

Sri Lanka: Edinburgh Lecturer Fights Legacy Of War With Healing Power Of Music

colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sri-lanka-edinburgh-lecturer-fights-legacy-of-war-with-healing-power-of-music/

January 23, 2013

By Laura Piper –

It's a hard fact of war that when bullets fly and bombs fall it is children who so often suffer.

Even in places as beautiful as this.

It would probably take a poet or a painter to show the beauty of Sri Lanka.

Its coconut trees, palms spread wide, fanning the salt sea air.

And the people.



Healing power: Dr. Tanya Ekanayaka with some of the children who took part in the project.

Sri Lankans. Those with an age-old tradition of honour, gentle blessings and a love of music dating back centuries.

Like so many similar parts of our world, it's hard to imagine war in paradise.

Yet for over a quarter of a century, violence and conflict scarred Sri Lanka through a civil war which led to the confinement of some 250,000 refugees to camps and left more than 70,000 people killed.

Ethnic tensions between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamil minority in the northeast of the island led to devastating suicide bombings and UN condemnation of war crimes against civilians and children.

The UN reported evidence of almost 7000 child soldiers up until October 2009.

It is this generation of child soldiers, and of any Sri Lanka child, who cannot help but be marked by the many lasting legacies of war.

But for one Edinburgh woman, legacy is something that can be changed.

Dr Tanya Ekanayaka has just returned from a visit to Sri Lanka to help the very children directly affected by the Civil War through her most powerful tool – her music.

A world renowned pianist and part-time faculty member of the music department of Edinburgh University, Tanya has been in her native homeland of Sri Lanka as a volunteer with the SJC 87 Initiative using instruments and song to help local children.

“The musical creativity of the children and their amazing smiles as they expressed themselves through music were particularly powerful moments,” recalls Tanya.

“I remember well quite a few children both in the country’s northern districts of Jaffna and Killinochchi and in the southern district of Hambantota who displayed tremendous innate musical potential.

“For example, there was a little girl from the school I visited in the southern district of Hambantota who is clearly a born and very gifted performer with a distinctly unique style of her own and whose musicality has developed naturally.

“Similarly, I remember the amazing sense of creative musical rhythm in a young boy from the war ravaged northern district of Killinochchi as he performed on a traditional drum: it was as though his very being is governed by rhythmic sequences.”

Tanya encourages the children to play, perform and receive feedback during their music lessons before they are placed into mixed groups and helped to create a story using music – composing pieces which express how they feel in an effort to help them understand their emotions.

Born in Sri Lanka at the start of the war, Tanya could be a role model for any aspiring musician. Having learned piano from the age of five, she is now considered one of Sri Lanka’s most distinguished classical pianists.

Though it is her own memories of war which have perhaps spurred her on to help others in her homeland. As Tanya told STV back in September 2012 at the start of the project: “When I was born the war was just about to start and my memories of living here are that the country was at war.

“There were bombs, I had friends that died, I’ve seen dead people but I witnessed it but to a lesser extent than these children.”

Today, Tanya’s reflections are similar.

As she explains: “Hearing accounts from various teachers belonging to the schools which participated in the workshops of the terrible trauma experienced by the children, their poverty and loss of family was heartbreaking but more importantly, deeply humbling.

“I don’t think that the horrendous and differing experiences of those who were born into and lived through a war that spanned nearly three decades can be ever be synthesized in terms of a single impact.

“On the basis of my own experiences through this project, I can say that I certainly have sensed a great deal of concealed anguish among the children I have worked with so far and this includes children from the country’s war ravaged northern regions as well as southern regions.”

Tanya has been committed in her involvement with the project to develop a unified approach to those children split between the northern and southern regions.

“My own background in linguistics and music has increasingly led me to think very deeply about the role of music and language in the lives of people and the connection between them,” Tanya explains.

“I see that music possesses immense potential for facilitating a healing process.”

A believer in the purity of music and its ability to heal, Tanya puts the ethos of this musical weapon down in part to her belief that “one cannot tell a lie through music”.

Using music in its purest form as a means of slowly building trust with young people who have possibly lost trust in a world which failed to protect them, Tanya hopes to build on the project – and to return back to the paradise island known as ‘The Pearl of the Indian Ocean’.

It would seem though, as Tanya pointed out earlier, that the true beauty of Sri Lanka might not be its coconut palms or rich spiced air.

Its beauty may lie instead in the smiles and the songs of its children.

For more information on Tanya’s work and the Sri Lanka project you can visit her website.

Courtesy stv.tv/edinburgh/magazine