

bullet or a magic potion,” she concedes. “I am saying that what we do shows us the powerful catalyst that art can be in healing the wounds of a city. When I came to Philadelphia it felt right to me. Twenty years later, I feel that this is not *just* the right city, it’s a city where the dynamics are in place to create a renaissance, and there is a mural renaissance going on here. I believe it with every bone in my body. Now this is spreading throughout this country, and I think ultimately we want this world to be better. I think that healing the world is a common task. It belongs to all of us. For me, it’s a privilege to do this work.”

Her foot taps the brake. The car slows. She stops talking for a second. Her eyes are glued to a wall ahead. She pulls the car over and without a word she’s leaping out and hurrying over to a man who seems to be digging a garden in a large lot.

“Hi, how are you?” says the Great Wall Hunter of Philadelphia. “I have a question. Do you know who owns this wall?”

SHE FELT THE FEAR AND DID IT ANYWAY

Lily Yeh is a painter, a scholar, an educator, a mystic, and a dreamer. She’s a petite woman who speaks in the halting accent of one for whom English is a second language. Lily was born in Taiwan but calls Philadelphia her home. She came here nearly forty years ago to study art and never left. Inspired by traditional Chinese painting, Lily has spent her life and devoted her art to a single mission: creating enchanting places. To explain what she means, she sometimes tells stories, because just explaining often isn’t enough.

Imagine, then, that you are looking at one of her paintings. Before you is an idealized scene of Chinese pastoral life, reminiscent of an old tapestry or a piece of fine china, and Lily is telling you a parable.

Once there was a fisherman who one day docks his boat and decides to wander along a hidden road. He passes impassable rocks and slips through dark places, and just when he thinks he has reached the end of the road, he stumbles upon a place full of cherry blossoms, healthy farm animals, and happy people

Lily Yeh founded the Village for the Arts and Humanities, a community arts center.



dressed in the garb of yesteryear. The fisherman is astonished. He asks the people how they came to be in such a wondrous place, and he learns that years ago, to escape warfare, they came to this remote place and never left. The fisherman is so entranced that he decides to stay a little while himself. But after a time he begins to miss his home and family. And so he heads home, but not before he marks the road, thinking, "I will tell everyone about this paradise." Of course, once he returns home he cannot find the road and must search for it all over again.

The story is a popular one in Chinese lore and one that Lily feels sums up her life's work. She accepted a challenge twenty years ago to create a park in the heart of desolate North Philadelphia and has been making art and building parks—and lives—ever since. "It is about the mundane," she says. "We live in the mundane and sometimes there are the sparks of inspiration and light, and we decide to explore. It's like coming to North Philadelphia and this abandoned lot and we explore it. In taking on the journey there are many roadblocks, but if we continue and follow the voice inside us, we are led to this paradise, to this very beautiful, pristine place, which is the park we built. But we cannot stay there forever, and we have to come back to the mundane and rediscover it through another journey. And that's what I think my work is like."

After completing her studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Lily got a job

teaching at the University of the Arts. On the side, she continued to paint and exhibit her work. One day in 1986, Arthur Hall, founder of the Black Foundation Center, asked her to create a small garden in the abandoned lot behind the center's building. Lily had never done such a thing. She hesitated. Deep down, she feared that she was out of her element. She was a trained painter. She knew nothing about gardening, knew nothing about carpentry, and possessed no outdoor skills whatsoever. To make matters worse, when she approached her artist friends and others who had actually built gardens, they did everything they could to dissuade her.

"People said, 'Kids will destroy everything you do.' 'You're Chinese and this is an African-American neighborhood.' And then the city leveled ten houses next to the lot and the project got bigger. I had a little bit of money, but suddenly it became a huge lot. Everyone I knew said, 'You must not do that.' And I said, 'Well, you know, the experts must be right.' As I was deciding to withdraw I remember distinctly the voice in me said, 'You must rise to the occasion, otherwise the best of you will die and then the rest will not amount to anything.' I think that was very powerful because I didn't want to look at myself and see a coward in the mirror down the line."

She went out to the lot one day and thought, man, this is a mess. It's chaotic and disorienting. How can I do this? She had no background in designing spaces, but she had



one great insight: “To transform a chaotic space into a place of order we need a center and we need a boundary. And so I picked up a stick from the ground, I drew a center in the middle of the park, and I said this is where we’re going to start building. When I look back, that center, the physical center, it’s a reflection of my own inner center and that’s where the energy, inspiration, and the light guided me through the whole path, I think.”

She used her small budget to buy cement and shovels and began by working with a

Yeh relies on volunteers whose community pride and neighborly relationships are often strengthened by working together.

local man, JoJo, who helped her build many of the structures in the lot. Local kids would wander by after school to see what they were doing, and little by little, the kids began helping. She contacted Philadelphia Green, who supplied trees and soil and worked with the children to teach them about gardening. That inspired Lily to run a simple art program for children. But in a few months, the park was done, and Lily prepared to head

back to her teaching job, to the world she knew best, the one she had prepared for all these years. She would go back to painting, writing reports, trying to land a show at galleries or museums.

Back at school, she wandered the halls feeling haunted. It was a feeling she could never explain to her colleagues. "That was a calling," she says. "I didn't know what it was, but I said 'No, I'm not ready,' because I knew if I responded to it, it would be my life and would be all consuming."

"I couldn't shake off the images," she says. "Something gripped me. Then I realized that I needed to go back and understand what caused me to do that. And so I went back, and it's been eighteen years since. I really feel my life unfolded with the doing of the project."

Her experience with the lot led to the formation of the Village for the Arts and Humanities, a community arts center that Lily founded. Children and adults come here to learn about different types of art. Like the center point she drew in the dirt of that very first lot, the Village has become the center of an entire community. People who feel the system has forgotten them, people who have never been encouraged to express themselves before, now have a place to go and an enthusiastic teacher in Lily. From that unusual place, they can take what they have learned out into the surrounding neighborhoods, creating park after park.

If you can pinpoint any one "style" in the Village's creations, it would have to be its

colorful mosaic sculptures. "At the very beginning we wanted to buy trees," Lily recalls, "but we didn't have money to buy trees so we built cement trees. And then we painted them and we eventually mosaicked them."

One day, she takes some friends out to see her work. One by one, they wander through the neighborhood, visiting the new parks, checking out the sculptures. Lily drops the names of her neighbors into conversation easily, along with their accomplishments. "Those were done by children with me from three-and-a-half to thirteen years old, and they're still here. The benches went through different stages, we have to repair them, but they are so important because they are the beginning. See the benches there? Those were done with recycled materials. We saw some metal frames in a dump truck. So I pulled them all out and then we put them together, we put lath wire and then cement, and Big Man [*the neighborhood's nickname for Village volunteer James Maxton*] and the children constructed this. Big Man never did any artwork before, but he became a master mosaic artist." (Mr. Maxton passed away in 2004.)

In another park, they come across Lover's Lane, so named because the row of trees looks so romantic. After the Flower Show one year, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society donated small trees. Local residents diligently watered them, even in the hottest of summers, and now they are gigantic. Another park features a mural of beautiful angels



A wall flower painting at the Village for the Arts and Humanities.

standing atop columns. This is a memorial to the sixty-four local graduates of Edison High School who later died in the Vietnam War—the highest number of that war’s casualties from any one public school in the nation.

“When we build a park,” Lily explains, “I have a concept, I have a basic design, but what I try to do is get as many people from the community as involved as possible, especially our young people. Our parks are all open. The way we protect them is by engaging people directly in building the park and transforming their land.”

Leon Saunders, a local resident, stops his work long enough to explain how he got involved. “I started with Lily when we did our first wall over here, the big rainbow. I was one of the artists. I painted whatever Lily wanted to be painted, and it came out beautiful. It was my first mural. When I was doing the mural with Lily I had some problems. I wasn’t working. I mean my life was going downhill. Now, whenever I can I come down here and I help out. I’m just here for the community, this is where I came from.”

After all these years, no one has defaced the mural in the slightest. “I think people respect beauty,” Lily says. “Beauty has a lot of power and energy. Also, when it’s painted with quality, it means ‘This place is occupied.’ People respect that.”

One park features a mural of a magical kingdom, where dragons fly across the sky. Another features sculptures of creatures Lily calls the Guardian Birds, whose wings envelop and protect the neighborhood. In

another space, a group of stone lions stands sentinel over the street. The stone lions came from China, but once the artists got hold of them, they were retrofitted with more colorful mosaic chips. Another sculpture, of a woman with outstretched hands, gets Lily giggling. She runs over and spread her arms in front of it.

“This is me,” she proclaims.

The pose and place of honor seems appropriate. Clearly, she has found a home here among the residents of North Philadelphia that will last forever. “Philadelphia is where I lived my adult life, so it’s very dear to my heart. I spent forty-seven years here, more years than I have in any other place. Philadelphia’s the place I call home.”

Art, she says, is about understanding what matters to you. For Lily, the Village became a special place where she found like-minded people and an environment in which she could thrive and grow. At first she feared it, but like a lot of the people in this book, that fear was a pivotal moment, a time of reckoning.

PHILLY EATS WHAT PHILLY GROWS

Philadelphia is also home to thousands of “farmers” who would rather plant a tomato plant or a handful of carrot seeds than a flower or a tree. Most do this as a hobby, but for others it’s a living, and a tough one at that. Farming is hard enough in the countryside, where you have open space, fresh air,

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