



Art =

THROUGH THE ARTS, ANDREA KERZNER IS BRINGING HOPE TO YOUTH IN SOUTH AFRICA, UGANDA AND THE SOUTH BRONX

BY **WILL BUNCH**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON HAMERMAN

Power

ast October, Andrea Kerzner, founding CEO of the arts education nonprofit Lalela, flew to her native South Africa to launch a new Center of Art & Innovation in Johannesburg's Maboneng Precinct. Kerzner (M.A. '87) lives in New York City, "so I'm not always there for the transformative moments" — but on this occasion she'd asked former Lalela student Siyolisi Bani to speak. "When we first met him in Cape Town, he was in a gang, growing up in one of our most marginalized communities and at risk of losing all hope, like so many of South Africa's youth," Kerzner says. "But he loved doing art, so he joined our program. One day, we framed one of his paintings and included it in an exhibit in our gallery at the One & Only Cape Town Hotel."

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In Maboneng, Bani, now at university studying graphic design, said that seeing his painting in the gallery made him realize “anything in life was possible.”

“Siyolisi is now working with us, helping youth from his community see a new world of possibility,” Kerzner says.

A GIFT OF IMAGINATION

In South Africa, where only three in 10 students in lower-income township schools reach grade 12 and two-thirds of young people ages 18–25 are unemployed, “possibility” is a *raison d’être* for Lalela.

“There are huge structural issues in South Africa — obviously people need clean water and health care — but I believe it is important to empower the younger generation to make changes for themselves,” says Kerzner. “South Africa needs entrepreneurship, but without adequate education and hope for the future, youth turn to drugs, violence, crime. The first subjects to be taken out of low-income schools are the arts, and this robs youth of the creativity that leads to innovation and positive change. Art massages the right brain and gives you the power to think outside the box; it improves self-confidence and develops powers of persistence, collaboration and solution thinking. Students engaged in the arts are five times less likely to drop out of school, and two times more likely to graduate from college.”

Lalela (Zulu for “to listen”) has been about possibility for Kerzner, too. Her father was a successful entrepreneur who developed South Africa’s largest hotel and resort chain. He became a supporter and friend of President Nelson Mandela. Yet Andrea left South Africa during apartheid “because I couldn’t live in that system anymore and didn’t want my children growing up there. The devastating effects of apartheid motivated me to launch Lalela,” she says. “I saw people without homes. I saw a community develop across the valley from our family home with no sanitation or running water.”

A LIFE-CHANGING TRIP

Kerzner’s own daughter sparked Lalela’s eventual creation. “I’d worked in finance, looking after my family’s investments,” says Kerzner, who earned a London Business School degree after studying organizational psychology at Teachers College. “My daughter wanted to take her friends to South Africa to fulfill their school’s community service requirement.”

For Kerzner, the trip’s highlight “was an art project in the KwaZulu-Natal region, an area hit hard by HIV/AIDS. We engaged young school children in art workshops. One creative moment led to another, and during a mask-making project, children donned the masks they decorated and began to open up about how they lived and what they endured. Listening to these stories, seeing how art broke down barriers and gave children a new voice when they were too traumatized to use the voice they had — it was joyful and transformative. Also the transformation of my daughter and her friends as they interacted with students from different cultures — it changed my life to see the difference one could make.”

MAPPING HEARTS, AND MORE

Over the next several years, with UNICEF and the International Rescue Committee, Kerzner worked with refugee children and former child soldiers of eastern Chad, Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo. She launched Lalela, with the motto “Art = Power,” in Cape Town in 2010, when South Africa hosted soccer’s World Cup. With schools on extended break, her priority was providing activities to keep kids off the streets.

“Initially we worked with just 20 children, then bussed children in from surrounding communities Mondays through Fridays,” she recalls. “After five weeks we had a growing community of young artists! The local primary school principal said, ‘Can we continue?’”

Today Lalela directly serves more than 2,200 South African students ages six through post-high school, reaching thousands more in schools through the curriculum ‘I AM’ (for “ideas, art and music”). Lalela staff work with former child soldiers at Hope North, in northern Uganda, using an arts facility built specifically for Lalela with money raised in part by students at New York City’s Blue School.

“In all our work, the primary goal is typically artistic — teaching skills such as using and mixing colors, exploring creativity and understanding trial and error,” Kerzner says. “The secondary goal is about character development, advancing life skills and academic achievement.”

Lalela also asks youth from divided communities to work together to create “Heart Maps” to heal hatred and mistrust.

“They ask each other, ‘What heritage were you born with, what are your fears, your challenges and

LALELA, IN A WORD

Always
inspire with creativity.

Reimagine
challenge as opportunity.

Trust we can be
the trailblazers of change.

Lalela Project provides educational arts to at-risk youth, sparking creative thinking and awakening the entrepreneurial spirit.



HEALING BY GIVING VOICE The Lalela Project is premised on the belief that doing art not only engages children’s creativity and hope, but also gives them the voice to describe how they have lived and what they have endured. To support or learn more about Lalela, visit www.lalela.org.

your dreams?” Kerzner says. “Then they map each other’s answers to the four chambers of their hearts. They learn to appreciate differences, common challenges and dreams. After a while, dialogue turns into laughter and deeper understanding. You can watch the walls of past hatred break down right in front of your eyes.”

In another Lalela program, “Photography for Social Change,” young people document community issues. One group photographed a neighborhood where children played in garbage and open sewage. On Mandela Day, the group showed their pictures in the community hall.

“They called on everyone to do something,” Kerzner says. “There was a cleanup and a new community awareness. Our students taught their moms cleaning techniques such as using lemons from local trees as sanitizers.”

NEW DIRECTIONS

In 2014 Kerzner brought Lalela to New York City, through an after-school program for middle school students in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx.

“I’m a firm believer in not duplicating services, and New York City has strong arts programs,” she says. “But we were asked to come by the Beacon After School Program. Also, several board members and volunteers live in New York City, and they were anxious to see us do something here.” So far, Hunts Point youth have responded enthusiastically. “The at-risk communities in South Africa and the South Bronx are similar — single-parent households, unemployment, gangs, domestic and sexual violence.”

For Kerzner, the Lalela Project clearly has become an all-consuming passion. Beyond creating qualified partnerships with foundations and seeking corporations to invest in the next generation of change makers, she spends her time ensuring that her core team remains intrinsically motivated. “They work all day in difficult, emotionally demanding situations,” she says. “I speak with them most every night. It’s a tough atmosphere, and you can’t reward highly, so it’s important for me to create the right culture, with an innovative arts atmosphere that really reflects our values. Because there’s so much more to be done.” **TC**

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