

# Converging Parallel Lives: The Story of Voices Breaking Boundaries

By Matt Howard

In a world full of customs offices and immigration departments, where borders and national identities play powerful roles, thousands of individuals experience similar crises and conflicts, and joys and frustrations, no matter where they live around the globe. Although the commonality of these experiences often goes unrecognized by politicians and policy-makers, the Houston-based non-profit organization Voices Breaking Boundaries (VBB) seeks to document these parallel realities. Through an ever-increasing diversity of productions and artforms, VBB has been fulfilling its mission to “cross borders, sustain dialogue, and incite social justice through art” for fifteen years. Along the way, it has garnered funding from such prestigious entities as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andy Warhol Foundation, and the Houston Endowment. Founded by five women artists in 2000, Voices Breaking Boundaries has been directed by Sehba Sarwar from the beginning. A Pakistani-born writer and artist, Sarwar divides her time between Houston and Karachi, Pakistan.

From the start Sarwar has led VBB to focus on a particular form of democratization to promote social justice — that



*Sehba Sarwar speaking at the What's Color Got to Do with It event hosted at the Houston Institute of Culture, January 2011.*

Photo courtesy of Burnell McCray.

of shared art and experience. VBB achieves this goal in a variety of ways. It acts as a platform for up-and-coming artists, allowing them to find an audience without having to work their way into the upper circles of Houston's art society. Its exhibits also present local problems through a global perspective, highlighting similarities between the experiences of marginalized communities in the United States, South Asia, and other parts of the globe.

Most importantly, VBB has developed a variety of art productions that bring art directly into the community. As



*Photos by Nalia Mahmood (Pakistan) in the home of Arlene and Mario Zamora for the Exploring Rituals Living Room Art exhibit, December 2013.*

Photo courtesy of Logan Sebastian Beck.



an “unfixed” arts association that prefers to work without a permanent production space, VBB has used the community as its constant canvas, encouraging cross-cultural understanding among diverse peoples and nations each step of the way.

Voices Breaking Boundaries is unique in that it is an arts/activist association directed by a South Asian artist, with the goal of reaching a broader multi-cultural audience rooted in shared political views rather than a specific ethnic identity. In VBB’s current *Borderlines* series for example (Fall 2013-Spring 2016), productions address commonalities between Latin American and South Asian cultures, focusing not only on the impact of border conflicts in both regions but on the common struggles, joys, and cultures of individuals and neighborhoods in each place. By giving Houstonians an opportunity to experience these diverse cultures through art, VBB achieves the “mathematically impossible,” forcing parallel lines and lives to converge.

## VBB’s Origins

Voices Breaking Boundaries began, as so many things have, with a phone call. In December of 1999 Marcela Descalzi, an Argentinian teacher and writer, called her close friend Sehba Sarwar to ask if she had anything that she wanted to do before the twentieth century came to a close. Sarwar responded that she would like to do a public reading of a poem she had written for her four-year-old niece, which focused on the impact of political transformations in Pakistan. Although informal poetry readings took place in Montrose-area coffee shops, Sarwar and Descalzi sought to establish a more structured forum to present their work. Sarwar submitted two grant proposals to the Cultural Arts Council (now Houston Arts Alliance), one seeking support to pursue her own writing, and the other to pay honoraria to artists for the performance series. She received both, and in February 2000, the five women organized a twice-monthly event at the Borders Bookstore off of Loop 610 and Beechnut.<sup>1</sup>

The format of the open-mic sessions provides an apt illustration of how VBB strove to create accessible forms of art. Each event opened with music performed by a local artist followed by a reading from an up-and-coming artist. They closed with a reading by a more established writer of local or national renown. Because Sarwar taught at Jones High School during this time, many of her students took part in performances and invited their friends. In this way VBB created a vibrant, multi-generational forum that enabled mentorship of younger artists striving to find their voice.

Although the open-mic series enjoyed great success, it came to an abrupt halt after eighteen months. A number of Borders’s customers complained about the content of one presentation, and afterwards Borders’s management insisted that it be allowed to pre-screen each performer’s work. Recognizing this as an infringement on the artists’ rights of free expression, VBB refused the request and terminated its partnership with the bookstore. As a result of this early “eviction,” the organization took on an essentially mobile character, seeking out unique locations and partnerships within Houston to host its events. From this dynamic a unique form of artistic creativity emerged, one grounded



*On-site artists created this altar/shrine in the home of Frank Aguilar at Exploring Rituals in December 2013.*

*Photo courtesy of Logan Sebastian Beck.*

in extreme flexibility, artistic adaptability, and a desire to introduce diverse communities to the political power of art.

VBB’s first city-wide success occurred in 2001, when it hosted a two-weekend-long film festival-style screening of South Asian films in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Himal South Asia, a non-profit arts group based in Nepal. Drawing a much larger audience than anticipated, the event provided VBB with its first self-generated revenues and placed the organization on Houston’s more traditional “culture map.” As the organization’s reputation grew and its finances became more complex, colleagues advised Sarwar that incorporating VBB as a non-profit would benefit its growth. With help from the Texas Association of Lawyers and Accountants, it gained non-profit status in 2001.

## Empowering Creativity, Creating Empowerment

Since its inception, Voices Breaking Boundaries has adopted a multifaceted approach to creating art for social change. Its repertoire of productions include writing workshops, speaker and film series, and temporary exhibits held in local communities that bring together the art of local and international artists around a common theme. All of these rely on innovative uses of technology, and over the past two years, VBB has published catalogs to capture highlights of these multimedia events for posterity.

VBB’s workshop series emerged from a partnership between Sarwar and Inprint, Houston’s premier literary arts non-profit organization. In 2001, after VBB left Borders, Inprint’s directorship offered its space for VBB’s monthly readings. Simultaneously, as an individual artist Sarwar partnered with Inprint to start a girls’ writing workshop entitled Making Noise. The idea for this workshop came from Sarwar’s work with female high school students, many of whom grappled with intense personal and familial issues. The workshop was designed to illustrate the power of writing as a form of expression and healing, thereby serving as a tool for personal empowerment.

Making Noise became a model for later VBB-sponsored art workshops, beginning in 2003. VBB held the first of these at high schools in underserved communities, such as

Furr, Sharpstown, and Lee. Others took place in community centers, where elders and non-English speakers were encouraged to share their experiences through writing. Descalzi alongside writer and psychologist Victoria Jones organized a particularly innovative workshop to help teachers manage the psychological intensity that accompanied their jobs.<sup>2</sup>

Another early event that transformed VBB's artistic direction was the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. As was the case for many Americans, 9/11 had a profound impact on the everyday lives of Sarwar and other VBB members of South Asian origin. They found themselves under new kinds of scrutiny, confronted with a host of incorrect assumptions about their cultures, home countries, and beliefs. As Sarwar explains, "That question, 'Are you Muslim?' And what that term means and what it means to be brown and Muslim, what it means to be male, brown, Muslim...it had taken on a different meaning....That was all there before, but it suddenly became...front and center...of people's consciousness....So, I think it was even more important to present an alternative view of the spaces, that were more representative of the truth of those spaces as opposed to whatever is painted through television screens."<sup>3</sup>

The series that emerged from this painful period, *Words for Peace*, remains one of the organization's most ambitious projects. VBB planned to have presentations given by speakers from South Asia such as 1997 Booker Prize winner and peace activist Arundhati Roy, Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye, Jewish poet Irena Kepfisz, and award-winning Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid. These talks would connect Houston audiences with alternative views from around the world. Rather than the intergenerational parallels and convergences generated in the writing workshops, this production encouraged convergence along cultural and national lines.



An image of Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid is displayed on the large screen during VBB's *Words for Peace 1* at *DiverseWorks Houston* in September 2002. Photo courtesy of Paul Hester.

The first installment took a year to produce. Still lacking a space of its own, VBB partnered with *DiverseWorks* in the warehouse district in September of 2002. Following VBB's open-mic format, the production took place in *DiverseWorks*'s black box theater, set up with a projector, screen, speakers, and telephone with a microphone. Local

artists presented their work along with speakers invited to call in from other countries to share their writing and ideas. The seemingly patched-together production method was exceptionally innovative for its time since it facilitated a long-distance audience-artist interaction a year before Skype appeared.

Although partly born of necessity since VBB lacked the funds to fly each speaker to Houston, the use of telephones and microphones illustrates the creativity and adaptability that came to characterize VBB productions. "It was just very, very basic," said Sarwar. "But *DiverseWorks* had the capacity...And then we had Rathna Kumar, who runs an Indian dance organization, and she did classical Indian... dance performance but in that she mixed in movements that were interreligious...it was amazing."<sup>4</sup> In the span of one afternoon, Sarwar estimates that 400 people came to *DiverseWorks*. Once again, VBB's flexibility and creativity paid off. Over time even after VBB began officing at Project Row Houses (2004-2006) and Houston Arts Alliance (2006-2010), VBB produced five more *Words for Peace* shows, with the last being held in 2008.

The organization also initiated a series of events called *Cultural Narratives* that brought in guest speakers to discuss their work and cultural roots. These programs were, in essence, a form of storytelling similar to what emerged from VBB's writing workshops. Like the open-mic sessions, they introduced more established artists and activists, some of them very famous, to Houston audiences. Among the most notable was the activist-musician Patti Smith, who came to Houston after the publication of her memoir *Just Kids* in September of 2010. Appearing at the UH Cullen Performance Hall, Smith read excerpts from her book, shared stories about her life, and performed a number of songs. This event, done in collaboration with Karen Farber, director of the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Performing Arts, gained greater local renown for VBB.

## Living Room Art: VBB's Signature Artform

VBB's most original artform, Living Room Art (LRA), emerged in 2006. Building on its established tradition of "using the city as a canvas," Living Room Art productions brought art to the community by organizing exhibitions in private homes of people living in underserved neighborhoods. Planned as "one night stands," the productions transformed living rooms, kitchens, and hallways into an open canvas upon which artists could exhibit their art, perform live art, and create installations. The single-night gatherings also provided opportunities for people to mix and mingle. For the surrounding neighborhood, LRA productions became like a carnival with performances and artforms often extending into the yard and street.

The concept for Living Room Art came from VBB friend and artist Oskar Sonnen, who knew about nineteenth-century European *salons* and a similar Los Angeles series. The first show was held in the home of Sarwar's friend Jaspal Subhlok, who had just bought a house in Montrose and wanted to host a party. As time passed numerous other homeowners in a variety of neighborhoods volunteered their spaces. LRA productions took place in such diverse neighborhoods as Fifth Ward, Eastside, and Gulfton. The





Stashed by Jimmy Castillo at the Crossing the Lines Living Room Art exhibit, May 2014.

Photo courtesy of Logan Sebastian Beck.

intimacy of a family living room often provokes experiences that are intensely personal. Sarwar hosted one in her own home in 2009 after the death of her father, Dr. Mohammed Sarwar. Titled *Honoring Dissent/Descent*, it was dedicated to his lifelong commitment to political activism, as well as that of the still-living Daniel Bustamante, a renowned Chicano activist and the father of artist Rosie Bustamante. “It was in my house, and it was a tribute to my father...[I]t began from a very, very personal place,” Sarwar explained. “Everything that happens [in VBB] has started from that personal place.”<sup>5</sup>

Living Room Art productions often occur in the homes of people who have no connection with VBB. Even in these instances, highly personal connections are forged. Frank Aguilar, for example, hosted an LRA in his house in the Near Northside neighborhood in December 2013. *Exploring Rituals* was designed to explore “how ritual commemorations – shrines, altars, *ritablos*, temples, performances and gestures – mediate history and memory along two border

regions: US-Mexico and India-Pakistan-Bangladesh.” The exhibit not only addressed key community issues in the Near Northside – such as prostitution and human trafficking – but also honored Aguilar’s recently deceased mother with a *Día de los Muertos* display. After this, Aguilar had nothing but compliments for VBB, saying, “That’s what made me really, really close to them and made me realize that, ‘Hey, they not only used my house for the event, they honored me, my house, and my mother.’”<sup>6</sup>

### Continuing the VBB Mission

Fifteen years after its founding, VBB is still going strong. Today the organization has a permanent office, professional administrative staff, and significantly more funding. Utilizing each new mode of media that emerges along with more traditional exhibition catalogs, the organization has built a global audience. There is much to admire about Voices Breaking Boundaries: its record of unique and powerful arts productions, its contributions to local communities through writing workshops and Living Room Art events, and its pursuit of social justice. Through years of hard work and dedication, accompanied by dedicated colleagues and collaborators, Sehba Sarwar has accomplished an amazing feat by transforming a grassroots art collective into an internationally renowned arts organization, forging cultural connections and raising awareness of social justice issues around the globe.

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Images by Paul Hester and Andrew Baloch glued to Andrews Street during Homes and Histories, December 2012.

Photo by Burnell McCray.