

Understanding the Plight of Haitian Refugees

There are few countries in the Western Hemisphere that are as overrun with violence as Haiti. Port-au-Prince has been called the most dangerous city in the world. The takeover by gangs of the infrastructure and widespread massacres have led to the displacement of more than a million of Haiti's citizens. The dangerous climate has prevented international aid groups from working safely within Haiti. In the face of this carnage, there are individuals and organizations, including folks living in our community, who are seeking to improve the lives of Haitians who fled Haiti and reside in the Dominican Republic. These refugees have been living for years in makeshift shelters next to the largest open-air landfill in the Caribbean, including children who have lived their entire lives as refugees.

Upstairs Artspace's summer show titled, **Land of High Mountains: The Art of Survival**, an exhibition featuring the textile work of these Haitian refugee children, on display through Aug. 28. At the center of the exhibition is "Threaded Voices: Stories from Duquesa," a large quilt which emerged from an interdisciplinary medical mission at the settlement outside Santo Domingo. During workshops led by Hague Williams, an art teacher at Landrum High School, children created personal story flags using simple materials such as muslin, pencils, paint markers, fabric, and thread.

They were guided by three open questions about their lives, daily experiences, and emotional landscapes. The responses were symbolic, direct, and imaginative. No corrections were made, and no interpretations were imposed. After the workshops, discarded materials from the landfill were collected and incorporated into a large-scale stitched textile installation, embedding the physical reality of Duquesa into the work itself.

The project continued through a reciprocal exchange with students at Landrum High School in South Carolina. His students drew portraits based on photographs of participating Haitian children. The student works and documentation of the final installation, were returned to the community through a subsequent medical team.

Presented as both installation and documentary presentation, Threaded Voices centers the voices, creativity, and resilience of the children while reflecting on what it means to work with care, humility, and responsibility across distances and differences.

I encourage you to visit the gallery, experience beauty and hope in the art flags as seen through the eyes of children who live in settlement. The gallery is located at 49 S. Trade St., Tryon, NC, and hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 12-5 pm. For more information and to learn how you can support the medical mission visit community-empowerment.org. The organization, in collaboration with Rush University Medical Center, saves lives by providing quality healthcare in chronically underserved communities in the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Sandy Miller
UA Board President

