

# Living a Legacy

**Marsha Conn**

**A**fter teaching art for more than thirty years, I found myself in the precarious position of suddenly not knowing what to do with myself. I made a list of everything I wanted to do, describing myself as a teacher, art educator, traveler, and volunteer.

I decided to search for creative ways to use my love of teaching art, working with kids, and traveling. As luck (or fate) would have it, an opportunity presented itself and I ended up as a volunteer with Smile Power, a dental outreach group that volunteers in developing countries. Through this group, I worked with children in Bolivia and Africa.

## The Batwa Pygmies

In Uganda, I came in contact with the Batwa pygmies, one of the oldest known hunter-gatherer cultures. In 1992, they were evicted from the Impenetrable Forest in southwest Uganda in order to make it a World Heritage Site and a national park. This was done to protect the mountain gorillas and to attract tourists going on gorilla treks.

Since the Batwa had no title to the land, they received no compensation. As a result, the Batwa lost their old ways of living and had to reshape their culture to fit a new way of life. Without their homeland, land rights, or means for economic survival, the Batwa faced discrimination, poverty, and disease. Their former knowledge of their lands is no longer pertinent to their lives, but new skills are being learned.

## Looking to Make a Difference

I learned that, even though the Batwa had a rich history of singing and dancing, there was no tradition of making art. In response, I established the Volunteer Artist Program (VAP) to go to Uganda to work with the Batwa to make crafts that would be true to their culture and help them become



self-sufficient. When I returned home from Uganda, I asked a group of artists if they would be interested in joining me on this adventure.

The artists—Carol Brady, Judy Chambers, Lynn DiNino, Cheryl Johnson, Annie Moorehouse, Elinor Maroney, Joan Robbins, and Jim Robbins—were all from the Seattle area. We met once a month for a year and agreed that we would work with discarded and recycled materials that were readily available in the Batwa's environment.

Questions arose: "Could they do the projects easily without us there to help?" "Would their crafts be marketable?" "How would we communicate with them?" "How would we be received by the Rugika (the dominant African tribe there) and the Batwa?" To our relief, we were positively received by both groups.

## Raising Money

Our next step was to raise money to take us to Uganda. Artist Colleen Lindsey made a quilt of African animals to raffle off at our fundraiser and silent auction at the Columbia City Gallery. Shortly before the fundraiser, I was fortunate to be interviewed by a local reporter for *The Seattle Times*, and this brought in more people.

We held a silent auction of each participating artist's work and raised enough money to send us on our way. We also received a grant from the Ambassador's Special Self-Help Fund from the United States Embassy in Kampala that paid for all of our supplies and materials.

## Working with the Batwa

Upon our arrival, the Batwa Development Program (BDP), our host, provided us with guesthouses to stay



in, a cook with a dining room, and concrete-floored classrooms.

We worked with forty-two Batwa community members, during two, one-week sessions. Day one of each session was focused on drawing and painting, with the remainder of the time devoted to choosing a craft from the options we presented. Projects included fabric necklaces, foam printing, woven mats, story cloths, bottle cap earrings, and magnets to sell in the Batwa craft *banda* (souvenir shop). We were so thrilled to have the opportunity to collaborate with such hard-working, receptive, and innovative people. Many improved upon the techniques we taught.

The emotional highlight was when a woman named Gladys showed up with a bundle of necklaces her village

had produced following the instruction she received the previous week. She'd walked from her village about twenty-four miles away in order to present these to the craft *banda* to sell.

### Reflections

One of my personal memories of our time with the Batwa is very simple. I lived in a *banda* by myself that was just up the hill from where the artists were staying. I had no electricity so I would come home in the dark and wake up in the dark.

Many nights I would hear sounds around me that seemed new and exciting. I would sit there thinking about how all of us, the Batwa and artists, had come together from different cultures and different worlds to create something beautiful that we would

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remember for a very long time.

When I returned to Seattle, I discovered that my electricity had been off in my kitchen for the entire time I was gone. I went back to my headlamp and flashlight and sat on my own back porch, basking in the memories just a little longer.

I have come to the realization that fulfilling one's dreams has little to do with age. There is a growing number of "retirees" finding ways to use their skills and experience to make a difference in their own communities and the world. I think it is important to live a legacy—not just leave one. 🐾

*Marsha Conn is a teacher, art educator, traveler, and volunteer who lives in Seattle, Washington.*

### WEB LINK

[www.batwaartist.com](http://www.batwaartist.com)