impact has come. Join us.

Colors of Connection was founded by two friends, Laurie Reyman and Christina Maillle, who share the belief that art has the power to impact people’s lives for the better: to transform, change and heal. They saw an unmet need for psychosocial support for those facing the overwhelming reality of rebuilding after war. They founded an organization that would bring art to conflict-affected populations, and use it as a vehicle for inspiration and change.
OUR MISSION

Colors of Connection engages conflict-affected youth and communities worldwide in collaborative art-making to nurture hope, cultivate well-being, and promote self-determination. Through our work we:

BUILD COMMUNITY
We engage with a range of societal actors in a series of discussions that allow them to communicate and connect around shared values, responsibilities and interests. We strive for the equal inclusion of actors from all sectors of society in our programs, working to challenge harmful power dynamics to build a more just community. Together they find ways forward, and solutions to the issues that impact their community, and these are reflected in the public artwork.

PROVIDE TOOLS TO CREATE SOLUTION-ORIENTED ART
Using community-based public art, we create a platform for adolescents and community leaders to represent the issues and values that are important to them. The imagery shows the values that the community wants to cultivate. This approach successfully promotes local strength, resilience, leadership and assets-focused thinking.

FACILITATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR HEALING, RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING, & KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING
We create safe spaces that promote emotional expression and creativity. Within these spaces we provide arts-based programming that focuses on social and emotional learning, is therapeutic, and that builds capacity for critical reflection.

DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS
We work with international and local partners to build local capacity and increase sustainability of our work through local ownership.

“What I want to show to people is the future, what I will have, and what I will be. Everything that I paint relates to that.”
- Courage in the Congo Participant

Participants paint a female political candidate being encouraged to create change in her community as part of the “Development and Promotion of Women Leadership Mural” Courage in the Congo Project, Goma, DRC, 2016.
OUR WORK

WHY DO WE ENGAGE THROUGH ART?
Art is an effective intervention tool that has a powerful therapeutic and developmental impact. A growing body of research confirms that art has the power to effectuate relationship-building, expression and communication, personal and community agency, and holistic healing. Community art creates the opportunity for people to examine the social, economic and political structures of their society and their own roles within society in a reflective and critical way.

WHY DO WE FOCUS ON YOUTH?
Today the population of youth in the world is at an all time high, with 1 in 6 people between the ages of 15-24. The unfortunate truth is that approximately one in four youth globally are affected by violence or armed conflict - an estimated 408 million people. The disruptive impacts of violence and conflict on youth are numerous, from stunting mental and physical development, to being cut off from education and job opportunities, to intensified gender inequality, and exclusion from key opportunities to participate in their societies. Despite the universal acknowledgement that youth are the future, they are often not given a chance to participate while they are young to help shape their future.

CC provides youth with learning opportunities to develop and use their voice through civic engagement. Studies show that youth participation in community development strategies is linked to preventing violence, extremism, and promoting peace. If engaged, youth can contribute creative energy and skill sets, that will “shift the tide for sustainable and inclusive peace and prosperity,” according to the United Nations Security Council. Colors of Connection believes it is vital to include youth as active partners to resolve conflict and violence in their own communities.

Goma is a population that is still traumatized with everything that has happened with war over and over again. Rape, violence, the way that people have been killed – I think that the population is traumatized. But, art – it can heal. It gives joy, actually. When you see a drawing or a positive image, we become happy. I think this can be a way to de-traumatize.

-Community Arts Council member, Courage in the Congo Project

FOCUS ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS
Beginning in 2020, we will be working towards the goal of 70% of our programming serving adolescent girls. At the core of our mission is to work with those who are most marginalized, and we know that by focusing our efforts on adolescent girls, we will reach a group that is consistently the most marginalized in society.

In almost every aspect of daily life, the simple fact of being a girl means facing greater risks and having less opportunities. Research shows that girls and women have less access than boys and men to resources and services in the community, including education and health. Girls face isolation as they enter puberty, with less social support networks than boys and men. They are forced to undergo traditional practices that violate basic human rights, including child marriage and female circumcision. Girls are more likely than boys and men to experience exploitation and abuse, including sexual violence.

Our programs help girls become more resilient and confident, and provide knowledge and skills that they need in order to protect themselves, and increase their opportunities. Through collaborative public art, they find greater roles of leadership and visibility in their communities, and can build relationships with other girls and women that provide a sense of solidarity. This support is vital in empowering them to become agents of change in their communities.
OUR PROGRAMS

Each program is unique. In every community we work in, we begin by engaging local leaders, who we ask to provide input on the program from beginning to end. This approach enables our programs to integrate community-formulated ideas into the programming, resulting in the curriculum and program content being meaningful and appropriate to every community we work with.

Our programs train groups of marginalized youth in a psychosocial art-based curriculum. Participants learn new skills in painting and drawing, participate in activities designed to encourage reflection and emotional expression and regulation, build knowledge around important issues in the community, and engage in relationship-building activities.

The projects culminate in the creation of murals in public spaces in the community by the youth participants. The murals are collaboratively designed with local leaders and project participants to address concerns around a specific issue raised by community leaders, using positive imagery showing community-based solutions.

Build a Community Arts Council of Local Leaders
Provide Youth with Psychosocial Art-Based Programming
Create Public Murals to Address Community Issues

“Both the process and the final product are important in showing what girls are really capable of.”

- Community Stakeholder, Tunaweza Portraits Project

Participants present their work at one of several public forums, sparking community discussions about gender equality. Tunaweza Portraits Project, Goma, DRC, 2019.
Project Highlight:

TUNAWEZA PORTRAITS
Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo,
26 young women challenged gender stereotypes, 2019

“Tunaweza” means “we are able/capable” in Kiswahili. Inspired by the knowledge that communities and youth have the capacity to make change for themselves, Tunaweza Portraits engaged 26 young women and a council of 27 community leaders in Goma, Eastern Congo, to challenge gender stereotypes that contribute to sexual violence in the community.

To accomplish this, Colors of Connection worked together with young women and leaders to create a series of murals and posters around the city of Goma that emphasized the role of women and girls in shaping the future in Goma and DRC.

“Before, there were no female construction workers, there were no female doctors. [The project] is really important because it will help other women progress.”

– Anita Kandolo, Participant

By sharing these stories and perspectives in public spaces, Tunaweza Portraits facilitated conversations about gender inequality and sexual violence in the Congo that included the individual and collective voices of women, and highlighted solutions to the issues. It was rare for the community, and transformative for the participants, for young women to be the ones creating public art about gender issues, and being able to effect change.

“Maguy is one girl who wasn’t used to being the center of attention. She was quiet, and slow to make friends. Her mother, the parent who raised her, passed away when she was 9. Because of this, as well as some other difficult experiences, she has some emotional wounds that prevented her from feeling close to people and trusting others. Being a part of the nurturing and safe environment of Tunaweza Portraits helped her build relationships, forming a social network to keep her from being isolated. Her participation led to her feeling more hopeful. We saw her smiling, and even dancing sometimes. This project created space and provided the support needed for even the shyest girl to become an agent of change in her community and take a stand on important issues.”

– Charline Kabuo, Participant

If the project continues in the future, I would like other girls to be trained. Let them study too, and let us all be brave. Let us not discriminate in society. Let women regain their true respect, and know that they are capable of doing all the work on the same level as men.”

– Salima, a young local artist hired to co-lead activities, assists Florence in a drawing activity.
Project Highlight:  
Goudoubo Refugee Community

Goudoubo Refugee Camp, Burkina Faso, 36 youth participants promoted tolerance and unity, 2014.

“If the youth, who are the strength of the society, understand this message of peaceful cohabitation, all will be well for the future.”

- Ati Wallet Ibrahim, Resident of Goudoubo Refugee Camp

In 2015, the Energizing Goudoubo Refugee Community Through Art Project brought together 36 out-of-school youth from different ethnic groups. Over the course of nine weeks they engaged in a psychosocial program and created two murals in the camp, one about education, the other about the ethnically diverse community living together peacefully. The murals reflected their hopes and dreams for their community.

Issa is a 17 year old boy who participated in the project. He and his family had been driven from their home in northern Mali by a war that stemmed from an effort by Touareg rebels and Islamic extremists to gain autonomy from the south. The conflict was fueled in part by ethnic tensions that remained to some degree in the camp. By the end of the project, Issa told us that because he had been interacting with the kids from the other ethnicities during the project, he wasn’t afraid of them anymore because he understood them better, and he believed that they understood him better too.

In seeing the new camaraderie, one of the community members who had watched the kids make the murals said that she felt inspired when she watched the kids and looked at the murals because it gave her hope that they would be able to overcome their differences and be able to live in peace again.
WHERE WE WORK

To be the best stewards of the resources we have, we are currently focusing on developing programs in two strategic areas. These are Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Seattle, Washington.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Empowering Adolescent Girls and Their Communities Through Art

In Goma, DRC, we are building on the work we have already done, and are focused on supporting marginalized adolescent girls to become powerful artistic agents of change in their community.

The DRC is a place known for its high rates of sexual violence against girls and women, and a lot of international resources are devoted to addressing the issue. Despite this, women and girls are too often victimized, and their critical role in addressing their own issues is not adequately recognized.

Our unique approach has deep impacts on the girl participants and community leaders, providing the space and time for them to delve into the issues that are important to them in a personal way, and enabling them to have a transformative role in creating local solutions.

Our work in Goma began in 2016 with the Courage in Congo project, and continued in 2019 with the Tumawiza Portraits project, during which we provided a rare opportunity for girls and community leaders to work together to address the issue of girls' lack of empowerment. The community worked together to find a new approach to sexual violence prevention through public art that portrayed girls and women as agents of change, rather than powerless victims. The project brought new strength and perspective into this community, and planted the seeds for a movement of strong, courageous women.

Inspired by our projects, the young women who had been involved formed M'Shujaats, a Girls Arts Collective (GAC), where they continue to meet to support each other and engage in art-based activities. Beginning in 2020, we are working with them to help them to deepen and broaden their impact, by collaboratively developing a sustainable program to support adolescent girls. The program will provide girls with the resources and tools they need to effect positive change in their own lives, and to work together to become agents of change in their community.

Seattle, WA, USA

We are developing programming in the US in order to help us deepen and grow our impact. This will be done through Seattle-based programming in the following ways:

1. The lower cost of Seattle-based programming will allow us to have a broader impact by reaching more conflict-affected youth and communities, and run more continuous programs.

2. Working in Seattle with populations that are coming from areas of unrest and violence will provide opportunities to enrich and expand our curriculum in ways that will benefit our programming both in the US and in our international programs.

3. Building a local network of supporters who can see the impact of our work by witnessing it in their own community will help us become a stronger organization that is better positioned to provide programming both in Seattle and overseas.

We know that creativity and innovation are key to the success of our work, and we are always open to opportunities to expand our programming to other areas and populations that will benefit from our programs.
At a time when conflict and crisis have increased in intensity and scale around the globe, there is a need for innovative solutions to help people to heal and rebuild their lives. Investing in the psychosocial wellbeing of those who have experienced conflict is a crucial component of restoring societies, yet it is often overlooked. We are filling this gap.

Our programs engage individuals, relationships, local organizations and society in a variety of ways that lead to positive change.

**ORGANIZATION**
Colors of Connection engages staff from the communities we work with and partners with local agencies to build strong relationships and share skills that will allow our impact to be sustainable.

**COMMUNITY**
Our programs work at the community level through engaging with local leaders in the form of a community arts council, which guides the program, and by engaging with community members during the process of creating the murals in a public space. This results in the following outcome:

- **Representation**: People advocate for themselves and others through public art

**RELATIONSHIPS**
Our programs focus on the importance of connecting with others for well-being and result in the following outcomes for participants:

- **Social Capital & Competence**: People learn how to build and manage relationships, and navigate social situations in constructive ways
- **Solidarity**: People feel connected to others and experience a sense of belonging, through shared values, responsibilities and interests.

**SOCIETY**
The benefits experienced by individuals and communities benefits societies as a whole by shifting perspectives. The imagery in the art itself, as well as the public creation of the art by the community’s own youth:

1. Shifts dominant narratives related to issues such as gender, racial and ethnic equality, and valuing local knowledge and identity
2. Portrays hope for a different reality
3. Reinforces the value of youth's contribution in society

**INDIVIDUAL**
We work directly with program participants using the expressive arts to create the following outcomes:

- **Self-efficacy**: People are more resilient, motivated to effect change, and able to handle hardship and imagine new possibilities
- **Healing**: People process and represent their emotions and thoughts, and reconnect with their bodies

**INTERNATIONAL**
Colors of Connection aims to foster a connection between our friends, supporters and donors and the youth and communities that we work with by sharing stories that shed a light on the connection we all share.
ORGANIZATION

This project was an example for all the partner (organization) and for the community because it has shown that with will power, anything is possible.

-Muphtah Ag Mohamed, Mentao Project Community Leader

INDIVIDUAL

I feel that there is something new that has been born in me, because now when I go out to the streets, everyone looks at me. People are surprised to see a woman painter. And when I work, I climb very high on the ladder. No one else can do that if they haven’t overcome fear.

- Esther Kamango, Tunaweza Portraits Participant

COMMUNITY

These murals and messages, they help make sure that girls are listened to when they don’t have sufficient voice within society. They make people think twice about what they think they know about girls and what they are capable of doing.

-Community Stakeholder, Tunaweza Portraits Project

RELATIONSHIPS

Before, I was afraid of the other ethnicities, to be together with them. But attending the class changed me, now I understand them and can work together with them. And they understand me better too.

- Iss, Goudoubo Project Participant

SOCIETY

I am touched because I didn’t know our youth were capable of doing all of that.

- Goudoubo Project Community Leader
ONE OPPORTUNITY CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

One in four children live in countries affected by conflict or disaster. In the aftermath of war, peoples’ emotional and social needs are often neglected, and they have severely limited opportunities and platforms for personal and public expression. There is often limited emotional and social support for people who have been affected by violent conflict, even though emotional health and community are vital to recovery.

Young people suffer the most in these environments from a lack of opportunities for education and engagement.

Together we can change that.

You can invest directly in the emotional and social development of people like Maguy and Issa. Your support will help youth find healing and dignity, and to feel empowered to make positive change through art.

Together with you and our partners, we are giving youth the emotional and social tools and resources they need to change their lives and communities for the better, through the powerful medium of art.

“This project gives us hope because we say that everything that the children have drawn is like a dream that can become a reality tomorrow.”

— Woman Leader, Mentao Refugee Camp

Colors of Connection is supported by the NoVo Foundation and past partner collaborations have included the International Rescue Committee, the Danish Refugee Council and Save the Children International.

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Note: Shares her opinions during a group session. The female-only environment and various activities that focused on building confidence and encouraging self-expression, provided a safe space for the girls’ voices to be heard and to develop their leadership skills. Tunaweza Portraits Project, Goma, DRC, 2019