

Visual Storytelling Workshop with Refugees Facilitator Suggestions

- **Length:** A Visual Storytelling Workshop is 2-3 hours long; the older the participants (or the longer their attention span), the longer the workshop.
- **Participants:** As participants will need, deserve and benefit from your one-on-one attention, limit each workshop to 25 people. For each workshop, recruit refugees from a limited age range: children, teenagers *or* adults. That way you will be able to customize your presentation. Human rights issues that may be revealed by adults' visual stories may not be appropriate for young children to witness.
- **Primary Goal:** To give (universal) voice to the challenges and aspirations of refugees, forced to flee conflict and/or persecution in their native land.
- **Approach:** The questions posed in your workshop (see "Sample Flier for Visual Storytelling Workshop") will encourage refugees to think and feel deeply. Kneel down and talk with each workshop participant. Observe, note and ask questions about the details of each workshop participant's painting. Answering your questions will spark ideas of details to incorporate, empowering the narrative of each visual story.
- **Credit.** Before starting to draw (in pencil) their answer to their choice of question, ask workshop participants to write on the *back* of the paper their name (full name, first name only, last name only or initials – it's their choice) and age. If you later submit a scanned version of their visual story c/o www.burmavisionsforpeace.org and it is selected for inclusion in an exhibit or a publication, this information will be included in the credit line.
- **Introduction:** After welcoming participants, thank them for wanting to help fulfill the primary goal of the workshop. (See above.) Reassure them that they don't need to be an artist to create a powerful visual story. Emphasize that only they can tell their story. Then ask them: Why have so many people been forced to flee their native land? (If you have access to a whiteboard, jot down their answers for everyone in the workshop to see and reflect on. If a whiteboard isn't available, simply repeat each answer so everyone can at least hear.) The more knowledgeable workshop participants are about human rights issues in their native land and the more experience they gain articulating the impact of those issues, the more qualified they will be to speak and act on behalf of refugees and those who continue to suffer from human rights abuses in their native land. This dialogue will also help participants paint their visual stories, keeping in mind each participant's painting will be unique to his/her story.
- **Art Materials.** I use 8" x 8" pieces of watercolor paper, pencils, erasers, watercolor crayons and watercolor pencils. If you are unable to find watercolor crayons (which can be ordered online, if unavailable locally), you can use color pastels. Outlining each visual

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story in pencil, first, will create a sharper image and watercolors/pastels avoid the scratchy look and feel of traditional crayons.

- **Logistics.** Each workshop participant should start with a pencil and a piece of watercolor paper (square, if they would like to submit their work for possible inclusion in a (square, like *Forced to Flee*) book or an exhibit. The other art materials will be shared by four refugees; that is, a box of watercolor crayons, a box of watercolor pencils, a cup of water and a handheld eraser – **or** (if you are unable to find watercolor crayons, which guarantee vibrant colors), a box of color pastels and paper towels to smudge the pastels. Paper towels can be used to smudge watercolors too.
- **Creative Process.** Read each question on the flier, slowly. Encourage participants to ask for clarification, if needed. Dialogue around your questions can be fruitful, nurturing self-confidence and a spirit of camaraderie. Ask each participant to answer the question s/he most wants the rest of the world to know the true answer to. Once a refugee has chosen a question, ask him/her to consider how he/she could answer it visually, with the art materials. Most of us aren't accustomed to answering questions visually, so this stage of the workshop can be challenging; it can take 15-20 minutes. If a participant is unable to envision an answer, kneel down and review the questions with him/her. Eventually, your conversation will spark a mental image. Encourage refugees to paint from their heart; the deeper the feelings expressed by a painting, the more likely it will engage viewers' hearts. As soon as an image comes to a participant, ask him/her to draw it in pencil, first (avoiding the use of stick figures, for people). The more narrative their painting, the more compelling. Only when their detailed pencil "answer" is complete will they begin to use the watercolors (or pastels) to fill in their drawing. (Note: a visual story includes *no* words, which is why it can be understood globally.) Urge participants to fill in their entire piece of paper with color; no white space should remain on the page. Reiterate that this will create a more powerful image, engaging more viewers.
- **Post-Workshop.** Gather all of the participants' visual stories. Thank them for helping advocate on behalf of refugees and human rights in Burma. Then note on the *back* of each painting (in pencil) the date of the workshop and any clarifying information shared verbally by the storyteller. (If a participant can write in English, encourage him/her to jot down as much clarifying information on the back as possible, themselves.) If selected for exhibit or publication, this information would be used to create a caption for their visual story. Also note on the back of each painting where the workshop took place.
- **Sharing Globally.** If a workshop participant would like to share his/her visual story, please send via the Contact link at www.burmavisionsforpeace.org a high-resolution (600 dpi) scan of the front and back of the painting. Before scanning, please be sure that the visual storyteller's name (full or abbreviated – they should feel free to preserve their anonymity), age, date, location and clarifying text is on the back of the painting. If a painting is selected for exhibit or publication, you/he/she will be notified ASAP. It may also be posted to my (Erika's) Facebook page, www.facebook.com/refugee.stories.5