

The following text has been adapted from a much longer interview with Angie Eng conducted by Paul Sendziuk.

Angie Eng and LIFESIGNS

Angie Eng has devised and worked in Arts-based education and empowerment programs for over 15 years. In 2002, while travelling through Asia and Africa, she co-founded LIFESIGNS, a not-for-profit organisation that works with local artists and adolescents to foster HIV prevention through theatre and public art. Eng contends that "art is an effective cure to save a generation from the HIV virus", and that despite advances in drug treatments and their availability, education and prevention are still the key to ending the AIDS pandemic. In Africa, it may yet be the case that artists and school children save more lives than medical researchers and pharmaceutical companies.

Back in New York to plot the future direction of LIFESIGNS and to produce her own video art, Angie Eng spoke with Paul Sendziuk.

Paul Sendziuk: What was the stimulus behind LIFESIGNS?

Angie Eng: I had been travelling through Asia and Africa for about a year before ending up in Ethiopia. I stayed in an area called Axum, in the north of Ethiopia, where you can find a hundred students from ages 5 to 17 in the same classroom. They have no audiovisual teaching aides. So they use public art – theatre and murals – for education. It's really effective. LIFESIGNS artists and student volunteers paint murals about HIV prevention and the importance of using condoms. We use a visual medium because a lot of people are illiterate. Even Vietnam, Burma and Cambodia are using murals to teach about drugs, AIDS, and prostitution. They use it for political propaganda as well.

The Catholic Church might argue that an AIDS mural depicting condoms should be regarded as propaganda!

In Axum, where the Ark of the Covenant is supposedly located, 50% of the population is Muslim and 50% is orthodox Christian. They're very religious on both sides. To address AIDS is really controversial but at the same time they're very open to learning about it. In some of the murals we painted penises and condoms. The priest was saying 'AIDS doesn't exist, don't wear condoms', but out in the community the villagers knew a lot of people were dying...about 1 in 13 people are dying in the villages. The adults were really shocked by our murals, but at the same time they said 'no, this is good, we need this'.

How were the murals created?

We recruited student volunteers who were interested in art and AIDS prevention, and who had the potential to be peer educators – we wanted them to talk about what they had learned with other students and their families. We'd choose a group of 6 to 10 students and they were the ones who painted the murals. I or another artist would do the design, and then we would discuss the design with them.

A couple of the groups wanted to do theatre. Theatre wasn't part of our program until we realised this is the way they communicate, this is what they do in school. I was amazed because when I was 13 there was no way I could get up on stage and do a play about HIV! They were very open. They did role-playing, theatre, and wrote songs about AIDS.

One of the students wrote a song and gave it to the teacher. I attended an assembly and there were 500 students all singing his song. The teacher had played the song, taught it to the students, and within a few months they were all singing it. I said 'we should really put this on the radio because if they've learned the song in just a few weeks...' The boy was shy and pretty embarrassed – like any teenager. He was, like, 'hey, they didn't mention my name did they?'

Did you have editorial control over the works that the kids produced? What if they came up with something dramatically incorrect?

Our discussions would frame their work. One student wrote a play, and the story was about a wealthy drunkard who spread HIV; the character would go to a bar and then go see prostitutes. This is a common scenario because it's very common for Ethiopian men to see prostitutes. But that story was on television and the radio over and over again. The boy did an excellent job, but we discussed if he should portray a wealthy man, because the audience might get the impression that you need to be wealthy to visit prostitutes and transmit HIV. So I said: maybe we should choose a mother, or a teacher who gets HIV. Or maybe the woman is the one who is promiscuous and gives it to her husband.

What age group were you targeting?

The goal was to get to the children before they were sexually active. Even though we did have an older group of 16 year olds, the idea was to get 13 and 14 year olds. In the program, I brought different groups together, so that we had 13-year-olds speaking to 16-year-olds; they became almost like their mentors. They have a lot of questions and are much more open with each other when speaking about HIV and sex than if their teacher was there.

I believe that you created a novel public art piece for World AIDS Day.

Yes, we spray-painted the AIDS ribbon on some camels that featured in a World AIDS Day parade. In places that I went in Ethiopia, and all over Africa, people know what this symbol means. The camels belonged to some nomads who travel between

the towns and the dessert selling wood and trading salt. They're moving constantly. We thought: great, this mobile placard, the camel. We asked some camel owners if we could use their camels and paid them a couple of dollars, which was a lot – that's how much they earned in a day – and spray-painted the AIDS ribbon. It was actually a great dialogue, too, because they then got involved in what we were doing. We got the students to ride the camels and throw condoms during the parade. The spray-paint on the camels would last a really long time too, a season at least.

A villager might see it and ask: 'why has that camel got a red ribbon on it?', and initiate a conversation with someone else. So for the cost of a couple of dollars you've got AIDS prevention on the back of a camel, walking in and out of villages.

Yes! You're right. It's such an effective design because it sparks conversation.

Do you think the other camels might have ostracised those camels because they had HIV?

They might! Somebody said: "They're gonna think, "does the camel have AIDS?"".

Your website states that 'LIFESIGNS believes that art is an effective cure to save a generation from the HIV virus. Public Art has always been a catalyst to promote social change in states of emergency'. Do you really believe this?

Yes, absolutely. In communities where there is a high illiteracy rate and a lot of things are unspoken, public art about AIDS really raises awareness.

END

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