


THE

WRITE

City of Asylum provides sanctuary for writers who have been persecuted in their home countries and

PLACE



"The Beast" was a poem created by Huang Xiang, the first exiled writer in the City of Asylum residency program. Mr. Huang painted the words on the house where he was staying to celebrate his arrival to Pittsburgh and his freedom to publish without persecution.

creates community for those who want to explore art from around the world. by Jeffery Fraser



R. Henry Reese, co-founder and president of City of Asylum, stands behind a window at the organization's Alphabet City Center that reflects its theme.

The idea first came to Henry Reese one evening in 1997 while listening to British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie speak of a movement to offer writers in exile, like himself, a place of sanctuary and freedom to continue their work.

Mr. Reese, founder of a telemarketing company, was intrigued. His love of the arts, literature in particular, dates to childhood. His wife, Diane Samuels, is a visual artist.

Why not Pittsburgh as such a place, he thought.

The North Side couple owned a second house on Sampsonia Way, a former crack den they had bought and rehabbed, and were renting as reluctant landlords. “My wife and I sort of kicked each other at the same time,” he recalled of that night.

Some 8,000 miles away in Barisal, Bangladesh, Tuhin Das was beginning to take his writing seriously.

Through his teenage years, childhood rhymes turned to more studied poetry. He began writing editorials and magazine articles often critical of government corruption and the inequities endured by minorities, himself among them, in the overwhelmingly Muslim nation. It was a direction that put him in the crosshairs of fundamentalist militants whose influence was growing and whose tolerance of views that ran counter to their own was less than zero.

And his standing as a marked man would lead to his exile.

“Whatever city I went to, my picture was there on the television and in the newspapers,” said the 32-year-old poet, novelist, editor and blogger. “Whenever there was a murder of a poet, a writer or an artist, the pictures of other writers would come up. I did not have any options left.”

His path crossed with that of Mr. Reese and Ms. Samuels when in 2016 Mr. Das became the sixth writer in exile to find sanctuary in Pittsburgh through the City of Asylum. By that time, the venture had grown from a creative use of the couple’s spare house to a catalyst for cross-culture exchange in a city where barely 8 percent of the population is foreign born.

Mr. Reese spent nearly six years getting City of Asylum off the ground, raising support and working with the International Cities of Refuge Network, the movement he’d heard Mr. Rushdie speak about. Today, Pittsburgh joins Ithaca, N.Y., as the only U.S. cities to offer writers such a sanctuary.

Unlike other sanctuaries funded by institutions, such as governments or universities, Mr. Reese saw Pittsburgh’s entry as a grassroots organization supported by individual donations. “We thought it would be important that they be part of a community they could make a new life with, that it would help teach them how to make that new life.”

Resources were found to guarantee support for one writer over a two-year residency living in the Sampsonia Way house, which Mr. Reese and Ms. Samuels offered to the program. What remained unclear was whether the program could be sustained, whether it could become part of the community fabric and how to go about doing that.

Building community through art

The first writer offered sanctuary was Huang Xiang, considered to be China’s pre-eminent post-cultural revolution poet. It didn’t take him long to get noticed. He covered the Sampsonia Way house with his poem, “The Beast,” which he painted in Chinese calligraphy.

Mr. Reese was photographing Mr. Huang painting his house poem one day when three teenage girls from the neighborhood stopped on their way home from school to ask what the poet was doing. He explained that Mr. Huang was a famous Chinese poet and asked if they wanted his autograph. Mr. Huang climbed down off the ladder and wrote Chinese characters on their hands with a Sharpie.

“They looked at me and said, ‘That’s not English,’” Mr. Reese recalled. He was surprised they only then seemed to realize there were languages other than their own. “I said, how about if he performs his house poem, reads it? They looked at me with that kind of sassy challenge and said, ‘Sure.’”

Mr. Huang got nose to nose with one of the girls and let out a scream. She jumped back. He dove to the ground and rolled around, reciting his poem in Chinese.

“He does it for about 30 seconds, gets up, brushes off, takes a little bow,” Mr. Reese said. “That expression, ‘jaw drop,’ is literally



Photo courtesy of City of Asylum

true. The three of them were standing there, jaws dropped. Then, one of them said, ‘Can he do another one?’

“With great clarity, it registered with me at that moment. We had just seen a gap I had no understanding of, and we saw a way to close that gap. Art was the way.”

City of Asylum has blossomed far beyond anything Mr. Reese had envisioned. After Mr. Huang painted his house poem, people slipped their own poems through his mail slot. They came by to hear him read. Authors’ readings became regular events in Mr. Reese and Ms. Samuel’s living room, under outdoor tents, on the street, in gardens the nonprofit cultivated in vacant lots, and in the gardens of North Side neighbors, who competed to host them.

Mr. Huang’s impromptu performance that enthralled the middle school girls inspired a free jazz-poetry concert in 2005 that proved to be so popular that it became an annual event.

“What we learned from that is that people in the community, who often walk by one another, began to engage as neighbors,” Mr. Reese said. “It had the identity as the arts event of the neighborhood, and the audience was very diverse.”

In all, the nonprofit’s calendar includes some 120 events a year.

Finding hope through asylum

Mr. Das grew up in a Hindu family, a minority in Bangladesh, where Islam is the state religion. He said he doesn’t identify with any religion. He considers himself Bengali and Bangladeshi first. That mattered less as religious intolerance spread.

His work also marked him. He wrote poetry. He started a magazine, *The Wild*, giving voice to writers like himself who spoke out against corruption and discrimination against minorities. At one point, he was editing nine magazines.

In 2013, protests spread across Bangladesh, initially seeking a harsher sentence for an Islamic leader convicted of war crimes. Mr. Das joined, speaking against religious persecution and for a more secular nation.

He received threats. Murders of writers and others who had spoken out began to mount. A close friend who had written songs of protest disappeared. Mr. Das went to police to request security. Upon arriving, he was told he might be arrested under a law that prescribed stiff prison sentences for writings deemed harmful to the state or religion. He saw copies of his work on the detective’s desk, certain passages highlighted.

“He told me, ‘I don’t think it’s safe for you in Bangladesh,’” Mr. Das said. “They told me I should go to India.”

He recounted that when he ignored the advice, he began to be followed, no matter what city he moved to. He appealed again for police protection, but was denied. An excerpt from his poem, “It is Midnight in My Bangladesh,” speaks to the experience:

I don’t know how I can express myself
As feelings become obtuse from fear.
Soldiers of darkness caught me like an animal
And butcher me in dreams.
You know the feelings of dreams are like reality.
It is midnight in my Bangladesh.

With help from a friend, Das contacted the International Cities of Refuge Network and began the journey that brought him to Pittsburgh.

Using art to welcome the world

The model for building community through the arts that evolved piecemeal has attracted broad support, including from federal and state government, local companies, and national and Pittsburgh-based foundations.

Last year, City of Asylum @ Alphabet City opened as the nonprofit’s new home in a former Masonic temple with a café, auditorium, bookstore and ambitions of becoming a hub for writers, music, artistic experimentation and diverse voices from around the world. This year, City of Asylum is looking for an executive director to whom Mr. Reese and Ms. Daniels will pass on leadership responsibilities



Renee Rosensteel



Tuhin Das, opposite page, is a Bangladeshi poet, activist, political columnist, short-story writer and essayist who fled his country in 2016 after being targeted by fundamentalist militant groups who were murdering secular writers and activists.

Above left, children and their families enjoy activities during Kids Without Borders, a program at City of Asylum's Alphabet City Center designed to connect youth from all backgrounds to positive forms of expression such as slam poetry and photography while providing a Know Your Rights workshop for immigrants and refugees.

Above right, the City of Asylum organization is housed in the Alphabet City Center — known together as City of Asylum @Alphabet City — which had been a Masonic temple.

for the organization as it further expands its reach and programming.

“Hosting City of Asylum is something Pittsburgh should be very proud of. It exemplifies our welcoming nature,” said Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto. “Pittsburgh was built upon the backs of those seeking new lives here, and our present and future will be built the same way.”

Less certain is the welcoming nature of the nation.

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the legality of a Trump Administration travel ban. The order restricts or bans visas for people in seven nations, including five predominantly Muslim-majority countries. City of Asylum programs have not yet been directly affected. But, Mr. Reese said, “we’re concerned, as many persecuted writers come from countries subject to the ban. And, generally, we are concerned that inviting people from other countries is now viewed suspiciously.”

However, Janet Sarbaugh, vice president for Creativity at The Heinz Endowments, one of the City of Asylum’s foundation supporters, insisted that there has never been a more important time for the organization to exist.

“In a contentious, politicized, isolating world, City of Asylum stands for global understanding, common humanity, and authentic connections,” she said. “What it represents is something we all should aspire to every day.”

Mr. Das arrived in Pittsburgh knowing no one and little English. His first impression, he confessed, was that “everyone looks the same.” But he took comfort that water embraces the city much like it does in

his hometown of Barisal. He has found inspiration from the people he’s encountered, the city’s parks and its rivers, and has written 40 poems since arriving, including “Exile Poem” translated from Bengali by Nandini Mandal:

The cold has intensified.
People are saying that
winter is finally here.
I pull the cap down on my forehead,
cheekbones tighten;
I look straight—far ahead.
Steel cold, full of confidence.
Solitude is perfect for my writing.
My neighbor, who all summer long
burst fireworks, where has he gone?
At 2:00 in the morning,
fireworks went off below my window,
startled and alarmed, I woke up,
But I am looking for him now.
Where has he gone?

The internet enables Mr. Das to stay in touch with writers in Bangladesh and others in exile. Still, he longs for family and homeland. Bangladesh, he fears, will sooner experience a cleansing of its minorities than a rebirth of tolerance, leaving him no choice but to make his home elsewhere.

For the moment, he’s pinning his hopes on Pittsburgh. “I don’t feel isolated. I feel part of something here and that’s important. This is the equivalent of freedom to me.” **h**