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NOVEMBER 5, 2019

# Meet Sheila Scott-Wilkinson of Theatre Of Hearts/Youth First in Korea Town and Downtown



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Today we'd like to introduce you to Sheila Scott-Wilkinson.

**Sheila, please share your story with us. How did you get to where you are today?**

I left home at sixteen on my own with blessings from my parents for Germany where I ended up studying opera and Lieder at the Frankfort Conservatory of Music. However, acting was what I always wanted to pursue since I was a small child in Aurora, Illinois. So, from Germany, I found my way to London to audition and was accepted into the London Drama Center where I completed a three-year course in theater. There were many stumbles and bumps along the way but I persevered and became a well-known working actor on stage, film and television in England. At that time there were few actors of color who were known in England and often times I felt alone in the deep sea of fish and chips.

However, after 13 years of being away from my family and with the passing of my only brother it was time to return to the states. It was a huge cultural shock being back in the good old USA but I was also excited by the possibilities to expand my horizons. I became more and more restless and felt that I had done everything that I had set out to do as an actor. It was my desire to put my skills that I learned as a professional artist to uses. But how? So, with that in mind, I was introduced to the late Jack Jackson, Executive Director/Founder of Inner City Cultural Center/Theater which was at the time the most amazing innovative multicultural organizations promoting excellent theater and educational programs for the Los Angeles community. He included me in his inclusive vision to take part in some of his theater productions and teach theater to high school kids that came to the center after school and on the weekends.

I jumped at the chance with some trepidation but I found that so-called out of reach youngsters were creative and smart as well as being eager to express themselves through the creative lens of theater. Their transformation was palpable. The light bulb went on for me. "Art is the Key" to move social change forward. I continued my quest by receiving a California Arts Council individual grant to teach youngsters in south Los Angeles acting. From there I instructed adult men and women in prisons through the initial Statewide Arts In- Correction Program and became a Program Manager for Artreach. At that point, I had seen enough proof that the arts can actually transform lives. That's when I thought let's try to keep these kids out of the prison system and catch them early while there is still a

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chance for them to awaken to the enormous possibilities through the creative experience. This would give them the opportunity to express themselves in a safe and nurturing environment.

That's when Theatre Of Hearts and the Youth First Program became an idea that grew into an action. Yes, the challenges have been complex and difficult at times, but the rewards have been stunning when I see that our organization has provided thousands of youngsters with inspiration and vision to reach beyond their four-block radius to be able to envision that all is possible enabling them to find "a pathway to their future goals". In addition, over 300 Theatre Of Hearts/Youth First professional artist's mentors, staff and board members that have shared not only their expertise but their heart to mentor, encourage and give hope to the thousands of youngsters we serve annually. All this is to be honored...this journey is all worthwhile.

Theatre Of Hearts Inc. was founded in 1987 by African American, actor, youth advocate, mentor, arts administrator Sheila Scott-Wilkinson. And in the wake of the civil unrest experienced in Los Angeles in 1992, the Youth First Artist-In-Residence (YFAIR) Program was initiated in order to prevent and intervene in youth violence through ongoing, high quality, youth development, multidisciplinary arts education workshops for at-risk and low-income youth and professional development workshops for educators/group leaders/probation officers and artists offered at schools and community-based sites in underserved neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles County. TOH has provided long-term quality youth development arts workshops by professional artist mentors to youngsters in juvenile detention facilities, alternative schools, low-income housing communities, libraries, community centers, and other community-based sites throughout Los Angeles County.

Every Youth First Program is a model of inclusion, crossing lines of race and cultural differences. Since its inception in 1992, the Youth First AIRP has linked over 300 professional artists from the Los Angeles area with—underserved youth. Our Youth First Artist-Residence Programs are long term, and project-based, providing youth with the continuity and ongoing mentoring so critical for making a lasting impact in their lives. TOHYF program is not just for arts sake but also expands the horizon of each individual as the communities they represent are most often excluded from the arts because of their ZIP code, issues of incarceration and poverty.

TOHYF believes strongly and has witnessed that quality arts education is the transformative springboard that promotes social change by nurturing the spirit giving life skills and a creative road map for individuals to realize their future goals through the creative process. TOHYF serves youth that are aged 4-18 throughout Los Angeles County that focuses on individuals who may have been abused, neglected, gang-involved, wards of the court, part of foster care, as well as pregnant minors. Since its inception, the Youth First Artist-In-Residence Program has become a leader among nonprofit arts education providers in Los Angeles. Since 1992, our Youth First Artist-In-Residence Program has served over 174,896 underserved youth and last year from June 2018 to August 2019 alone, TOHYF served 15,466 youth in countywide.

**Overall, has it been relatively smooth? If not, what were some of the struggles along the way?**

When the value of quality arts education was considered insignificant in underserved communities, youth detention centers and schools and other low-income community sites, Theatre Of Hearts was one of the pioneer organizations to first break new ground advocating that quality arts education is the transformative springboard for all youth including the system engaged youngsters. Theatre Of Hearts and our Youth First Artist-In-Residence Program was on the frontlines to promote social change by nurturing the spirit, giving life skills and providing a creative road map to reach their fullest potential. All of this did not come about by chance. Programs came to fruition in the form of baby steps of accomplishments. Little by little we were recognized as an organization successfully fulfilling our mission to promote social and behavioral understandings between peoples and communities by coming together to celebrate the integration of arts education countywide.

As a non-profit arts education organization requests for individual funding and grants are always ongoing. I think there is a misconception that the need is always outside of our country in such places as Africa and other developing locations around the world. But we mustn't forget the underserved kids who are right in our very own city who may be wards of the court, neglected, abused, abandoned, homeless, and youth who attend Title 1 schools whose mandate is to feed youngsters through the free lunch programs. This sometimes may be their only meal for the day. It's not only important to give nourishment for the body but it's equally important to fuel the spirit through the gift of arts and culture.

Theatre Of Hearts Youth First will continue to move our mission forward and to fight the good fight so that every youth and their families have the right to engage in the multifaceted illuminating offerings of the world of arts and culture and give voice to and celebrate that each and every youth has the equal opportunity to reach their highest potential through the creative process. "Quality Arts should not be a privilege for the few but a right for all".

**We'd love to hear more about your organization.**

TOHYF's programming is customized and strategically designed to meet the specific needs of the participants and communities we serve, via orientation and team meetings with both TOHYF and participating, site staff. Our focus is to deliver comprehensive, long-term arts instruction to at-risk and high-risk youth in low-income schools, juvenile detention centers, residential homes, libraries and community-based sites which are presented by ethnically and culturally diverse professionally trained artists from the visual and performing arts, and literary field.

This year we completed three large scale student-driven murals in the living units at Central Juvenile Hall; this was our 22nd, 23rd and 24th mural installed in the county Juvenile Halls and Camp facilities.

The Theatre Of Hearts/Youth First Artist-In-Residence Program is recognized by local, state, and national agencies as being an organization with a solid history, organizational stability, and quantifiable performance measures. Educational institutions recognize that Theatre Of Hearts/Youth First Provides programming that fulfills the California State Board of Education-approved Visual and Performance Arts (VAPA) Framework and Standards. As a result, we are a member of the Los Angeles Unified School District Arts Education Partnership Network. The California Arts Council has designated Theatre Of Hearts/Youth First and Exemplary Program.

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies has designated the TOHYF AIR Program a model program, and the U.S. Department of Justice recognized our program in its publication, Part of the Creative Solution, Creative Alternatives for Youth. The TOHYF AIR Program was also identified by RAND in The Arts and Public Safety Impact Study, as a "best practices" program for effective, community-based arts education, aimed at improving the pro-social behaviors of youth (Stone et al., 1997). The County Department of Arts and Culture's Directory recognizes TOHYF as an organization fulfilling the California State Standards for the Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) in arts education.

In 2016, Theatre Of Hearts/Youth First was selected to be included as one of forty premier arts organizations in California, and one of only four in Los Angeles, featured in the California Arts Council's publication, Forty Stories, Forty Years, profiling the work of forty grantees since 1976 for their notable contributions to arts and creativity in California. TOHYF is included in The California Endowment study "The Power of Art" as an organization using an effective intervention strategy for at-risk youth (2008).

**Any shoutouts? Who else deserves credit in this story – who has played a meaningful role?**

Initially, my biggest cheerleader was my father and mother, but especially my mother Marie Wilkinson, which you can find sitting on a memorial bench with me in the photos. A life-size bronze statue of my mother honoring her as a human and civil rights icon sits at the front entrance of Santori Public Library of Aurora, ILL, which is the 2nd largest city in Illinois. She nurtured me and taught me to understand that it is vital to be inclusive of all ethnicities and cultures, be involved in the community, help others and go wherever the need is. My mother strengthened her community through her activism and leadership as an advocate for human and civil rights.



Her legacy continues as a beacon of light for women, children, and minorities striving to improve their quality of life. With her dedication and hard work, she founded over 30 organizations in around Aurora- Chicago area. Even though my mother passed away in 2010 her legacy lives on through “The Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry” and The Marie Wilkinson Child Development Center in Aurora, Illinois. Her generosity of spirit remains as a glowing example to never look away from a challenge but to use whatever resources I have to engage, encourage, and help those who are less fortunate no matter their race, social, gender, sexual orientation or creed.

All of my family members have garnered respect for their activism and leadership in the community. They all left their mark. My family’s exemplary community activist spirit laid a solid foundation of Theatre Of Hearts and they are my passionate driving force. This passion will never wane.

Combined with the visionary gift of friendship and love that I received from one of our first founding board members, is Karolyn Ali who has since passed. She was an important figure in my life who helped me usher in new beginnings and changes for Theatre Of Hearts. Susan Hill, who was my director whom I worked with at the UCLA’s community service organization Artsreach where I designed and implemented quality arts programs for Arts & Corrections. She invested confidence in me to create diverse, creative community art projects and believed in me to manage 17 southern prisons.

The California Arts Council was instrumental in my early days for helping me receive our 1st funding, which gave me an incredible energy to tirelessly expand Theatre Of Hearts programs. Yat Malmgren and Doreen Cannon who mentored me at the London Drama Center for three years they taught me to always stay in the moment, which is true on or off the stage because art is a process as in life. Bill Gaskill director of the Royal Court Theatre in London at the time gave me my first break out of Drama School and so many others along the way who may have left this planet but their mentorship remains as my guiding star. I thank all of them for being.

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