

Renaissance Dreaming

By: Radhika Mitra

How I wish I could solve global poverty, climate change or instill world peace just by dreaming! Why is there no real Mary Poppins who can make all our dreams come true by a quick wink? Alas, dreaming a wishful dream will never allow me to help one of those underprivileged kids who just got trampled under an auto-rickshaw in front of my own eye. I still shudder as I recollect that eventful evening when my taxi stopped at a busy traffic intersection of Kolkata, India. A moment ago the boy was thrusting his face against the window pane, trying to hawk some handmade bead necklace to me and I was cringing after seeing his ragged dress, dirty face and soulful eyes. Traffic light turned green and all the cars rushed to overtake each other as no one appeared to obey any traffic rule. An auto-rickshaw came from the wrong side and knocked the boy on the road. I just saw the beads of his torn necklaces strewn everywhere. Our indifferent taxi driver kept driving while muttering some curse word in Bengali towards the boy and the auto-rickshaw driver. That event was a major turning point of my life as it broke all my wishful Mary Poppins dreams forever. I have learned to dream an action plan.

I came to know that the boy belonged to a poor artisan family and they make and sell their handicrafts at street corner for a living. They hardly earn a dollar a day to buy two square meals. They have no education, no tools or any formal vocational training. A kid of such poor family is put to work and earn money as soon as they can walk and talk. I touched my artsy handmade African wooden bangle which I bought at a glitzy store by paying twenty dollars. I could easily visualize an artisan hand carving it meticulously with some primitive tools, sitting outside of a hut as I have seen in National Geographic photo essays. How much does the artisans make from making that bangle? If they were paid well, then why do we still see those folk artists struggle to survive? Lot of un-answered questions cluttered my mind. I started asking few handicraft vendors peddling cheap handmade bead jewelry in unauthorized makeshift roadside

stalls. They all told me that most folk artists and artisans are very poor, they have never gone to school, so they cannot even read and write. They have learnt this skill by watching and working with their parents. They make their own tools from broken watch spring and metal pieces as they do not have money to buy proper tools. They do not have any showroom and outlet so they sell their work on street corners or in local train stations. Sometime few middle men come to purchase their merchandise and they even pay less as they are buying in quantities. They have limited ideas for a product design. If someone comes with a design or color scheme, entire artisan community of the village just copies that design. When I told them what price I have paid for my bangle in the local currency, they could not believe me and thought I was joking.

I came back from my vacation and researched about folk art and artisans in the internet. I was amazed to see how talented these artisans are. They are there in every country across the world and most of them are underpaid. They just get crumbs of the profit pie as main slices are eaten by other players of the supply chain. I felt a strong urge to do something to help these artisans with my limited resources. As a first step I have founded my non-profit organization "Renaissance Now" in the state of California to help underprivileged artists and artisans all over the world. We are not limiting our help to any particular country or region as art has no country, religion or racial barrier. No one asks which color or religion the artist has before enjoying or buying an art piece. As our first pilot project, I chose Kolkata, the city of joy, where mother Teresa had worked for most of her life. It is not a random choice as I can speak local vernacular Bengali and communicate with artisans without any interpreter. I have decided not to give them direct money. That never works in third world countries, poor as they are, they will immediately spend most money to pay back their debtors or to buy food. My plan is to provide assistance in

five ways and empower them to be self sufficient; I call them Renaissance Now five star program:

- 1) Conduct free on-location vocational training workshop
- 2) Provide free professional hand tools
- 3) Help them to develop a product for export or domestic sale
- 4) Fee publicity through featuring them in Renaissance Now website <http://rennow.org>
- 5) Provide free on-line store through they can sell their merchandise without any commission.

It was one of my happiest days when I received that white envelop from IRS, declaring Renaissance Now as tax exempted 501(C)3 public charity. We now have more than 200 members internationally and a group of very talented volunteers. While working for our first pilot project at Kolkata, I have also started assisting local talented poets and singers like Unity and Valentina by featuring them in Renaissance Now's website and sponsoring their CD album. Here at America, we have many problems surfacing, like many youths do not have access to learn and develop their artistic talents, we are filling that gap by hosting 'Arts Day' in local communities for underprivileged students. I have also been able to reach out to painting artists from San Francisco who are in need of resources and publicity. Renaissance Now is currently working on that as well.

I am now raising money for the 2009 pilot project Kolkata as we are all set to conduct one week training workshop in November and also donate tools to 100 wood carving and Jute weaving artisans. West Bengal Government will sponsor the cost of venue and artist stipend for the training. I am extremely excited now as I can clearly visualize very soon Renaissance Now

will be extending its five star program locally and globally to promote folk art, help underprivileged artisans and rehabilitate victims of human trafficking by teaching them vocational training.

My current dream is to expand the reach of Renaissance Now vocational training globally without spending our limited resources by making vocational training DVDs and providing them free to artisan cooperatives and NGOs. We also need art and craft tools for donation and lots of volunteers globally. To make this dream true, it is challenging to balance time between school and managing a full-fledged non-profit organization. I am putting all my free time after my high school studies and college application towards reaching out to people and communities, organizing fundraisers and recruiting volunteers. I pray that the US economy will revive soon as getting a donation or corporate grant has become very difficult for a grass root organization like Renaissance Now. However, I know getting fund for Renaissance Now charity can be difficult but not impossible, so it is not a wishful dream. I have a strong conviction that by next year when I leave my high school and enter a college, I will progress many step closer to my dream. While I do all this, I hope to inspire many others to turn their dreams into realities and overcome their challenges.