



“All the Good in Life” An Interview

with Amanda Dargan and Steve Zeitlin of **CityLore**

by Sahar Muradi

In the summer of 2014, I was halfway through my MFA in Poetry at Brooklyn College and desperately looking for work at the intersection of poetry and education. As a poet exploring work in translation from Farsi and my Afghan heritage, I somehow stumbled upon City Lore’s “Poetic Voices from the Muslim World.” This lush digital exhibit, created in collaboration with Poets House and beautifully designed by Ralph Appelbaum Associates, highlights poetic traditions from four major language areas—Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu—and introduces poetry from Asia, Africa, and diasporic communities in the United States through original and translated verse, arresting photography, and calligraphic masterworks. In one sitting, I learned about the roots of Islamic poetry, saw contemporary illustrations of my favorite classic Sufi epic “Conference of the Birds,” and listened to an audio recording of a poem by my hero Forugh Farrokhzad. My jaw fell flat in my lap, my breath was taken. What was this [City Lore](#) anyway? I started digging online.

About the photo: Teaching Artist Hector Morales preparing for a student culmination in Latin percussion at P.S. 11 in Queens, NY.

The organization was established in 1985 by Steve Zeitlin as New York City's center for urban folk culture? What? It brought culturally rooted artists into public schools to share their traditions with over 10,000 young people? It ran City of Memory, a participatory, dynamic story map of New York City and the places that matter to ordinary people and their communities? My gasps widened. It had a poetry-bedecked POEMobile that projected poems onto buildings? And, wait, City Lore's office and gallery was just a few blocks from my apartment?! I had felt the same as I had as an undergraduate in college, when I first learned about Jean Toomer's seminal book Cane: Why hadn't I heard of this before? And, now that I had, my life couldn't possibly remain the same!

I am not the only one; nearly everyone I know who newly encounters City Lore and its deliciously unique projects feels the same way: Why haven't I heard of them before?! And how can I get involved?? Somehow City Lore is both nationally recognized and remains a hidden gem locally. For me, my life did transform that fateful summer of 2014. I was immediately hired as an intern for the Poetry Programs under Catherine Fletcher, who had conceived of Poetic Voices of the Muslim World and worked on extraordinary projects like the [People's Poetry Gathering](#), a biennial citywide festival of folk, ethnic, and literary poets. I then went on to work in arts education under Amanda Dargan, the incomparable folklorist who established City Lore's Education Programs and managed a cohort of over 40 teaching artists with cultural roots in Africa, Asia, Europe, and throughout the Americas, facilitating in-school residencies, performances, and professional learning workshops in folk, traditional, and community-based arts. Eleven years later, Amanda is retired, I direct the program, and it is City Lore's 40th anniversary.

No other organization in New York or the U.S. approaches culture and culturally rooted arts with this integrated approach that includes rich culturally based in-school and after-school programs for students and teachers; an acclaimed grassroots preservation program; a public gallery and rehearsal space for community-based arts and urban folk culture; a special focus on grassroots poetry traditions; and special projects that draw on a number of these strands. People have taken note. In 2016, City Lore received the Starr Award from the United Federation of Teachers and the NYC Association of Social Studies Teachers for our work in the City's public schools for 30 years. In 2018, City Lore became a Smithsonian Affiliate. In 2022, City Lore's Co-Director, Molly Garfinkel, was nominated for membership to the NY State Review Board for Historic Preservation. Now in this pivotal anniversary year, it's time not only for this gem to shine radiantly, but also for it to reflect on its long journey here. So I sat down with City Lore founder and Co-Director Steve Zeitlin and former Director of Education Programs Amanda Dargan for a conversation on how it all began, where we are now, and why it matters.

Sahar: *This year marks the 40th anniversary of City Lore as an institution. It was not long after City Lore was founded that you established the education program and brought folk arts into public schools. How did that come about? Can you take us back to how the education programs began?*



City Lore founder Steve Zeitlin

Steve: When I started City Lore in 1985, the field of public folklore was centered around the work of state folklorists. The National Endowment for the Arts Folk and Traditional Arts Program, led by Bess Lomax Hawes, had funded numerous state folklorists whose public programs focused primarily on state and community folk festivals. Folklorists would conduct fieldwork and surveys of folk artists and cultural traditions in a community, then bring the artists to present at a festival or public space like a library. We did that too, but we also expanded the range of folk arts we would document and present to include arts such as children's play and skateboarding and how they incorporated the built environment of the city as well as the occupational skills, knowledge, and artistry of high steel workers and subway workers. We also worked with artists like the photographers Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, who were documenting urban arts and artists including graffiti artists and break dancers. We were among the first nonprofits to focus solely on the folk and traditional arts of urban communities.

Making education a major program focus of a folklore nonprofit was pretty new at the time, and education continues to be one of City Lore's core programs along with Urban Culture, Grassroots Poetry, and Place Matters. Education is also our largest program, with multiple staff and a core of about 40 teaching artists. Many people outside the field think of folklore as being a very niche kind of thing, that it's mostly about traditional basket makers and fiddlers, for example. Before coming to New York City in 1982, when Amanda and I shared the job of Queens Borough folklorists through the Queens Council on the Arts, I had worked eight years on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. I created and directed the Family Folklore Program there where we interviewed festival goers about their family traditions. That program was rooted in the idea that everyone has folklore—because folklore is actually much bigger than traditional crafts and old-time music. It's as big as life itself. Folklore *is* life. It's all that's good in life.

Amanda: And the bad too! [both laugh]

Steve: So, when I founded City Lore, a major focus of our work was preservation and the idea that it is important to collaborate with communities to document and advocate for important sites that are endangered. And we also recognized from the beginning that it was important to go into schools and engage young people in exploring their own family and community traditions. Our original education model, which was the focus of most arts education programs provided by New York City nonprofits back in 1986, was primarily assembly hall performances. With Roberta Singer (the

late ethnomusicologist and longtime City Lore staff member), we contacted Arts Connection, a prominent arts education organization that has been serving New York City public schools since 1981. At that time, Arts Connection ran mostly fine arts programs, and we offered to provide folk and traditional artists from a wide range of cultures, for example, the No Name Gospel Singers and the Thunderbird Indian Dancers. So that's the model we started with.



City Lore Education Programs founder Amanda Dargan in a professional learning workshop for teachers, with teaching artist Lu Yu standing to her right

Amanda: I started working with City Lore in the early '90s on a joint project between City Lore and Bank Street College to develop a folk and traditional arts resource center for educators at the college, with initial funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. I worked with Nina Jaffe and Lonetta Gaines, both Bank Street faculty who were interested in folklore and arts education. Together we created a resource library and offered professional learning programs for teachers. We created a demonstration folk arts education program at a middle school that included both assembly hall performances and a series of guest artists to work with students in classrooms. We also created a newsletter for educators which we eventually expanded to feature not only the work of the center but also articles by folklorists and educators around the country, which we renamed *CARTS*, an acronym for Cultural Arts Resources for Teachers and Students. In 1993, when the space that housed the Center was sold, we moved to the City Lore offices on First Street on the Lower East Side. In 1996 we published the first issue of *CARTS*, which in the following year I began co-editing with Paddy Bowman, the Director of the newly formed National Task Force on Folk Arts in Education (now [Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education](#)). We also created the Culture Catalog where we sold books and recordings for educators interested in teaching through traditional arts and oral histories.

When I started working at City Lore, I couldn't replicate the model Steve and I had used at Queens Council on the Arts where the folklorist is the primary teacher introducing a new guest artist every

week. It is hard to manage that model in more than one or two schools, and City Lore had three school partners at that time. You certainly couldn't do it with the 25 or more school partners that City Lore has currently, even with the larger education staff that we have now. It would demand all of your time. At City Lore, I started providing professional learning experiences for both folk and traditional artists and for artists with a fine arts background who were interested in teaching students through folk and community based arts. We began running arts residency programs led by teaching artists from a wide range of backgrounds. This allowed me to tailor the program to each school's student population and to the interests and subjects taught by the classroom teachers. I discovered that I really loved the work of co-creating a team of teachers and artists who worked well together. I also enjoyed co-designing artist residencies that met the needs of individual teachers and their students as well as the school's curriculum requirements. It was very rewarding when the whole school got excited and engaged in the program.

I like to use jazz as a model for what a good artist residency can be. We work together by agreeing on some constraints (theme, length, art forms, structure) and then encourage everyone (artists, teachers, students) to contribute or to improvise on the theme. A good example of whole school engagement was an artist residency at an elementary school that focused on roles artists played in disseminating the ideas of the Mexican Revolution. The residency brought together a group of wonderful teaching and guest artists whom students also interviewed that included a dance theater artist, father and daughter Mexican traditional dance artists who also taught the history of the revolution, and a guest visual artist who talked about her father's friendship with Diego Rivera and how Rivera depicted the history and social struggles of the Mexican people in his murals. She also engaged students in examining closely Rivera's mural, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alemeda Central Park*. Another teaching artist working for the arts education organization DreamYard offered to use her residency to engage students in painting a version of the mural as a backdrop for their performance. The school's music teacher taught lessons on the corridos of the Mexican Revolution and the art teacher taught classes on films of the Revolution. As one student said, "Everybody here is doing the Mexican Revolution!"

***Sahar:** Interviewing is really the heart of our arts education programs—it's one of our main tools for documenting and artmaking. In fact, this year, we asked all our City Lore teaching artists to integrate interviewing into their residencies, and it's wonderful to see the different ways they've done that, from a spoken word and beatboxing residency where students interviewed one another for persona poems to a Bharatanatyam dance residency where students interviewed a third-generation dancer. What do you love about interviews?*

Amanda: I do love interviewing, and I love teaching students and teachers and artists to interview, because it's such a wonderful skill and useful tool that students can use throughout their lives. A student once called me "the interview lady," a title I am happy to claim. Most students don't have opportunities to do original research and work with primary sources until they are in college or graduate school, so doing interviews and fieldwork in their communities and city is very exciting for them, and for their teachers. Interviewing uses so many important skills that support students' learning and thinking. It gives students opportunities to practice close listening as well as close looking, knowing how to ask generative questions and good follow-up questions, knowing how to pause and give the person you are interviewing time to think, telling your own story and retelling someone else's story, how to edit and interpret interviews, and more. Knowing how to give a good

interview is also a skill students will need when they start applying for jobs or when they are interviewed for a school or local newspaper, so we work on that as well. Even children as young as five can participate in an interview. In my experience, students quickly get “the interview bug,” as we call it, and they want to interview everyone—their parents and grandparents, their teachers, the local baker, their teaching artist, and each other.

When I first started working in City Lore’s partner schools, we would often begin our artist residency programs by asking students, “Who is somebody you see almost every day, but you don’t know anything about their life?” So together we would select someone to interview and invite them to the classroom, or if they worked somewhere in the neighborhood we might interview them there. Then students would work with their teaching artist to interpret the interview through a collaborative art project. At P.S. 11 in Queens, for example, teaching artist Leo Schaff, a singer songwriter, worked with students to interview the security guard and compose a song about her. I still remember some of the lines, especially, “Miss Jovita /You should meet her/ No one neater/ Than Jovita.” After the students performed the song, I saw Jovita wrap her arms around a group of students and say, “This is the highlight of my career!” And I have no doubt that she meant it. Jovita told us that for the rest of the school year, students would sing those lines when they passed her at the entrance to the school. (You can hear [“Jovita’s Song”](#) on [City Lore’s SoundCloud](#), which features several recordings from songwriting residencies.)

I think interviewing awakens students’ curiosity and interest in learning more about the people and places they see every day. Several students have told us that they learned things about their own parents that they didn’t know before. We use a wonderful interview activity that our teaching artist George Zavala introduced to us, where we pair students off and give them a prompt to think about for a few minutes before sharing their story with a partner. For example, a prompt might be, “Share a story about a time you had to leave someone or a place that you thought you might never see again.” Each person tells their story for two minutes, while their partner listens without asking any questions. Then they switch. Afterward, we have them retell their partner’s story to the class—not their own. So they realize that they have to listen carefully to recall their partner’s story. We also use this activity to talk about the ethics of interviewing someone and sharing their story publicly through a recording or interpreted in an art project. So when one person shares the other person’s story, we instruct them to say, “Did I leave anything out, or did I get anything wrong that you want to correct?” Sometimes we have two classes interview the same person separately so that they can compare the differences between their interviews based on the questions they asked. You can see City Lore’s interview guide, including the interview activity, as well as interview-based lessons by City Lore teaching artists in the 2019 issue of Local Learning’s *Journal of Folklore and Education* on [Art of the Interview](#).

Ethnographic fieldwork, interviewing, and documentation are core to what folklorists do, and Steve and I are both folklorists. We weren’t trained to be educators. But I feel very grateful that I had wonderful teachers to guide me along the way. I did take one education course with Shirley Brice Heath at the University of Pennsylvania, where I got my doctorate in folklore, and I worked with her on a year-long project when I observed a middle school in New Jersey. I learned a lot about observation and conducting ethnographic fieldwork in schools as an outsider from that experience.



Teaching Artist Yahya Kamate in a West African dance residency at P.S./M.S. 4 in the Bronx.

At City Lore we have worked with Dennie Palmer Wolf as our outside evaluator for many years. She has taught us not only about how to better observe students and teachers in classrooms and to understand school culture, but also how to describe what we do in terms that educators will understand. We are fortunate in New York to have a large number of organizations, over 600 I think, who provide arts education services in the city's schools, and we meet annually to learn and to share ideas as well as talk about joys and challenges of this work.

Our extraordinary teaching artists, many of whom learned their art informally, were also my teachers. I learned from Lu Yu that students remember their lines and entrances in a play better if you give them sole responsibility rather than a script. From George Zavala and Yahya Kamate I learned multiple strategies to engage shy or resistant students. And from Dionne Kamara I learned the value of multi-sensory teaching and learning. At City Lore, we encourage the teaching artists to share how they learned their art in an artist letter to students before the residency starts, when they first introduce themselves to students, and throughout the residency in stories and examples from their own experiences.

Before I retired, City Lore's Education Department and a group of ten artists co-curated an exhibit that featured those artists and how they learned their arts informally in family, community, peer settings, or mentor-mentee relationships. The exhibit title, *Parampara*, a Sanskrit word for lineage, referred to the modes of learning an art form through oral tradition. We identified seven modes in the interviews we conducted with the artists, including imitation, deferred participation, learning secretly through observation and an outside helper, communal learning with peers, informal learning in families, and master-apprentice or mentor-mentee relationships. We invited visitors to: "Explore each artist's tools, stories, and tributes to their teachers and to reflect on your own experiences of learning outside of institutional settings. What values are embedded in these transmission methods? What can we—as artists, as educators, as community and family members—learn from these modes of learning? We invite viewers to consider the implications and applications of how these traditional learning methods for teaching the arts might be applied in institutional education settings, such as schools, as well as in our families and communities."



Joann Cassianos, recently retired arts specialist and arts liaison supporting students in a weaving residency at P.S. 11 in Queens, NY.

Over the years, I've consulted with folk arts and history organizations that want to incorporate education into their programming, and when they ask me what is most important, I say, "Spend time observing in the classroom." If you don't have a program yet, find other organizations that will allow you to observe their artist residencies. When I directed the Education Programs, I tried to spend time every week observing our teaching artists in their classrooms. For me, it is the most satisfying part of this work because you see what students are learning and creating, and you observe the different ways that each artist teaches as well as how they draw on their experiences and cultural backgrounds. You also learn what is working well and what is not.

Over the years, so many teachers thanked us for bringing an artist to their classroom because "I don't know anything about art." We encourage teachers to participate in the documentation and artmaking along with their students and to try co-teaching with their teaching artist, in order to boost their confidence in teaching through the arts. I want the students and the teachers we work with to understand that folk and traditional arts often invite participation at any level—that you don't have to engage with the arts only as an audience member. I want them to experience the joy of artmaking and the excitement of discovery through documentation and to continue to use what they have learned throughout their lives.

Steve: As I look forward to celebrating City Lore's 40th anniversary, I'm excited about the next few exhibits. [Legendary Looks: Preserving Our Legacy](#) documents and presents the LGBTQ House Ballroom traditions in New York and beyond in collaboration with Arts Westchester. Next we open an exhibit that takes us back to our beginnings, highlighting Martha Cooper, City Lore's staff photographer through much of our history, along with the iconoclastic Clayton Patterson, who has documented our neighborhood of the Lower East Side in photographs for decades. Like [our previous shows](#) on the Rumberos of Central Park, African American Dollmakers, and our Place Matters show on lesbian bars and pioneers in the '70s and 80s, we are on a never-ending journey to shine a light on the City's subcultures and myriad communities. It's been our honor to meet and get to know so many inimitable and peerless New York City icons for so many years along folklore's yellow brick road.

URLs

City Lore <https://citylore.org>

Poetic Voices from the Muslim World <https://poetshouse.org/programs-events/national-projects/bridging-cultures-poetic-voices-of-the-muslim-world/>

People's Poetry Gathering <https://citylore.org/grassroots-poetry/peoples-poetry-gathering>

Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education <https://locallearningnetwork.org>

Jovita's Song https://soundcloud.com/city_lore/jovitas-song?in=city_lore/sets/p-s-11-songwriting-residency

City Lore's SoundCloud https://soundcloud.com/city_lore/albums

2019 *Journal of Folklore and Education* <https://jfepublications.org/journal/vol-6>

Parampara Exhibit <https://citylore.org/education/our-work/parampara-exhibit/>

Legendary Looks <https://citylore.org/events/legendary-looks-preserving-our-legacy>

City Lore's past exhibits <https://citylore.org/about-the-gallery/past-exhibits/>
