



Camille Zamora and Monica Yunus

# Uniting Artists, Uniting Communities

An Interview with Camille Zamora and Monica Yunus, Co-Founding Directors, Sing for Hope

**EDITORS' NOTE** In 1995, Camille Zamora organized *Sing for Hope: An Evening of Art Songs and Arias in memory of a friend who spent his final days at Houston's Omega House AIDS Hospice*. The concert is now one of the country's largest annual AIDS benefits.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Monica Yunus, daughter of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Mubammad Yunus, organized fundraising concerts with her colleagues from The Metropolitan Opera.

Together, Zamora and Yunus who became close friends while in the Master's Degree program at The Juilliard School, established *Sing for Hope* as a resource for artists with a desire to use their talents for positive social change. Both sopranos, Yunus has performed at The Metropolitan Opera, Spoleto Festival USA, and Glimmerglass Opera, among others, and Zamora has performed principal roles with companies including Los Angeles Opera and Houston Grand Opera, and is a collaborator of musical artists ranging from Plácido Domingo to Sting.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *Sing for Hope* ([singforhope.org](http://singforhope.org)) is a nonprofit organization that mobilizes professional artists – from classical musicians to photographers to Broadway performers – in volunteer service programs that benefit schools, hospitals, and communities. *Sing for Hope's* volunteer programs bring arts education to under-resourced youth, provide in-hospital performances that complement the healing process, and raise awareness for humanitarian causes. Each *Sing for Hope* program is defined by the needs of the community, the service of professional artists, and the belief in the transformative power of the arts.

**What did you see out there that made you feel there was a need for Sing for Hope and what was your vision for it in the early days?**

*Zamora:* Sing for Hope's development has been organic – a response to a need. When my best friend died of AIDS in our hometown of Houston, I wanted to do something to contribute, to make myself feel better as much as anything. So I performed a small concert to raise funds for the hospice where he died.

It ended up being an important healing event for myself and for the community. You realize that music can be a catalyst for bringing people together and for charitable giving.

So we saw this pick up speed in Houston year after year. By year three or four, my opera colleagues all over the country were saying, "If you ever need another singer, call me!" Continental Airlines sponsors the event to the tune of 10 free tickets annually, but I was getting this comment from as many as 70 or 80 singers a year.

Monica and I started dialoguing about it, asking, what if there was a go-to resource for artists who can't necessarily write a big check for a given cause, but who want to give back through their art?

*Yunus:* A few years after we left Juilliard, Hurricane Katrina hit and I felt a similar need to do something to help. I organized a concert with Camille's help and we raised several thousand dollars, and felt we had contributed in some small way.

The larger discussion that came out of that was about creating an organization that would empower artists to serve communities in need through this incredible art we have. We wanted to provide a resource to bring communities together and allow artists to give back through what they know best – their art.

So Sing for Hope, the greater structure, was born out of these conversations.

*Zamora:* Sing for Hope's motto is "Uniting Artists, Uniting Communities." Now in our fifth year, our programs touch thousands of lives by leveraging the volunteer power of professional artists to create positive change for communities in need.

**Art U! is one of your three volunteer service programs. What does it entail?**

*Zamora:* Art U! is our education outreach program. The focus is on our under-resourced kids and it was created in response to what we saw when we looked around, which was that more and more inner-city schools don't have vibrant arts programming.

*Yunus:* Both of us have participated in arts outreach programs where you show up and perform for the kids once, but there is no follow-through. So it was important for us to create a through-line in our education outreach. Our Art U! classes are led by Teaching Artists who are in our schools year-round, and whose work is complemented by collaborative visits from our Volunteer Artists from Broadway, Lincoln Center, etc.

**What is the objective of the Healing Arts program?**

*Yunus:* Our Healing Arts program brings Volunteer Artists to health care facilities for public concerts and bedside performances. These soothing, uplifting performances complement

the healing process and provide respite for patients and caregivers alike.

**What does the Community Arts program focus on?**

*Zamora:* That's our program modeled on the Houston AIDS benefit concert, where you have a charitable community coming together around an artistic event. It's about reflecting the community and the charitable mission through the art. For example, we'll do a concert for a women's shelter and focus on songs of uplift by female composers.

The idea is to use art as a prism to reflect the cause. We're a dual service organization, because we serve communities but we also serve the artists and the art form. These events, which are healing and unifying for these communities, point to art's centrality in our lives and show us that art is deeply relevant to us all.

So the Community Arts concerts raise funds and awareness for humanitarian causes.

The second aspect of the Community Arts program is that we do large-scale projects that dismantle barriers to arts accessibility. It's about finding radical ways to invite people in and the street pianos are a part of that.

**Are you continuing the street pianos program, which garnered a lot of attention?**

*Yunus:* We are, indeed. Last year, we brought 60 pianos to the streets of all five boroughs of New York. They were painted by artists and the kids that we work with in our schools, and were put on the streets for their two-week residency, and after that, they were donated to the schools and hospitals we work with.

This summer, there will be 88 pianos, up from the original 60 – 88 pianos for 88 keys. Twenty-eight of these are grand pianos, which will be in indoor public spaces.

**Is it strange that you might end up being remembered more for your charity work than what you do in the arts?**

*Zamora:* I feel that while singing is my passion, Sing for Hope is my mission. Our greatest hope is that we're setting up an organization that will be remembered long after we're remembered.

In a funny way, it legitimizes Sing for Hope that we are working artists ourselves – this wasn't created in the mind of an administrator.

*Yunus:* We both have a passion for singing that will never go away, but it's as meaningful for us to give this opportunity to other artists as it is to be singing onstage at the Metropolitan Opera. ●