



COAST & VALLEY
PROPERTIES

JANUARY 2024 | ISSUE NO. 34

Repair the World: The Heart & Soul of Arts for Change

"SURVIVORS should be an integral part of the education system in all schools..."
– Henry Stern, California State Senator

A Conversation between Wendy Kout, playwright/co-producer, Genie Benson, co-producer, Monica Lenches, Realtor and Claudia Rucker, Founder of Beyond Ordinary Business.



I met Wendy Kout several years ago during a real estate transaction. She was no ordinary buyer. She and her husband went out of their way to ensure that the transaction was a win-win for all parties and approached the challenges that arose with such grace, respect, and kindness that I couldn't help but be touched by her caring heart. A few months ago, we ran into each other at the Fund for Santa Barbara's annual fundraiser, Bread and Roses, which Wendy co-created 35 years ago. She invited me to the Santa Barbara premiere of her play, SURVIVORS. I attended with a few

friends from Hope Ranch, and we were all profoundly touched by its power and impact that we stayed afterwards to discuss what we could do to support this cause. For days I couldn't stop thinking about the rise of hatred and violence around the world and the coarsening of our culture here. So, I asked for a meeting with her to learn more about her intentions for the play. From the moment she greeted me with a huge hug, I knew I was in for an inspirational coffee date. By the end, it was clear that Arts for Change would have a place in A Kinder World of Commerce as one of our featured non-profits shining the light on a kinder playwright/producer as we write and perform our way into a kinder new year!

ML/CR: What is the mission for your non-profit, Arts for Change, and what is the project you are currently working on?

WK/GB: Our mission is to repair the world through art. We develop, produce, and support plays, films, dance, music, and literature which inspire inclusivity, positive personal change, and social responsibility.

As a response to the national and international rise of antisemitism, racism, hatred based on religion and sexual orientation and hate fueled violence, we are producing the West Coast Tour of SURVIVORS. On June 1, 2017, Wendy was commissioned to write this play by CenterStage Theatre in Rochester, NY, which once had a thriving Holocaust survivors' community. The purpose was to honor, remember and learn from the trauma and resiliency of survivors and encourage hope, kindness and tolerance. And she did it by creating a school-touring play that enacted the history of the Holocaust through the eyewitness accounts of ten of Rochester's survivors. A month after she received the commission, Neo Nazis marched with tiki torches in Charlottesville chanting, "The Jews will not replace us!", and Wendy realized she wasn't just writing a history play. She was writing a warning play...that this could happen again. Today that warning is even more alarming. With five national and international productions, SURVIVORS offers students and adult audiences the opportunity to learn of the normalization of hatred in the past as a warning to stand up to hatred in the present and in the future.

Our West Coast tour is honored to be partnered with the Holocaust Museum LA and the Holocaust Education Center of StandWithUs, which provides in-classroom support and teaching resources for educators. We are also honored that the Museum of Tolerance presented our Los Angeles public premiere and that we were invited to perform at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in conjunction with the Auschwitz Exhibition.

ML/CR: What was your experience of bringing SURVIVORS to Santa Barbara and did you achieve the impact you are wanting to create in our community?

WK/GB: In a word, our experience was encouraging! Thanks to the support we received in Santa Barbara, this past October, we performed at the beautiful Marjorie Luke Theatre for 700 public school students. That evening, we produced RAISE OUR VOICES, an affordable community event, which included local choirs, a performance of SURVIVORS and a talkback following the play moderated by Gwyn Lurie, CEO and Editor-in-Chief of the Montecito Journal. Our West Coast tour has also been encouraged by our rave reviews, sold-out performances, standing ovations and feedback from our adult audiences.

We measure impact after our school performances by providing student surveys created by Vital Research, which created surveys for Holocaust Museum LA, the Museum of Tolerance, and the Geffen Playhouse in LA. Our surveys question students' knowledge of the Holocaust, personal prejudices about minorities and behaviors around bullying. According to our survey results, after seeing the play, students have a greatly increased knowledge of the Holocaust, an increase in tolerance and are inspired to stand up to bullying and hatred. At the end of the play there is a call to action to take social responsibility and stand up to hatred. We hope everyone reading this interview will also answer that call.

ML/CR: What are your organization's values?

WK/GB: To put it simply, we value caring, diversity, inclusivity, collaboration, and change.

ML/CR: Can you give us some examples of how your organization puts some of those values into action?

WK/GB: While very serious about our mission, budget and schedules, we are equally serious about weaving our values into everything we do. For example, Genie and I are business partners, and we are also dear friends who have known each other for decades. Genie's parents, Sidonia and Lewis Lax, of blessed memory, are the first Holocaust survivors I ever met. The caring, loving and joyous bond Genie and I share is what we wanted to create between all who work with us and support us. So, we don't think in terms of cast and crew, or employees and stakeholders. We think in terms of our SURVIVORS family which includes our financial benefactors, volunteers, and audiences.

We also value collaboration by welcoming feedback and suggestions from our entire SURVIVORS family. We are very excited to implement several of their suggestions into the play, performances, and talkbacks in 2024.

Valuing diversity is also integral to our mission. Our main goal on our West Coast tour is to reach young and diverse audiences, and what better way to do this than with a young and diverse cast. Our surveys and experience indicate that relatability can lead to empathy and empathy can lead to tolerance, inclusion and standing up to hatred. Our diverse cast provides a human and humane bridge from the past to the present and the future.



The responsibility of presenting the tragedy of the Holocaust, its warnings and the triumph of the survivors is as serious as it gets. Our work is also as inspiring as it gets because the survivors also teach us the importance of our humanity, camaraderie, and the resiliency of the human spirit to overcome adversity and thrive.

ML/CR: In what ways can the community support your mission?

WK/GB: We are honored to be invited back to Santa Barbara in spring 2024 for public and private school performances. We are a non-profit and need private, public, and organizational donations, grants, and sponsorships for schools which can't afford our fee. Secondly, we welcome all to join our SURVIVORS family and sign up for our mailing list to follow our West Coast journey and share your suggestions. We also welcome volunteers for the multiple tasks needed, including outreach through social media. Thank you, Monica & Claudia, for this opportunity to share our mission, and for your kindred mission to make Santa Barbara and the world a fairer and kinder place for all.

ML/CR: Is there anything else you would like to share?

WK/GB: We are deeply grateful to our friends and donors Rod Lathim, Angela Antenore, Nancy Weiss, our supporters the SB Unified School District, our sponsors the SB Education Foundation, ADL SB/Tri-Counties, the Jewish Federation of Greater SB and the Dreier Family Rent Subsidy Fund at the Marjorie Luke Theatre. In SB our village also includes Dan Meisel and Ashley Myers, Regional Director and Associate Director of ADL SB/Tri-counties, Amy Wendel, Reverend Julie Hamilton, Rabbi Steven Cohen and Gwyn Lurie.

To learn more about SURVIVORS, Arts for Change and their commitment to social responsibility, visit: www.artsforchange.world or you may contact Wendy Kout directly at (818) 926-9807.

Monica & Claudia