



OPEN SPACES SACRED PLACESSM



STORIES OF HOW NATURE HEALS AND UNIFIES

TOM STONER AND CAROLYN RAPP
WITH A FOREWORD BY G. MARTIN MOELLER, JR.

All proceeds from the sale of this book will go to creating open spaces sacred places

The mission of the TKF Foundation is to provide the opportunity for a deeper human experience by supporting the creation of public greenspaces that offers a temporary place of sanctuary, encourages reflection, provides solace, and engenders peace.

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO

MARY F. WYATT

OUR FOUNDING FIRESOUL

**WHO NURTURED THESE STORIES AND THESE
OPEN SPACES SACRED PLACES
INTO CREATION.**



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8 Kids on the Hill Sculpture Garden

It's not rocket science to get the kids on your side. You have to make them feel a part of the community rather than apart from the community.

— Rebecca Yenawine, Firesoul

Like so many inner city neighborhoods in America, the area that surrounds Reservoir Hill in Baltimore City is deeply challenged. Despite many caring and dedicated residents, there are abandoned lots and abandoned homes, an active drug trade, a struggling school, no supermarket, and no economic infrastructure—leaving residents without essential resources.

Growing up in a lower income neighborhood can have a devastating impact on youth. These children face challenges that many people could never even imagine. They are forced to take on responsibilities that are beyond their capacity to fulfill. Their childhood is too quickly sacrificed, replaced by the struggle to survive. When youth and creativity are robbed, something very valuable gets lost along the way: confidence, goals for the future, and hope that one's life could make a difference. Many young people, under this pressure, can become a source of crime in their own communities.

Rebecca Yenawine moved to Reservoir Hill in 1991 to study art at a nearby college, but the native New Yorker quickly learned that the true classroom was in her backyard. She focused her attention on the kids, determined to



use the arts to help them combat stereotypes and discouragement. Using her skills as an artist and listener, she helped to bring out the creativity and insights of the young people. Through art, they grappled with disruptive forces and transformed the issues into something uplifting and hopeful. As a result, the kids began to see the possibility of a better community for themselves. With Rebecca's guidance, the kids created a very special sculpture garden that is now an oasis in the neighborhood. Through nurturing the young people's creativity, Rebecca helped them become part of the solution. As new neighbors moved in and became invested in the community, they saw the role that young people could have in revitalization, and they in turn were inspired.

Rebecca had no map, no institutional plan in place to help her accomplish this vision. She had only her belief that art and imagination could transform a disconnected community into a unified one, through the creation of a laboratory for creative expression. She and the kids turned an abandoned lot into a place for all to experience and enjoy. Woven in with the Kids on the Hill sculpture park is a small garden area with a bench and a journal, so that nature also plays a part in the healing. This project brings the best part of human nature together with nature itself. Rebecca then convinced the City of Baltimore to partner with her organization. This valuable step gave an added sense of permanence and empowerment to the budding enterprise. Adults and youth together have contributed to a sculpture park that depicts their dreams for a better life and a better neighborhood. Together they converted a place of turmoil into a space of safety and sacredness.

Today, Rebecca and her co-director, Mark Carter, have a plan for making neighborhood changes happen. They use the idea of "art for social change" as their motto and have set in motion another valuable legacy: they have inspired young teachers to join in, like sculptor Jesse Reid. Rebecca's combination of creative and entrepreneurial skills along with the dedication of her neighbors and the young people themselves ensure that the Kids on the Hill sculpture garden can remain a viable and valuable part of this community for years to come.

—T.S.

Rebecca Yenawine

Co-Director and Artistic Director, Kids on the Hill Inc.

I fell in love with Reservoir Hill in 1991, when I was going to art school nearby, and I rented an apartment here. My childhood in New York City was privileged, and as a result, I have sought out the experience of being a minority in a community. It forces me to think about myself and my identity as a white person, and I like what I learn from being with people who are different from me.

I was studying at the Maryland Institute College of Art, but I dropped out after about a year and a half. It was during the Persian Gulf War, and I expected that my fellow artists would have a response to the war. In my mind, art and social action go hand in hand. I consider artists to be truth-sayers and visionaries, people who can imagine a much more elegant solution than war. But I found that very few of my classmates cared. I also believe that art should be active and inclusive, and I wasn't finding my path in the systems that were set up for artists at the school. At the same time, I knew that I was committed to art. I also knew that I didn't want to leave the neighborhood. So I bought a house about a block away that was incredibly inexpensive. And there I was—a homeowner in my early twenties!

I got to know the children in the neighborhood by working in my backyard. I could hear them in the alley, and I would go out and introduce myself. Eventually, they started coming over to visit, and I began carving out time in my day to spend with them. We would play piano, make apple juice, draw—whatever I was doing, they would join in. Then one day, I caught three teenage girls spray painting. I took their paint and invited them in for an art lesson. They loved it and came back week after week, studying figure drawing and painting, and eventually painting their self-portraits. They got permission from a landlord and the neighborhood association to paint over the boarded windows and doors of three abandoned buildings. Less than six months after I caught them spray painting, their portraits and other art covered nine



windows and doors and brightened the whole block. The girls were proud of their art, and when the younger children walked by, they felt proud of their older friends. Instead of seeing graffiti and the negative statement it sometimes makes, adults saw how creative and talented the neighborhood teens were. This was the first time I was able to see how art had the possibility for changing a group of young people—and possibly even a community.

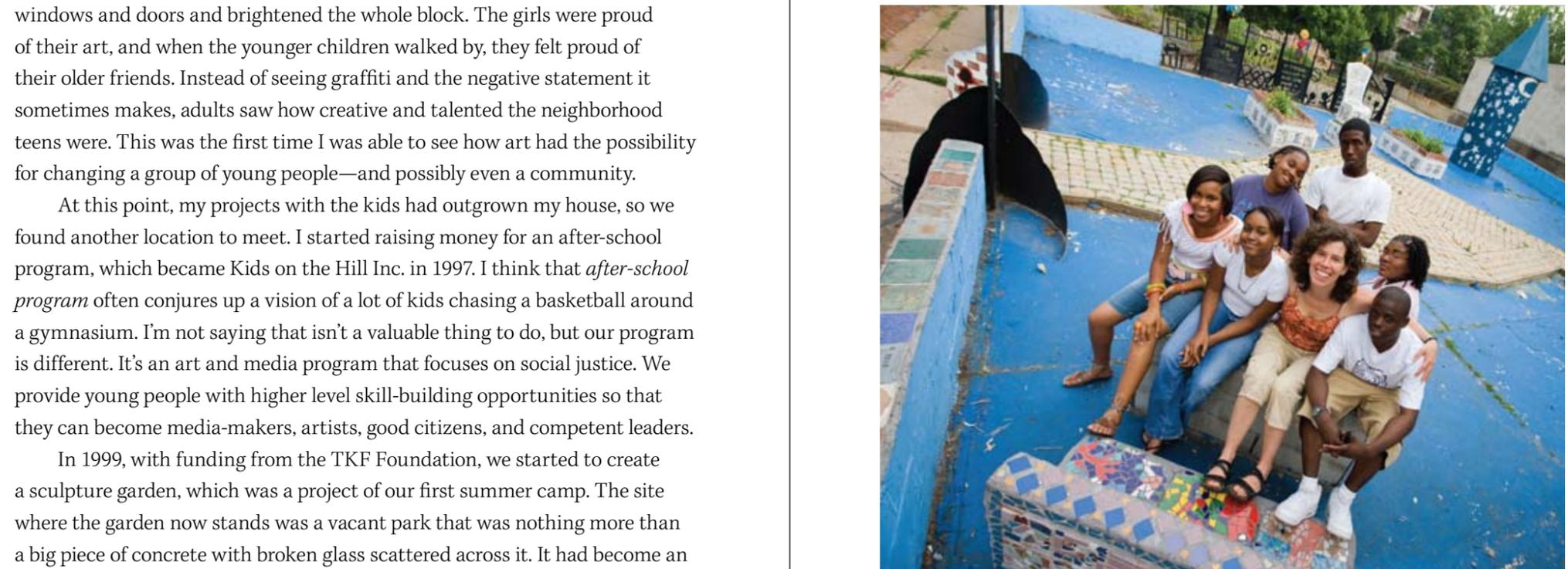
At this point, my projects with the kids had outgrown my house, so we found another location to meet. I started raising money for an after-school program, which became Kids on the Hill Inc. in 1997. I think that *after-school program* often conjures up a vision of a lot of kids chasing a basketball around a gymnasium. I'm not saying that isn't a valuable thing to do, but our program is different. It's an art and media program that focuses on social justice. We provide young people with higher level skill-building opportunities so that they can become media-makers, artists, good citizens, and competent leaders.

In 1999, with funding from the TKF Foundation, we started to create a sculpture garden, which was a project of our first summer camp. The site where the garden now stands was a vacant park that was nothing more than a big piece of concrete with broken glass scattered across it. It had become an open-air drug market, with neighbors complaining about the drug activity and about people getting drunk and being noisy late at night.

We began our garden project by focusing on the theme of castles. Every child knows that castles are where kings, queens, princes, and princesses live, and they are powerful people. So we set out to create a castle in our neighborhood where youth could be powerful. At the same time, we gave them a way to address issues of power and class. We asked the children, "If you were



The park is nice because it looks like fun for a picnic



king or queen, what would you change about your world to make it better?"

The answers to that question are embedded in the sculptures in the garden:

"If I were king for a day, I would make a type of skin lotion so everyone would have the same skin color, so no one could be racist."

"If I were queen, I would give all the poor people money and toys."

Every project we do has three parts. First, we study. The children learned about castles, they looked at pictures, and they figured out what imagery appealed to them. The second phase was for them to design the imagery they wanted in the garden. For example, they wanted a tower, so each child drew a picture of a tower, and the group voted on the one they liked best. Then, finally, the children brought their images into reality. They created three welded metal towers, a mosaic throne, a mosaic table and benches for games and picnics, numerous images, and a wall of tiles that surrounds the garden. The words of the children are included as well, expressing their visions for a better world.

The towers are big—one is nine feet tall—so we're talking about an ambitious project! We had artists working with and teaching the children all summer long—a mosaic artist, a casting artist, and a welding artist. Learning how to use power tools was a very empowering experience for the

*We saw a bird that we tried to catch.
A fun place to dig with sticks, looking for worms. We came here to see other people in the neighborhood.*



young people, especially for the girls. They used circular saws, jigsaws, plasma cutters, and welding electric grinders. To see one of the “girliest” girls wearing a welding hat and feeling comfortable with getting dirty was exciting for me. The project built self-confidence in every one of the children who worked on it.

But it empowered them in another way too. Their art is visible in their community, and therefore they are visible. Every time they walk by the garden, they get to say, “I made that. That’s my piece right there. That was my idea.” They also get to see other people, both youth and adults, interact with their art, and that enhances their sense of self. The garden gives young people a voice in their neighborhood, a way to be seen and heard, a way to have ownership in their community.

You can see that ownership in the way they take care of the garden. Often, when adults think of what young people can do for their community, they ask them to come out for a cleanup day. In my experience, that’s not really what young people enjoy. But I’ve noticed that when they pick up trash in their sculpture garden, it’s a very different experience. It doesn’t feel to them like they are being used to pick up somebody else’s junk. It feels more like they are cleaning up their own rooms, and they get to enjoy and appreciate their artwork. There’s no dignity in picking up someone else’s trash, but keeping the sculpture garden clean has a lot of dignity, because it’s theirs.

Another thing that has strengthened their connection to each other, and therefore strengthened the community, is the teamwork they’ve learned from creating the sculpture garden together. Whether it’s drawing designs, learning to use a tape measure, marking, cutting, or welding, we break the tasks down as much as possible, so that each person knows what he or she is contributing to the group and how that group is contributing to the final goal. It is always a group effort, a collaboration, to get a project created and finished.

In the eight years since we began the sculpture garden—and it remains an ongoing project—its young creators have witnessed the impact that their work has had on the community. Each year we have a festival in the park. One of the neighbors is our grill-master. We count on him to bring out his giant grill and cook up hamburgers and hot dogs. Another neighbor is a musician, and he puts up his huge speakers so that people can hear his music all over the neighborhood. I truly feel transported when we have our summer festivals, as if I’m in a different world.

On summer evenings, people bring folding chairs and sit and watch movies shown on a screen hung from the stage we designed in a corner of the park. There is also a fountain. Playing in it provides the children endless entertainment. In another part of the park, there is a lovely bench from TFK, which people use to read or meditate. All around it are flowers, many of them



Beauty is a child's imagination in practice.



I am remembering Jason who died long ago, at age 15 because he didn't know he was loved, wanted, and valued. May he rest in peace, and may we all learn to cherish our children.



I'M KING
FOR A 2ND
TIME

IF EVERYBODY
WANTED TO
HAVE SKIN
COLOR OF
NO ONE COULD
BE RACIST

WE WERE
QUEEN
NO PAINT THE
STREETS WITH
RED (BLACK SHAPES)



This is a reservoir of peace in a busy world. It gives one the possibility to hear the spirit within.

planted by a neighbor. She said her yard just wasn't big enough for all the flowers she wanted to grow, and she asked if she could extend her garden to the park. Now she and the Kids on the Hill children tend the flowers together.

Not all of the activities are planned. Recently, the neighborhood had a cleanup day and afterward, people spontaneously came to the park to grill and picnic and talk together. The sculpture garden—the vision and the work of the neighborhood children—serves as the center of what has become an important and vibrant community gathering place. This place that was once a drug hangout is now used by neighbors of all ages; and lots of people, young and old, consider themselves guardians of the space.

I always learn as much from young people as they do from me, and one of the things I've learned from creating this sculpture garden with them is how powerful it is for a community to have a youth space. In communities that are newer and more middle class, they plan for children to have play space. I think it's absolutely vital to provide that same thing in older communities as well. Young people have an incredible amount to contribute to community issues. If they aren't engaged in some way in the life of the community, they won't be on the community's side, the side of making a positive difference. It's not rocket science to get the kids on your side, and it's not rocket science to figure out what leads them to be vandals. You have to make them feel *a part of* the community rather than *apart from* the community.

There's no end of ideas that we can come up with to add to the sculpture garden. Each year, we have initiated a new project to involve more children. So far, more than a hundred children have contributed to the garden. This is vital to creating an ongoing sense of ownership that will make younger children want to be the guardians of the art of those who came before them. But as the years pass, we also have to focus on repairing and maintaining what we already have, so that people continue to respect it. At this point, we must balance the two.

Fortunately, Kids on the Hill continues to attract other staff members like Jesse Reid, who are as passionately dedicated to sculpture instruction and the garden as I am. Ironically, Jesse found his way to Kids on the Hill through an internship with the Maryland Institute College of Art. He was earning his master's degree in their Art and Community Arts program—the kind of program I wanted sixteen years ago but wasn't available—and the sculpture garden attracted him. What a blessing he's been! Watching Jesse's commitment to the garden grow and deepen over the year we've worked together has taught me something very important about sacred places: No one person owns them. You put the torch into the hands of the next Firesoul and pass it on.

