

# Bangkok Post : Bridging CULTURAL DIVIDE



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## Bridging CULTURAL DIVIDE

**Wendy Sternberg has dedicated her life to helping the unfortunate worldwide and integrating cross-cultural acceptance through creative problem-solving programmes**

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She has always been fluent in the science of healing. Now Wendy Sternberg works to prevent wounds and heal existing ones inflicted by socio-political and cultural ills.



Musical virtuosos: Moroccan oud player Haj Youness and Jewish-American tenor Alberto Mizrahi at a Genesis World Music Ensemble performance.

After 14 years of what she describes as a solid career in internal medicine, Sternberg left the practice at the end of last year, more energised than ever, to work full-time on Genesis at the Crossroads (GATC), the non-profit organisation she founded in 1999 and now serves as its executive director.

"I think a lot of people transition out of a career when they're burned out. I was never burned out. It was reaching the height of the career, feeling really good about the people I took care of ...

"Medicine was interesting and fascinating and challenging, but never hit the passion level. There was always something to solve and puzzle through, but it never really got at my creative side whereas Genesis gets at all of that, whether it be fund-raising or creating opportunities, or the link between cultures, I have accessed my passion. There's no roadmap for Genesis. I'm creating it all the time and I love that. And I thrive on it," said Sternberg.

The Chicagoan has every reason to be energised. Her Chicago-based organisation that works with artists, youth and communities to bridge cultural divide through performance, arts education and humanitarian programmes has been growing and diversifying since its inception as a project in Landmark Education's 1999 Self-Expression

and Leadership Programme. The organisation's board of directors and advisory boards consist of people from a wide range of cultural and professional backgrounds.

The GATC's most distinguished project to date is the Genesis World Music Ensemble, or the Saffron Caravan, which brings together music artists from the Middle East, North Africa and the Americas to revisit, reinvent and link musical traditions. The organisation began uniting musicians from cultures in conflict in 2004 with the pairing of a Jewish-Moroccan and a Muslim-Moroccan musicians. The artists had never been introduced to one another before, and together they performed with a band comprising musicians from nine different nationalities. Their performance served as a finale to GATC's two-day ethnic music festival. The group later travelled to Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C. Later in 2005, GATC's Israeli-Palestinian performance became a part of the United Nations' 60th Anniversary celebration.



A Chicago youngster created a peace quilt square for the children in Iraq.

In the same vein as its predecessors, the Saffron Caravan began with the pairing of a Jewish and a Muslim virtuosos: Moroccan oud master Haj Youness and Jewish-American Greek-born tenor Alberto Mizrahi. The Ensemble began with the pairing of a Jewish and a Muslim virtuosos: Moroccan oud master Haj Youness and Jewish-American Greek-born tenor Alberto Mizrahi. The Ensemble debuted in 2007 in Chicago and went on to give concerts at the Kennedy Centre in the US capital and in Casablanca, where they were joined by local musicians.

According to the USINFO website, the artists assembled their music and ideas over the internet and by phone for four months in preparation for their 2007 performance at the Kennedy Centre. They met mere two days before the date of the show. The Saffron Caravan stars other musical heavyweights aside from Youness and Mizrahi, from US maverick harmonica artist Howard Levy, Cuban-born drummer and Grammy-Award winner Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez to Iranian composer-producer and guitarist Shahin Shahida and Afghanistan-born vocalist and musician Humayun Khan, among others.

At the beginning of this year, Sternberg came to Thailand to participate in Rotary Peace and Conflict Studies at Chulalongkorn University. The three-month programme took her to the remote places in Thailand and its neighbours, including Laos and Cambodia. Never having been to this part of Asia before, the Chicagoan said during the interview in April that she has emerged from the programme armed with a new instrument and a more sharpened view of how to deal with societies in conflict.



Wendy Sternberg, founder and executive director of Genesis at the Crossroads.

"The most important thing that I've learned from the programme was to analyse conflict going into any situation and take a look at who are the actors involved," she said. "The other thing is to ask a question and be with the question. Not necessarily ever finding an answer but to understand the question and begin to get at larger questions. 'How do you restore society post-conflict?' 'What is justice?' And is it your culture saying to another culture, 'This is how I do it?' I think just being with ambiguity is a big issue. You don't have the answer or that you don't always have the right way of doing things. Or that you leave something open-ended such that something arrives in the space that you've created."

When it comes to promotion of peace and helping people in conflict zones, the GATC largely focuses on the youth population. Its One Peace at a Time programme involves youngsters from Chicago's public and private schools, ethnic communities, refugee programmes and girl scout troops to create quilt squares, which are then assembled by professional quilt artists to be delivered to children in Iraq.

Another humanitarian programme that incorporates arts education is Armed Them with Instruments, which encourages adults and children from the US to donate musical instruments to the children in North African and Middle Eastern countries. This programme also aims to take vulnerable youth off the streets by providing them opportunities to study music at conservatories.

Sternberg reveals that she plans to reach not only younger audience, but also younger artists.

"I think when children perform for children, it stimulates children's thinking along these lines. It also helps adults thinking along these lines, too, by the way. But I think a child watching another child leaves them inspired differently than when an adult does."

Her belief in and effort to build a future generation of peace-loving and more creative adults and leaders doesn't end there. Despite the economic crisis that has bankrupted many contributors to the arts, wiped out many NGOs and hit almost everyone in its wake, Sternberg still has hopes for her big dream to build an international high school with an arts education-based programme to expand and further support the mission of Genesis at the Crossroads.

"I think a lot of the issues and conflicts in the world come about because we keep doing the same thing again and again and again. So we don't create a new framework because we don't teach creatively. This is what the school is about. It's about creative problem-solving, using art as a model to think creatively, all the while doing the standard curriculum," Sternberg said.

The Chicagoan reveals that, at this school, students wouldn't need to have interests in the arts to attend. She wants to work with an international body of educators and other professionals to devise a curriculum that promotes cross-cultural understanding and creative problem-solving.

"We need to train a different kind of teachers and we need to train a different kind of students ... you can open a huge can of worms starting something like this. It's a very big concept, but I think it's about taking a look at the core curriculum in high school. What if you could teach history, instead of teaching about wars, you teach about heroes that show up in every culture and the kind of creative ways they use to solve problems? You could look at Harlem Renaissance in the US or you could look at jazz and learn the history of the US through jazz. So it's about creating a curriculum that you can learn everything you need to know in high school and then some."

A major factor that has reinvigorated Sternberg's desire to focus and even accelerate this ambitious project is the Obama administration, which also sees the appointment of former CEO of Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan, as Secretary of Education. The President's platform for pluralism, reinvestment in arts education, and wider access to art makes Sternberg believe that there is a chance for governmental support and funding for her school.

In running a non-profit organisation during the economic downturn, Sternberg shares that it's about starting small and inventing new models to build trust with donors.

"The challenge is we grow responsibly to learn how to do pilot programme well and not take on very very big projects right away and to phase project."

This July the Saffron Caravan will travel to Egypt and Jordan to give concerts and conduct classes and workshops with the locals. During the month, the organisation plans to implement a new model to connect donors of musical instruments with recipients through a travel programme and video-conferencing.

"You never know where your money is physically going. I want to create a personal link between people. I want to create VDO conferencing between the children who donate the instrument and the children who receive the instruments that has to alter both children's lives. I'm not sure what they'll do with it in the future; I can only extrapolate down the road ... this is giving a child a connection to another part of the world and I think that is a better transformation. It's slow, it's not going to happen overnight. The work it does will happen long after I'm gone. It's not a one generational thing. But I've seen the way it's connected people just in the short time that I've run it that allows people to take their careers in new directions."

The most stubborn challenge in Sternberg's line of work, however, is not the economic reality or uniting artists from cultures in conflict.

"I think the biggest challenge with this work is to have people suspend their disbelief about conflict. What if you could create an opportunity to engage [two conflicting cultures] in something that they feel is sacred and beautiful about their culture, and in sharing it could understand one another. But you have to believe that there's another way, that they don't have to be at each other's throat, that there's going to be peace, that there's going to be a sense of quiet, nurturing life that allows people to continue their education and live life and fulfil their dreams. You have to create an opportunity for people to believe that."