

# artsets kidsfree

By Hollis Walker

When Sarah Lukas and Kitty Leaken of Santa Fe, New Mexico met exiled Tibetan children in India, they were inspired to find ways of alleviating their suffering. The program they created, Art Refuge, now eight years old, has helped thousands of Tibetan refugee children regain their culture, their religion, and their hope as they begin life anew in India.

Photos by Kitty Leaken

Art Refuge offers painting/creative playgroups for Tibetan children in Nepal and India. Tibetan children often first encounter the program at a Kathmandu reception center for those who have made the escape from Tibet into Nepal. Under Chinese rule, Tibetans' cultural and religious freedoms are restricted. For decades Tibetan parents have been secretly sending their children out of the country to attend schools for Tibetan children operated in India under the auspices of the Tibetan government in exile and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The trek out is usually made in winter, traveling at night, when the Tibetans are least likely to be intercepted. A paid guide leads the escapees on foot. Depending on the weather, it can take three weeks – or three months – to cross the rugged Himalayan passes, some of which reach 17,000 feet. Children as young as six-years-old make the trip, usually without adequate clothing or food. Many arrive starving and injured, with frostbite and snow blindness, and more than a few have witnessed the deaths of siblings or others on the trip. Often it is not until they have arrived in Kathmandu and are given food and medical treatment that the children begin to realize what has happened – they may never see their parents again, and don't know where they're going or what will happen to them.

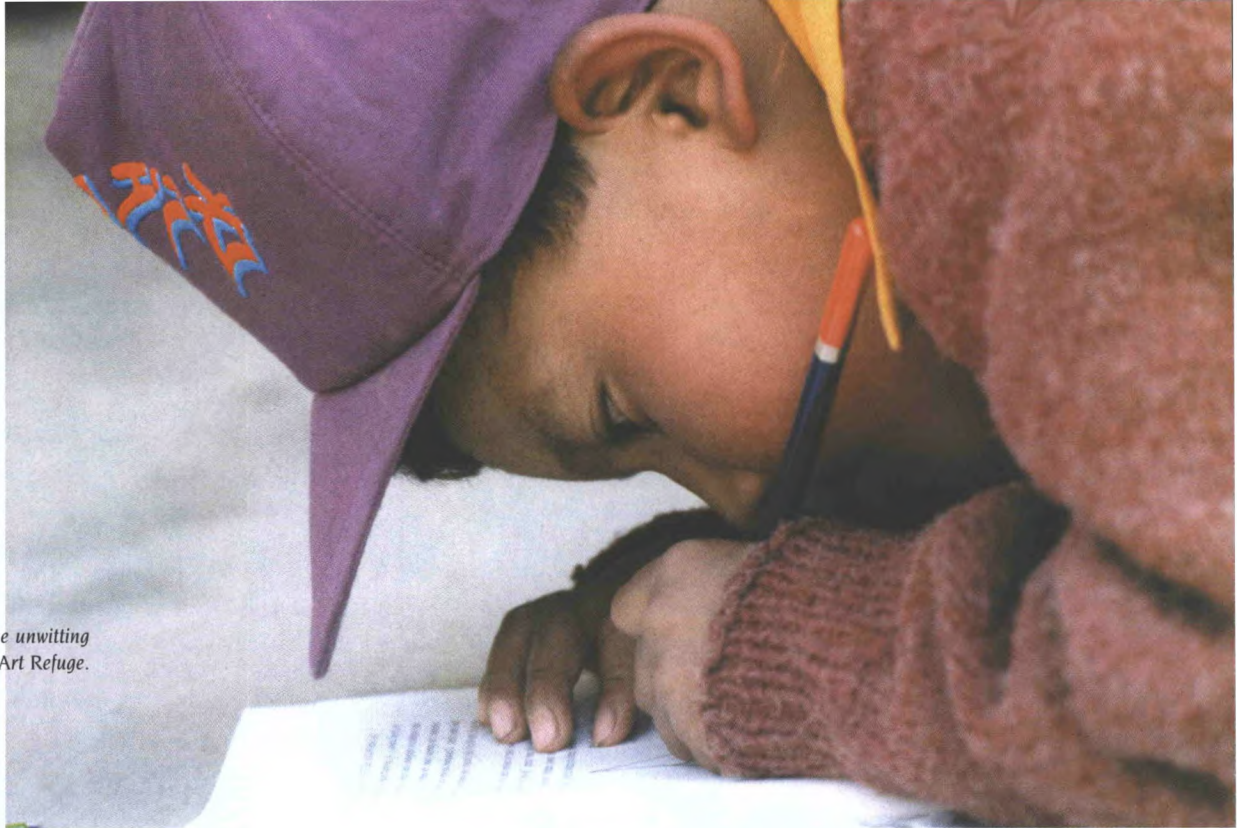
That's where Art Refuge comes in. Children at the reception center are invited to play by two Tibetan women teachers. Offered toys, costumes, crayons, watercolors and paper – objects many have never seen before – they are encouraged to make pictures of their homes, their families, their trips out of Tibet, and what they hope for in the future. Inevitably, they start to play, to heal, and to become children again – not just survivors. Last year, the Kathmandu Art Refuge served approximately 1,000 children.

Children typically spend a few weeks at the reception center before boarding buses to Dharamsala, India, where they stay at another reception center for several weeks. At the Dharamsala center, the children find Art Refuge again. The Dharamsala program is directed by Adhe Tapontsang, better known as Ama Adhe (Mother Adhe), a grandmotherly Tibetan woman who was imprisoned and tortured by the Chinese in Tibet for twenty-seven years before her release and escape to India. [For the whole story, read her autobiography, *Ama Adhe: The Voice That Remembers*, Wisdom Publications 1997.]





Tsering, the unwitting catalyst for Art Refuge.



*"Having been a political prisoner, I usually tell my experiences to these newly arrived children, and they listen with great interest. I teach the children daily prayers and the importance and need of the Buddhist doctrine in these modern times." (AMA ADHE)*

*"Through painting, these newly arrived children explore their talents, their experiences, their emotions, their views and can express their feelings." (YANGCHEN LHAMO)*

Mira Speare, a 21-year-old American college student, spent six months in 2001 working with Art Refuge, in Kathmandu and in Dharamsala. Ama Adhe, said Speare, "is a remarkable woman." Because of her own suffering, she has a tremendous capacity to empathize and understand the children and what they have been through, Speare said. And by example, she teaches the Dharma.

The connections between Lukas, Leaken, Speare and Tibetan exiles in the United States and in India have come about in a fluid and synchronous way.

Lukas began walking the Buddhist path in 1972, when she began studying with Geshe Wangyal, a lama of Kalmyk-Mongolian descent, who started the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in America in 1957 in Freewood Acres, New Jersey. In 1985, Lukas went to India on a three-week pilgrimage, staying for six days at a guesthouse run by the Dalai Lama's younger brother, Ngari Rinpoche, and his wife, Rinchen Khando. Later, when Khando came to

the States in 1990, she asked Lukas to start an American organization to aid the Tibetan Women's Association's (TWA) efforts.

In October of that year, Lukas founded Friends of the Tibetan Women's Association (FOTWA). Thereafter, when Stateside, Lukas raised money; on trips to India, she worked on projects the TWA suggested. Her first activity was interviewing Tibetan Buddhist nuns who had been tortured by the Chinese. Later, the interviews were submitted to Amnesty International. Then she set up an ongoing program for donors to regularly give money to sponsor individual Tibetan families, children, and the elderly and disabled. FOTWA helped start a nursery school for the children of Tibetan rug weavers in Dharamsala, bought beds for the nuns' new nunneries, and paid for playground equipment and teachers' salaries at several Tibetan Montessori schools.

FOTWA's work is an outgrowth of Lukas's belief system. "I am a firm believer in engaged Buddhism," she said. "To me, it's about putting



Ama Adhe





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into action loving kindness, and doing work with a very clear heart, getting us out of our small, selfish minds and reaching out in an unpretentious, real way to help people. It's about throwing a pebble in the water. You have no idea how those wonderful rings of water reach other people, but they do."

Meanwhile, as part of a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services program, a number of Tibetan exiles resettled in Santa Fe, where Leaken, a newspaper photographer, met them and began documenting their transition to American life. The daughter of a diplomat, Leaken had lived all over the world, but found she had a particular affinity for the Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism.

"You know, we Westerners bring all this intellectual stuff to it; we have all these psychological needs we want Buddhism to address," she said. The Buddhism her newfound friends practiced instead seemed more integral to their lives and culture. Leaken began reading Pema Chodron (*When Things Fall Apart*) and Sogyal Rinpoche (*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*). And one of those "rings of water" reached her when Lukas visited Santa Fe to give a talk on FOTWA.

In 1994, Leaken traveled with some of the Santa Fe Tibetans back to India to photograph their reunions with family members. In Dharamsala, she and Lukas ran into each other. The two went to the reception center, where they met a nine-year-old boy named Tsering who had arrived the day before. He was frightened and somber. But he coveted Leaken's baseball cap from the Tibetan handicrafts center; it said *Rangzen* (freedom) on it. Leaken gave him her cap, while Lukas offered him watercolors and a coloring book, *Birds of California*. Tsering cautiously took up the paintbrush, and soon thereafter, "We were dismissed," Sarah recalled with a laugh. "End of interview."

Leaken recalled the moment. "Of course! I thought," she said. "These kids have been in survival mode for three months. When have they had time to play, to be children, to not worry where their next meal was coming from, what mountain path they next had to traverse?"

The interaction with Tsering marked the beginning of Art Refuge. Leaken and Lukas gathered art materials and offered classes at Tibetan Homes Foundation (THF) for a week during that 1994 trip. THF is a large boarding school for exiled and Indian-born Tibetan children in Mussoorie, India. Convinced that the idea was good, Pema Dechen Gorab, general secretary of THF, told them to come back any time. Lukas and Leaken returned to India on several occasions over the next five years,

offering Art Refuge classes at various locations for three weeks to three months at a time. By October 1999 FOTWA was able to hire Tibetan women to run the programs on an ongoing basis at the reception centers. In winter, an Art Refuge program also is offered at the Mussoorie boarding school. In addition, Lukas and Leaken have held classes at a girls' orphanage in war-torn Sri Lanka.

Leaken, by 1996 a student of Buddhism and completely involved in FOTWA, left her newspaper job and ultimately became FOTWA's program director. Among her accomplishments for the program was shooting and producing a video about Art Refuge and the exiled Tibetan children, *Dance of the Young Nomads*, which was shown as part of the Smithsonian Institute's 2000 Folklife Festival on Tibet. With Lukas, she also initiated a book of photographs and essays about the children, *The Art of Exile: Paintings by Tibetan Children in India* (Museum of New Mexico Press, 1998). Her photographs were part of a companion exhibit

at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe that same year.

Lukas moved FOTWA's headquarters to Santa Fe in March 2000. Art Refuge remains a major focus of the organization. Letters of thanks from various Tibetan officials attest to the program's value. Former Art Refuge students have remained in close contact with Lukas and Leaken. Twenty-two-year-old Gyalwang (many Tibetans use only one name) attended one of the first Art Refuge experiments. In a recent email interview from India, Gyalwang recalled how much fun



he had in the program, and expressed appreciation for learning to paint.

Leaken's spiritual teacher, Lobsang Lhalungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist scholar and teacher who now lives in Santa Fe and has followed the progress of Art Refuge, said it is important for the children on many levels. "These children coming out of Tibet have to be treated as though they are lost. These children do not have a background in Buddhism." Through nurturing by their teachers, and with guidance in appropriate interaction with other children, they learn the Dharma as well as other aspects of their culture, he said.

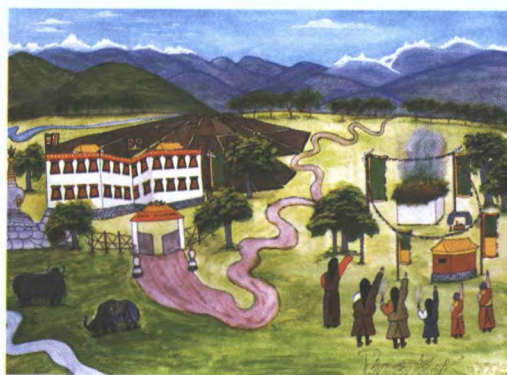
"In Buddhist culture, art is not done for proving one's personal creative power, but to express one's inner power and devotion," Lhalungpa said. "It is not competition. The (foremost) value is to appreciate what each one is doing, no matter how good or bad . . . Therein lies compassion."

Compassion drew Speare to Art Refuge. She had seen the book, *Art of Exile*, and arranged to visit Lukas and Leaken in Santa Fe. An art and community studies major at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Speare was soon on her way to





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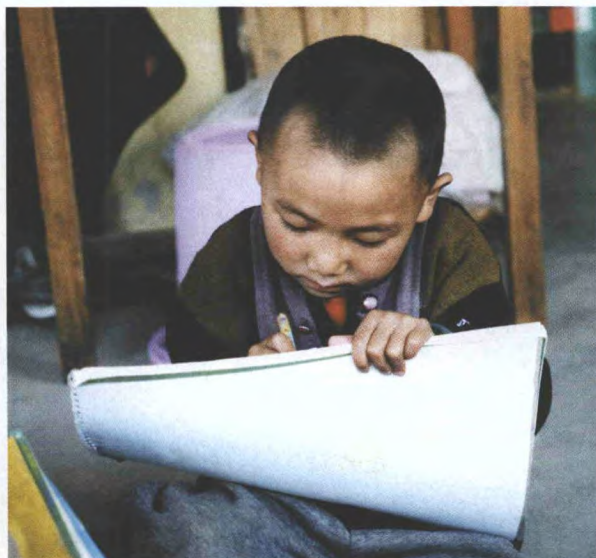




Fairy Princess



Mira Speare relates.



India to help develop the programs at the reception centers. There she used art therapy exercises to entice the children into creative play.

"We had them lie on white cloths and we traced their bodies," Speare explained. Then the children were encouraged to draw their feelings inside the outlines. For one little girl with a broken leg, they outlined her crutches as well. "She started out drawing very orderly, filling in abstract shapes, then went crazy at the end, scribbling. There was such a release that took place."

The teachers also helped the children create storybooks about their lives. Then each child told his or her story to the others, including the tragedies of the past and hopes for the future. Another future-focused project was making prayer flags. The children drew what they wished for on the flags, which then were hung, so the wind could blow their wishes upward.

Working with the Tibetan children reinforced Speare's commitment to right action. "For the first time, I really came into contact with suffering," she said. "When you sit next to a person without levels of separation – it's not a story on TV – and you feel someone else's pain . . . not closing, not becoming hateful and angry . . . what gets born inside is heart, strength of heart and strength of spirit."

Lukas and Leaken would like to develop Art Refuge at the orphanage in Sri Lanka into an ongoing program, and to offer it to displaced children in other countries, including the newly independent East Timor. Through the simple acts of painting and play, they've come to believe, any troubled child can find happiness, hope and healing. ☸

Art Refuge can be contacted at (505) 982-2865 or visit [www.fotwa.org](http://www.fotwa.org)

Hollis Walker writes about art from Santa Fe, N.M. Her work has been published in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Ms. magazine*, *Art & Antiques*, and many other publications.



A teacher and student at play at the Kathmandu reception center.



Photo Julie Graber