

CONNECTION  
THEATER

# OPPORTUNITY'S GATE

An intercommunity exploration of life's challenges and chances.

North Philadelphia • June 2003 through December 2004

A PROJECT OF COSACOSA ART AT LARGE, INC.



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## THE ART OF THE OPPORTUNITY

BY JAMES BRANCH

Life gives, life takes away, and difficulty is inevitable. Neither the good nor the bad ever comes easy -- at least, that's what I've learned in my fifty years living in North Philadelphia. But in every situation, good or bad, opportunity awaits. The art of living well is really just the art of discovering, creating, holding onto, and taking advantage of opportunity.

Some opportunities promise us great achievements or just the satisfaction of accomplishing a task and doing it well. Other opportunities may bring us riches or fame. There are the everyday opportunities we all miss in life -- getting the job we wanted or having the relationships we desire. And in each of our lives, there are opportunities that seem to have been snatched from our grasp, pulled out of reach even before we could explore them. When other deny us opportunity, our belief in ourselves can be mentally and physically wiped from our very existence, from our souls. At such moments, it is imperative not to let anyone or anything deter you from whatever your hopes or dreams may be.

Growing up in the early sixties, the racism I encountered as a young African American male came to define my very being. During my Junior High years, professional "counselors" came to my school to help us decide on our future careers and courses of study. At the time, I was avidly reading our classroom's encyclopedia and was intrigued by the article on sociology. When asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I replied, "A sociologist!" The woman interviewing me was clearly taken aback, and her partner made some statements that still cut me to the core: "I bet you don't even know what that is, do you, boy? You're just meant to become a laborer; don't even think about a higher education. It's not for you, even if you're extremely lucky. Don't go striving for more than you can achieve, or

your life will be only a disappointment to you, do you understand me?!"

I left the room without any feeling that I could or would be anything in life. I was depleted, left empty without a willingness to even try. The "truth" these "counselors" had presented to me seemed too official -- insurmountably sanctioned by an establishment of which I could never be a part and unfortunately affirmed by my own self-doubt. Yet, in failing to try, I not only failed to prove them wrong, but failed myself, as well.

**YOU HAVE  
TO DISCARD  
DISCOURAGEMENT  
AND JUST BELIEVE  
IN YOURSELF.**

Many residents of my current neighborhood believe they have no control over what happens to them. This feeling of powerlessness is rooted in lives riddled with disappointment -- in finding no support from the people and institutions they encounter. It is more a fear of failure -- or a fear of hope -- than a lack of initiative. Often

all it takes is one concerned individual or one competent agency to turn around a lifetime of inadequacy and despair. Believe me; I know. My life experiences have included prison time and serious illness. And through all my difficulties, I've come to realize that you have to strive to reach the goals you desire. You have to discard discouragement and just believe in yourself.

COSACOSA art at large, Inc. developed the *Opportunity's Gate* project to relay just such a message within North Philadelphia communities. The project focuses on young people as essential community builders for their neighborhoods -- creating in them, through art-making and technology, a sense of self-determination, motivation, and community engagement. *Opportunity's Gate* demonstrates the nearly limitless capacity for positive advancement that exists within our communities and within ourselves -- art celebrating the art of the opportunity.

James Branch serves as a Board Member and Community Liaison for COSACOSA.

A gate of wrought iron and chicken wire in North Philadelphia.



# THE MOSAIC PROJECT

Through intergenerational dialogues and multiple artistic disciplines, *Opportunity's Gate* explored ideals essential to creating strong and vital communities. Building on the necessary attributes of leadership, project participants discovered, defined and celebrated the often hidden opportunities that exist within our communities and within ourselves. Led by COSACOSA youth, the project facilitated collaborations among North Philadelphia's African American and Latino communities, reaffirming shared concerns and a commitment to better our city's neighborhoods. The project resulted in the creation of a site-specific mosaic mural and a theatrical film produced by our youth for DVD.

*Opportunity's Gate* asked its participants several fundamental questions: What characteristics -- that we have as individuals, or collectively -- will best preserve and advance our community in society at large? What does it mean to be a community? How might we be connected as a community -- through our history, our heritage, our common experiences? Where is our community -- is it a physical location or a locus of experience? Why must we learn from these experiences? What are the essential qualities of leadership?

COSACOSA youth, artists and staff, together with local community leaders, engaged neighborhood residents in a

year-long series of discussions about personal meaning and community values. In neighborhood workshops and town meetings, intergenerational groups of community members collaborated to debate and select the leadership qualities that they believe best allow for positive growth and change. These attributes were then represented on the mosaic. Stories, writings, and interviews from neighborhood residents also were incorporated into the *Opportunity's Gate* film project.

The *Opportunity's Gate* mosaic was created as a Service Learning collaboration among students at the Kenderton School and members of the surrounding North Philadelphia community. Community members worked with interdisciplinary artist Dit Wah Deng to design and create a site-specific, 22' x 11', brilliantly-colored tile mosaic portraying the qualities of leadership and their hopes for the neighborhood. Eighth graders at the school created individual leadership symbols that form the mural's border. Eight main community ideals are inscribed in the piece and also represented symbolically. Wisdom is an owl. Justice is the balance between night and day. Integrity is a star; courage is the sun. Responsibility is a tree with compassion as its golden, heart-shaped fruits. Hope is a rainbow, and respect is an open gate of shared opportunity.

## OPPORTUNITY'S CHARACTERISTICS AND CULTIVATORS

*Opportunity's Gate* mosaic designer/participants were asked which quality of community leadership they felt was most essential, and would create the greatest opportunities for advancement.

The following are some of their responses:

"**Brilliance** is the most important leadership quality

Intelligent people can think of bright ideas to solve whatever problems they encounter."

"You've got to be **responsible** for your actions.

If people believe in you and trust you, opportunities will come your way."

"Leaders must have **wisdom**. They always act with fairness and understanding toward others."

"Without **courage**, you couldn't achieve your goals.

You've got to stay true to what you believe and to your dreams, no matter what challenges you face."

"Being **open** is what I believe is most important.

If we're open to each other, we can listen and hear each other's ideas and find new paths to opportunity."



The *Opportunity's Gate* mosaic was designed and created by students as a Service Learning collaboration among members of the surrounding North Philadelphia community. IMAGES (top to bottom) Left column: qualities of leadership relay race; individual mosaic designs; theater program improvisations at the Nicetown-Tioga Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia; participants attend the world premiere of *Violet Fire*, a multimedia opera ([www.violetfire.com](http://www.violetfire.com)); *Violet Fire* creators introduce multimedia techniques at the Kenderton School. Center column: resident artist Deng observes the design process; mosaic creation; singer Patti LaBelle attends the unveiling of the mosaic. Right column: intergenerational mosaic-making.





# OPPORTUNITY'S GATE

A PROJECT OF COSACOSA ART AT LARGE, INC.

a collaborative mosaic

by members of the North Philadelphia community and artist Dit Wah Deng

ceramic tile on fiber cement substrate; 22' x 11'; 2004.

The Kenderton School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.





# THE FILM PROJECT

COSACOSA's *Opportunity's Gate* film project highlights the hidden and under-acknowledged opportunities that exist even within our most challenged communities. The project's core group of writers and performers ranged in age from 11 to 16, and had no prior training in the performative arts. Participants worked with each other and with elders in their North Philadelphia neighborhoods to develop stories based on both individual and community histories. The final film project consists of seven group vignettes, dialogues and poetry, as well as two songs -- all written, composed, performed and edited by COSACOSA's Connection Theater members. The following are descriptions, images and excerpts of from the *Opportunity's Gate* DVD included with this catalogue:

## THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Mr. Giver, guardian of the *Land of Opportunity*, stands at an entrance gate, beyond which lies a beautiful tree filled with the golden fruits of opportunity. As people arrive at the gate, they describe the qualities of leadership that helped them on their journey -- revealing an acronym of the word "opportunity."

## SUCCESS

In *Success*, an extended family gathers around their dining room table to host an annual celebration of opportunity. Each person recalls the past year's choices and accomplishments, and how the family enabled his or her success.

## REGRET

*Regret* revisits two of the characters from *Success* to explore what would have happened if they had not seized the opportunities they encountered. Many years in the future, the now elderly brother and sister look back on some of their past decisions with regret.

## LET'S MAKE A DEAL

*Let's Make a Deal* is a game show where you never know what lies beyond the next door! Today's contestant, Joe Everyman, makes some difficult life choices -- and then has to face the consequences of his actions in front of a live audience!

## THE CHOICE

As a young woman faces a possible life-changing decision, she weighs the pros and cons of *The Choice* with a little help from an angel and a devil.

## WAITING FOR LOTTÓ

In *Waiting for Lottó*, two friends believe winning the lottery is all they need to solve their problems. COSACOSA's Connection Theater members created this hip-hop dialogue based on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

## UNITY

A final poem, *Unity*, describes how, if each individual member contributes, the whole community will advance.



Images from the top: *The Land of Opportunity*, *Success*, *Regret*, *Let's Make a Deal*, *The Choice*, *Waiting for Lottó*, and *Unity*.

### *Land of Opportunity excerpt:*

Giver: *(with enthusiasm and genuine interest)*  
Welcome to the Land of Opportunity!  
What brings you here?

Traveler: Optimism! I'm positive about my future  
and my ability to do everything I have to do!

Giver: *(opening the gate)* You may pass.

### *Success excerpt:*

Mother: *(raising her glass)* And now a toast...  
Remember to take every opportunity you get;  
you don't know if it's going to be there tomorrow.  
Never give up on your dreams, and help other  
people with their dreams, too...

All: *(with raised glasses)* To opportunity and success!

### *Regret excerpt:*

Sister: *(with remorse)* I'm the one that knows about  
regrets, brother... I was too afraid to take the risk,  
too afraid that I wouldn't be good enough.  
*(pause, looking sidely at her brother)*  
And now I'm stuck sitting here talking to you!

### *Let's Make a Deal excerpt:*

Host: *(energetically)* The first life choice our contestant  
will make today is between a quick buck selling  
drugs and an honest wage to support himself  
through college. Joe must decide between door  
number one and door number two.  
*(suspensefully, hushed)* Which will he choose?

### *The Choice excerpt:*

Student: *(with confidence)* I've got to make the decision  
that's best for me -- no matter what anyone else  
thinks... I'm not going to sacrifice all my hopes  
and dreams for one night of fun. It's not a fair  
exchange. This is my future, no one else's.  
And it is all on me. *(goes back to studying)*

### *Waiting for Lottó excerpt:*

Mimi: We'll come back tomorrow.

Jojo: And the day after tomorrow.

Mimi: For sure.

Jojo: *(excited)* And so on.

Mimi: *(more excited)* The point is --

Jojo: *(interrupting)* Until we win!

Mimi: That's crazy!

## UNITY

Together we will rise.  
We will grow like this tree.  
We will blossom in adversity.  
We will stand tall in unity.

Within our community  
are the seeds of opportunity.

Planted in imagination,  
They grow through our determination.

We are capable and strong,  
always choosing right from wrong.

Every dream is within our hands,  
outstretched to meet all life demands.

Together we will rise.  
We will grow like this tree.  
We will blossom in adversity.  
We will stand tall in unity.

With compassion and with care,  
we forgive and love and share.

We will lift up our neighborhood,  
creating for the common good.

We will work for prosperity  
and peace with no disparity.

We will move ahead with confidence,  
Not bound by any gate or fence,

Our never-ending justice call:  
Opportunities for all!

Together we will rise.  
We will grow like this tree.  
We will blossom in adversity.  
We will stand tall in unity.

*Unity* ©2004 COSACOSA art at large, Inc.



# THE ARTISTS

**DIT WAH DENG** (multimedia artist in residence) explores intercultural commonalities with his work. Born in mainland China, Deng completed apprenticeships in sculpture, fiber art and architectural engineering before arriving in Philadelphia. Deng previously led COSACOSA's *International Appropriations/ Cultural Assimilations*, a year-long project creating a visual nexus of common cultural artifacts between Chinatown and the Italian Market along Ninth Street. His recent public works also include *Connection*, an 80' x 5' ceramic mural at Philadelphia International Airport created with pediatric hospital patients celebrating themes common to all of our human experience, beyond the boundaries of culture and community. Deng has received grants from the Five County Arts Fund, the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Philadelphia Arts in Education Partnership.

**KIMBERLY NIEMELA** (writer in residence) is Founder and Director of COSACOSA art at large, Inc. As an interdisciplinary artist, her work in film and sound examines multi-sensory memory and cognition, and has been performed/exhibited in a variety of venues, including, in New York, Central Park and El Museo del Barrio and, in Philadelphia, the Painted Bride Art Center and Taller Puertorriqueño. Her public art designs also have been widely acclaimed and featured in the international award book *Designing the World's Best Children's Hospitals*. Niemela has received grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts/AFI Media Arts Fellowship. Niemela graduated summa cum laude in music theory from the University of Pennsylvania. She also holds a degree in chemistry from Carnegie Mellon University.

**BRUCE ROBINSON** (theater artist in residence) has been teaching and performing in Philadelphia for over twenty-five years. As a theater director, actor and educator, he has held major roles in productions with numerous area companies including InterAct, Novel Stages, and the Wilma Theatre. Robinson has won the Barrymore Award for "Outstanding Community Service in Theater." Robinson is Founder and Artistic Director of the Fresh Visions Youth Theatre. His work includes teaching dramatic arts to special needs populations, including incarcerated and adjudicated youth.

**EZECHIAL THURMAN** (sound artist in residence) combines music, sound art, and poetry to effect anti-racism, conflict-resolution and reconciliation through art-making. Founder and Producer of K-Town Records, his work uses traditional and non-traditional musical forms, non-linear text, spoken word and other performative/interactive aspects. Thurman has worked as an art educator at regional schools and community centers, including the Kenderton School and COSACOSA. He holds a B.A. in Music from Colver-Stockton College, Missouri and a M.F.A. in Music Performance from the University of Iowa.

**ADAM TILLMAN-YOUNG** (videographer in residence) is the digital filmmaker/founder/dreamer of Hill City Parable productions. He holds a degree in Film and Media Arts from Temple University. Currently, Tillman-Young lives as a volunteer on a 114-acre ranch in Seguin, Texas, documenting the activity of his family's educational ministry. After his time in Texas is complete, Tillman-Young plans to nomad across the world with his cameras to learn how to tell stories that more centrally communicate the human condition. Please visit [www.hillcityparable.com](http://www.hillcityparable.com) to view an ever-changing gallery of his work.

## ORGANIZATIONAL PARTICIPANTS

Challenge Learning Camp  
Ferguson Manor Community Center  
Gratz High School  
Gratz Youth-Driven Service Learning Center  
The Kenderton School  
Latino Partnership Initiative  
Nicetown-Tioga Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia  
Nicetown-Tioga Improvement Team  
Norris Square Neighborhood Project

North City Youth Association  
Opportunities Industrialization Centers  
Opportunities Tower  
St. Christopher's Hospital for Children  
Shriners Hospital for Children  
Temple University Children's Medical Center  
To Our Children's Future with Health  
University of Louisville Service Learning Center  
Zion Baptist Church

## COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS

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Kia Miller  
Korin Miller  
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Brian Nobles  
Monica Oake  
Derrick Randolph  
Marc Riley  
Angel Robles  
Sarita Robless  
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Fallon Smith  
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Eudora Wiggins  
Myles Wiggins  
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Michael Williams  
Topaze Wilson  
Vanita Wilson



# COSACOSA

art at  
large

Art creates cultural change.

**F**ounded in 1990, COSACOSA art at large, Inc. creates new art specific to Philadelphia neighborhoods and public spaces. Through collaborative art workshops, artist residencies, and media projects, we enable dialogues among our city's disparate cultures and communities. COSACOSA projects assure a sense of equality among people of diverse backgrounds and differing abilities, while building their participation in local communities as well as in society-at-large.

**INTERACTION** COSACOSA art workshops engage people of differing backgrounds to create a common project. Each workshop identifies a community theme to explore through one of many possible artistic disciplines, from painting to theater, from quilt-making to ceramics. COSACOSA has brought together thousands of citizens from over thirty Philadelphia neighborhoods to learn about art, about each other, and about how to work together. As our participants grow in mutual understanding and respect, their community -- our city -- grows with them.

**INTERPRETATION** COSACOSA artist commissions and media projects expand upon ideas evolved in our public workshops. Again, our approach is multi-disciplinary -- from tile mosaics for a school to interactive sculpture for a hospital, from audio work examining changing city neighborhoods to theatrical journeys through Philadelphia's public monuments filmed for the Smithsonian Institution. COSACOSA interpretive projects provoke accessible, insightful dialogues, while building collaborative forums in which to address the common and uncommon challenges of living together.

COSACOSA continues to design and apply new models to deliver innovative and interactive "dialogues through art" directly into Philadelphia neighborhoods. For more information about COSACOSA, and to learn how to participate in our programs, please visit our website at [www.cosacosa.org](http://www.cosacosa.org).

## OPPORTUNITY'S GATE STAFF

Director/Writer in Residence

Multimedia Artist in Residence

Theater Artist in Residence

Sound Artist in Residence/Producer, K-Town Records

Videographer in Residence

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Research Associate

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