



Standing

Camille Zamora and Monica Yunus
PHOTO BY BECCA FAY

With Sing for Hope, Camille Zamora and Monica Yunus are taking performances from stage to street.

Written by Julie Jacobs
Photography courtesy of Sing for Hope

It's a Monday afternoon and Camille Zamora and Monica Yunus have just come out of a planning meeting for Sing for Hope, their well-tuned nonprofit that harnesses the volunteer services of more than 1,500 artists to bring the performing and visual arts into under-resourced communities throughout New York City's five boroughs. At the top of today's agenda was their new partnership with the Institute for the Puerto Rican/Hispanic Elderly, one of the city's largest social service agencies, and their continuing Arts Intensive, which convened high-school students this past summer at Glasgow Caledonian University's satellite campus in SoHo. "We have a lot of fun stuff that we're planning," says Zamora. "It's definitely an exciting time."

And a busy one as well. Zamora and Yunus, both internationally acclaimed sopranos, juggle their flourishing opera careers with their administrative responsibilities and own hours volunteering for Sing for Hope—a balancing act they have happily and successfully managed since they founded the organization in 2006. The two met as students at Juilliard and kept crossing paths, a road map that eventually led to a close friendship and many late-night conversations about the critical role that art plays in society. Each had personally given back through their artistry and witnessed the powerfully transformative impact it had on the community as well as on their colleagues.

Ovation

Zamora had organized a concert to raise money for a hospice where a good friend had spent his final weeks, and was part of a group at Juilliard that sang at New York City firehouses in the days following 9/11. She remembers the torrent of emotion released by the firefighters during the performances, firsthand evidence of how bringing the arts out of the concert hall and making them accessible to all, particularly during periods of grief, can be enormously healing.

With Zamora's assistance, Yunus had coordinated a concert to support the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The show revealed the innate desire of artists to use their talents in meaningful ways, and proved to be the epiphany for launching Sing for Hope. Yunus recollects having an "aha moment" afterward and speaking with Zamora the very next morning to plan next steps. "It wasn't necessarily about the musical success of the concert, it was more about how it brought together a community in New York that didn't really have any connection necessarily with Katrina, except that they had empathy and wanted to do something," she notes. "So how could we keep that response, that empathy response, using what we knew best, our artistry?"

"We realized, gosh, there should really be a go-to resource for artists to connect to community causes in this way," Zamora adds. "And so, you know, without having any idea if we were

embarking on a nonprofit organization, we said, 'Okay, let's set up some kind of a structure for artists to be able to volunteer and actually have an impact.'"

"And so we sort of started Sing for Hope out of that experience, started building what it is today," says Yunus. "The premise has always been the same, which is that music uplifts and transforms people's lives. And for people not to have access to this wonderful language that we really all speak and can all share and take part in and brings us together as a community, that's something that we felt very strongly about and really wanted to put our time and talent to developing an organization...that seeks to use artists as agents of change."

Many people have since joined the fold, from an extensive and diverse roster of volunteer artists—actors, singers, classical and jazz musicians, dancers, choreographers, composers, designers, photographers, puppeteers, and more—to a distinguished board of trustees that includes opera luminaries Andrea Bocelli,

Clockwise from top left:
 Sing for Hope Volunteer Artists visit a Hurricane Sandy shelter in Queens.
 Photo by Shawn Hoke

Sing for Hope Volunteer Artist Monique Coleman with Zamora and Yunus at Songs for Heroes.
 Photo by Shawn Hoke

Sing for Hope Volunteer Artist Laura Ricciardi leads a visual art workshop at the 2014 Youth Arts Intensive.
 Photo by Shawn Hoke

Zamora and Yunus with students at Betances Community Center.
 Photo by Lekha Singh



Plácido Domingo, and Renée Fleming, as well as Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus, whose pioneering work in microcredit and microfinance has served as a blueprint of sorts for his daughter and Zamora in how to enact positive change and improve the lives of those less fortunate. The registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit continues to recruit new volunteer artists, who must be at least 18 years of age and possess the “willingness to bring a smile and their talent” to Sing for Hope’s initiatives. Because artists typically have to travel a lot, Yunus and Zamora do not require a specific time commitment; it’s a lifestyle with which they are quite familiar, having performed professionally throughout the world, and having engaged in the national arts conversation at various meetings and institutions, including the Aspen Ideas Festival and the United Nations. For their efforts, they have been honored by the World Harmony Run Foundation, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and the 21st Century Leaders Awards.

All of Sing for Hope’s programs are free for participants and take place in the organization’s midtown office as well as on the streets of New York City and at hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and other venues in the community. Among the many partners sharing Zamora and Yunus’s vision of “art for all” are United Cerebral Palsy of New York City, New York Families for Autistic Children, Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, Queens Community Hospital, and numerous private and public schools. Sing for Hope’s outreach has touched children, students, senior adults, health care patients, and more, complements existing services, and in many cases helps fill an artistic void.

“With all of our programs—and this is something that has remained constant from the very early days—it’s not a cookie cutter approach. We listen...we’re always working with staff in our various locations,” points out Zamora, who cites Coler-Goldwater Specialty Hospital and Nursing Facility on Roosevelt Island, which has a therapist on staff but still collaborates with Sing for Hope to bring live performances on site to entertain the patients.

As for the schools, where arts curricula are often the first to go during budget cutting, Zamora remarks, “It defies logic. Art is a way to envision a better world and thus create a better world. So it is imperative that our kids have the arts, and certainly Sing for Hope exists just to help bridge that gap.”

Students benefit as well from a range of programs administered by staff and volunteers at Sing for Hope’s home base. There’s the Sing for Hope Youth Chorus that offers classes and rehearsals to kids ages 14 to 18, and the Saturday Series and Arts Intensive, both of which provide young people with master-level instruction in various artistic disciplines; the Youth Chorus opened the NYC Service Summit, hosted by Mayor Bill de Blasio this past July. To thank the volunteers who help make these programs possible, the organization hosts Welcome Wednesdays, a monthly party for socializing and networking.

What perhaps best brings art to the masses, reaching some two million people, is the organization’s flagship public-art initiative, the Sing for Hope Pianos. The annual event, started in 2011 and one of the largest installations of its kind, places

88 artist-designed pianos in public spaces throughout the city’s five boroughs for anyone to play. The pianos stay for two weeks and are bequeathed later to schools, elder care facilities, and other community-based institutions served by Sing for Hope.

It’s undoubtedly a big undertaking that calls for a lot of heads (and fingers). As Yunus explains, the pianos come in at or below cost from overstocked warehouses all over the tristate area and are tuned and rehabbed. Volunteer artists, who have been selected by an outside council via an open-application process, then transform the pianos into works of art. They spend between 40 to 75 hours creating their masterpieces in 7,500-square-foot worth of donated spaces. When the pianos are ready for their debut, each is assigned a “buddy” to look out for it and cover it in inclement weather. The city mandates that the piano tops be bolted down as a precaution against items being thrown inside and, fortunately, vandalism has been rare.

Although currently on hiatus as Zamora, Yunus, and their team develop sponsorships for 2015 and beyond, the initiative certainly has made its mark, especially at Lincoln Center Plaza, where in 2013 all 88 pianos gathered for a one-day interactive exhibit. “We had such a wonderful response. There’s nothing like it in terms of coming upon a piano and seeing this little mini community of people around it, some listening, some enjoying with their children, somebody’s playing, somebody’s singing, maybe somebody’s coming by with another instrument and making it into a duo or trio,” offers Yunus. “It’s really a gift to these communities and it’s a gift that lives on.”

Despite all their success, both Yunus and Zamora profess they still are figuring out how to best build their organization while learning about strategic planning and impact studies.

“Our feeling is that art is currency...and we provide a very high-impact vehicle through which to give your currency, which is your art. And again I think that’s why we have grown, that’s why people come back to us. They know that Sing for Hope has in a way become a hallmark for integrity and quality, and part of that is because people know how fiercely Monica and I believe in it and how we guard it,” Zamora says. “It’s an incredible sense of joy and accomplishment that we’ve gotten here, and also a sense that really we’ve only just begun.” **LM**