

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF ART

### HANDOUT 2.1

CASE STUDY:  
AVIJIT HALDER  
*BORN INTO  
BROTHELS*

(REFER TO CLIPS  
27-32, 43, 49-50,  
53, 55-56)

- NAME: Avijit Halder
- AGE: 12
- BACKGROUND:
  - o Avijit grew up a member of a unique group of children, sons and daughters of sex workers living in brothels, children neglected and ignored by a family structure, the government and most aid agencies.
  - o His family ran an illegal alcohol business in the red light district of Calcutta, India, a place for men to get drunk before they solicited the sex workers. It was Avijit's job to serve alcohol and to chase down customers who didn't pay for their drinks.
  - o His father was a drug addict, a figure in a constant stupor whom everyone ignored, a man Avijit "tries to love...a little."
  - o His mother, divorced from her husband, was a sex worker in a nearby town.
  - o Ever since he was very young, Avijit was exceptionally talented at painting and drawing, and used it as an escape from the harsh reality of living in a brothel, where he was often subject to abuse and ridicule by the adults in his world. "I want to express what's on my mind," he says of his work. "I want to put my thoughts into colors."
  - o Throughout his childhood, he won numerous local awards for his artwork, medals that are proudly displayed by his grandmother, the only adult figure in his life who expressed any pride and interest in his talent, until the arrival of Zana.
- PERSONAL JOURNEY:
  - o When he was 11, Avijit obtained a camera and photography lessons from Zana Briski, a filmmaker living in the red light district to document the lives of the sex workers there. From the start, he showed an incredible natural aptitude for photography.
  - o With a camera in his hands and an irrepressible urge to express himself, as well as a wish to capture moments in time, faces, people, events, and record them permanently he created powerful stills of the world around him from the very start.
  - o Very soon his photos were internationally recognized for both their artistic and educational value.
  - o Despite his talent he was denied equal access to a quality education, for the simple fact that he was the child of a sex worker. It was only through Zana's dedication and willingness to fight all odds that he had the opportunity to be enrolled in a boarding school.
  - o After weeks of negotiations, debates with law enforcers, school officials, parents, HIV tests and academic tests, he was finally considered for a place in a quality educational facility.
  - o In 2002 he was chosen to represent the children of India at the World Photo Conference in Amsterdam, Holland.
  - o It was his position as a child raised in a brothel that again impede his success and opportunity; obtaining a passport appeared to be next to impossible because of his mother's profession. Again, it was only

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### HANDOUT 2.1 (CONTINUED)

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- through the perseverance on the part of Zana that this particular discrimination was overcome and the trip was made a reality.
- o His attitudes towards photography, painting, school and life changed drastically when his mother was allegedly burned to death by her pimp in the kitchen of the brothel.
  - o After this horrific incident Avijit lost his interest in both attending boarding school and going to Amsterdam for his photography. His grades dropped, and he stopped attending photography class. His surroundings, the traumatic reality of his childhood and his upbringing seemed to be getting the better of him, and he became listless and apathetic.
  - o After months of negotiations, his passport was finally processed and his trip to the World Photo Conference became a reality. Away from the red light district that had colored his childhood, his interest in art and education returned full force.
  - o Through the process of creating and analyzing art he was able to move past the trauma of his childhood.
  - o Since that conference he has continued to study art intensively and to excel in photography, using it both as a method of rehabilitation and recovery, as well as a tool by which to spread awareness about the situations surrounding life in the Sonagachi red light district.
  - o In 2005 he had the opportunity to come to the United States to further his education.
- CURRENT (as of March 2007):
    - o Avijit, now 18, currently attends a private school in Salt Lake City, Utah where he is focusing his studies on medicine and cinematography, but still taking photographs and painting classes in his free time.
    - o In the summer of 2006 he participated in the Sundance Film Lab, a program offered by a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting and teaching independent and budding film and theater artists, and providing a venue for their work (<http://www2.sundance.org>.)
    - o In the spring of 2007, Avijit participated in an art exhibit at the Zimmer Children's Museum in Los Angeles, an organization whose mission is "to promote values that help make a better society through interactive learning, creative self-expression and art experiences for children and families." <http://www.zimmermuseum.org>.

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- o When he is not in school or developing film, Avijit spends time updating his MySpace account, <http://www.myspace.com/barababa> where his interest in art and photography feature prominently.
- Aside from being a form of expression and a way to overcome past trauma, Avijit's art also serves another very important purpose. He has become an activist and a human rights educator, using his photography as a tool for educating others about the human rights aspects and ethical dilemmas of the story of his past. His story provides an example of the reality for so many children throughout the world, and helps raise the awareness of the global community.
  - o One example of this activism is that MySpace recently awarded Avijit the Impact Award for Social Justice as part of a program that seeks to recognize those "making a difference in the world" through social networking.
  - o A documentary he created, titled Culture, highlights challenges facing youth of different cultures and origins, growing up in the United States. <http://www.kids-with-cameras.org/news/?page=2006-11-16-kidsupdate.incl>
  - o His participation in an exhibit at the Zimmer Children's Museum fulfills their mission of using art to promote the creation of a more socially conscious global community.

#### CASE STUDY: FUGEES SOCCER TEAM

#### REFUGEES FIND HOSTILITY AND HOPE *The New York Times, Jan. 21st, 2007*

##### Overview:

- The United States Refugee Resettlement Program is a government-initiated organization dedicated to setting up permanent homes for refugees in towns and cities throughout the country. Through this, and many other programs like it, refugees from around the world are given the opportunity to resettle in the United States and other nations. These programs give them the chance to start new lives with their families, free from fear of persecution and displacement. Yet while tens of thousands of families are given hope and a chance for a new life through such programs there are more than eight and a half million refugees worldwide and an additional twenty-three million people displaced from their homes still living in the conflict zones within their own countries. For the vast majority of these men, women and children, there is no hope of resettlement.

##### The Fugees:

- Through the U.S. resettlement program, the families of each member of the Fugees soccer team arrived in Clarkston, Georgia to rebuild their lives as citizens of the United States.
- Refugees from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Burundi, the Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Sudan and other war-torn and failed states all share a common bond; a past of trauma, displacement, persecution and horror.

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### CASE STUDY: FUGEES SOCCER TEAM (CONTINUED)

- o One boy was a child soldier.
- o Another was forced by armed insurgents to kill his best friend.
- o A third witnessed his father being tortured.
- All were forced from their homes by either rebel armies, dictators, or fear for their lives, to live in hiding or in overcrowded refugee camps in foreign nations.
  - o **Mohammed Mohammed**, age 12 – forced to flee the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and live as a refugee in Turkey for five years.
  - o **Shahir Anwar**, age 13 – forced from his home in Afghanistan by the Taliban.
  - o **Mafoday Jawneh**, age 12 – fled from Gambia with his family, fearing for their lives, after they “fell out of favor” in the aftermath of a coup.
  - o **Idwar Diktori, Robin Diktori, Santino Jerke** – refugees from Sudan, where the systematic destruction in Darfur by the Janjawiid forces destroyed their homes.
  - o **Jeremiah Ziaty** – along with his mother and brothers, brothers fled rebel troops and the civil war of Liberia to live first in the bush and then in a refugee camp for five years. Before they left, the then eight year old boy watched his father murdered in their living room by members of the Liberian rebel army because he had no money to give them.
- Once in the small town of Clarkston, the young refugees formed a soccer team under the leadership of Luma Mufleh, a coach from Jordan.
- While the Fugees and their families were safe from persecution and genocide, they were not free from discrimination, isolation and fear.
  - o Long-time residents of Clarkston resented the increased presence of outsiders and immigrants- of people who didn’t share their collective past, their cultures and traditions.
  - o A town meeting in 2003 addressed the harsh question: “What can we do to keep the refugees from coming to Clarkston?”
  - o The mayor of the town, labeling the incomers ‘the soccer people’ for their love of soccer as opposed to the more traditional American sports, such as baseball or football, forbade the new teams to play in the public park.
  - o The children, especially those from African nations, were subject to racial slurs from both peers of their own age and adults.
- Soccer Coach Luma Mufleh fought against this sentiment in order to create soccer teams comprised of the young refugees. A female coach in a league of men and living far away from her native homeland, she felt she could identify to an extent with the isolation and rejection the refugee families felt. But she had no idea how to react to some of the stories of their pasts, so she stopped asking, focusing instead on sharing her passion for soccer. And indeed, it soon became evident that soccer meant much more to these kids than even she could have realized.

<sup>2</sup> For more general information on refugees and the US Resettlement Program, please see Teacher Resource 3

<sup>3</sup> Failed State – A country where the government has no control over most of the territory and populations.

Basic security is not provided and there are often high levels of violence and human rights abuses within the state.

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### CASE STUDY: FUGEES SOCCER TEAM (CONTINUED)

- o Being on a team, playing the sport had incredible transformative powers in the lives of these refugees. As tryouts were held and teams were formed, it was clear that these former refugees were much more than just teammates to one another.
- o Due to their pasts as well as their present living conditions, the players formed strong bonds with each other. "It's like they're all from my own country," one of the Fugees said. "They're my brothers."
- o Not only could they identify with the others' stories, they acted as a support group for their teammates. "Being a Fuguee provide[d] a sense of belonging to the children that [didn't] have a place they [could] call home."
- o Soccer was also a way for them to express themselves, to gain interactive skills, to form enduring friendships, and to rebuild their lives. "Our children have been robbed of their childhood. Soccer, for however brief a moment it may be, allows them to be kids again...We continue to look for unique experiences for the children so that they can have more good memories," Coach Mufleh says of the opportunity she is giving these refugees.
- Aside from providing a means of personal expression and a support group for these refugees, the Fugees soccer team has also contributed to the education of their community. Some members of the town, once resentful towards the influx of outsiders, have begun to accept them, to admire their struggles, and to show support for their situation.
  - o After one game the rival team donated equipment to the Fugees.
  - o The mayor finally let the team practice in the park.
  - o Other outside organizations have also become interested in the Fugees' unique history. Recently, Universal Pictures gave 500,000 dollars to fund the Fugees Family Organization, a non-profit support group "to challenge and nurture refugee families so that they may recognize and fulfill their potential." and to build a permanent soccer field for the team. With this, they signed a contract to make the story of the team into a film, so that their story can be shared with the world.

<sup>5</sup> To read more about Luma Mufleh's work and the Fugees Family Organization, visit: <http://www.fugeesfamily.org>

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF ART

### HANDOUT 2.3

#### CASE STUDY: ZLATA FILIPOVIC

*Suddenly, unexpectedly, someone is using the ugly powers of war, which horrify me, to try to pull and drag me away from the shores of peace, from the happiness of wonderful friendships, playing and love. I feel like a swimmer who was made to enter the cold water, against her will. I feel shocked, sad, unhappy and frightened and wonder where they are forcing me to go, I wonder why they have taken away my peaceful and lovely shores of my childhood. I used to rejoice at each new day, because each was beautiful in its own way. I used to rejoice at the sun, at playing, at songs. In short, I enjoyed my childhood. I had no need of a better one. I have less and less strength to keep swimming in these cold waters. So take me back to the shores of my childhood, where I was warm, happy and content, like all the children whose childhood and the right to enjoy it are now being destroyed.*

*The only thing I want to say to everyone is: PEACE!*

– Zlata Filipovic

In September of 1991, 11 year old Zlata Filipovic began a diary to document her busy, peaceful life in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The entries were like those of any fifth grader, looking forward to a new school year with her friends, studying for tests, practicing piano, going to birthday parties. A month later, these entries changed drastically with the introduction of a single word: war. It started with rumors of conflict in other countries, conversations about politics that she could hardly understand. “After Slovenia and Croatia, are the winds of war now blowing toward Bosnia-Herzegovina?” Then it was followed by the attack, shelling and destruction of the towns of relatives and the vacation sites of previous summers. Gasoline became scarce, then electricity, and finally even food and water.

- In the spring of 1992, Sarajevo came under siege, and Zlata’s life was turned upside down.
  - o All the schools in the city closed. It was too dangerous for children or for anyone else to be out on the streets.
  - o Gunfire and mortar shells came from the hills surrounding Sarajevo, where the enemy army kept military camps.
  - o Shooting and explosions became an everyday reality, killing civilians and destroying buildings. The post office, the library and countless houses were left in ruins.
  - o Zlata, her mother and father often had to spend entire days and nights in their cellar or the basement of a neighbor’s house, because houses were no longer safe to be in. When they left the basement whenever the shooting stopped, there was no telling what would be left standing, and what would be destroyed.
  - o One day the park near Zlata’s house was demolished by a shell. Many children were seriously wounded and a friend of Zlata was killed: “an innocent eleven-year-old girl – the victim of a stupid war.”
  - o Zlata’s mother’s workplace burned to the ground, and Zlata’s uncle was badly wounded.

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#### CASE STUDY: ZLATA FILIPOVIC

“Shelling, killing, darkness and hunger continue in Sarajevo,” Zlata wrote in her diary. She now only left the house to run to the neighbor’s cellar, which offered more protection from the shelling. It became too dangerous to leave the house to visit anyone and the phones stopped working, so families, neighbors and friends lost touch with each other. From one day to the next, Zlata couldn’t be sure that her neighbors, grandparents and other relatives, or her friends were still alive. Every day brought stories of more deaths, of strangers but also of friends and relatives. Hundreds of people began to leave Sarajevo to escape the war. Many of Zlata’s friends and their families left, to become refugees in foreign countries, perhaps a safer life, but not without its own hardships.

A part of Zlata’s childhood, and the childhood of all the children in Bosnia-Herzegovina was destroyed by the war. Because of the war “us kids are not playing, we are living in fear, we are suffering, we are not enjoying our childhood.” Zlata blamed it on politics and on people who have no respect for innocent lives. “They’re drawing maps, coloring with their crayons, but I think they’re crossing out human beings, childhood and everything that’s nice and normal.” She soon lost all faith in the prospect of peace treaties. As soon as one was announced, as soon as a ceasefire was called, the shelling would start up again, and more people would die.

- Zlata used her diary to record the horrors of her everyday life amidst the death and destruction of war. But her writing served another purpose as well.
  - o The diary she called Mimmy became her friend. After her friends had left, she often felt very alone. But “fortunately, I’ve got you to talk to...you understand me,” she wrote to her diary.
  - o She turned to writing when it seemed to her she could not go on living in such a way. “I have a burned-down, destroyed country, a demolished town, friends-refugees all over the world...But, luckily, I have you Mimmy, and your lined pages, which are always silent, patiently waiting for me to fill them out with my sad thoughts.”
  - o Her writing served as an outlet for the trauma and suffering she experienced every day and became a way to process the pain.
  - o It also served to change her life. The international community became interested in publishing a diary of a child in Bosnia-Herzegovina. And they chose Zlata’s diary. It was because of this that in December of 2003, after living almost two years in the middle of war, Zlata and her parents were flown to Paris, where they could restart their lives.
- Through her diary, a form of personal expression that helped her get through the war, Zlata also became a human rights educator.
  - o “I wrote what I felt, saw and heard, and now people outside of Sarajevo are going to know it.” This diary, translated into over twenty languages teaches millions of people about the effects war has on the life of a child.
  - o Through her diary Zlata exposes the pain and the suffering she witnessed daily, that “the children of Sarajevo will not be forgotten.”

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### **HANDOUT 2.3 (CONTINUED)**

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- o Zlata also used the proceeds from the publication to start a humanitarian organization to aid those affected by the Bosnian war.
- o She is internationally recognized for her courage and her role as a human rights educator, receiving the Special Child of Courage Award from the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, a human rights organization “dedicated to repairing the world one step at a time.”