



# LYNN WARSHAFSKY DRAWS UPON “CREATIVE JUSTICE”

A story of heritage and art

BY BETTY BAILEY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM DIEPHUIS



Venice's Lynn Warshafsky knows the power of story. As a clinical psychologist, she's worked with it on a daily basis. Story is also at the heart of her work as Founder and Executive Director of the nonprofit Venice Arts. "It's how we create culture," she says. "How we understand ourselves and how we understand other people in our societies and everything around us. Without story, we can't organize our world, understand our lives, understand other people or use our imaginations."

Warshafsky's own story began in Wisconsin, where she graduated high school at age 15 and joined the student body at the University of Wisconsin. After a year, she wanted a change so she transferred to the Johnston College, which is now the University of Redlands, about 2 hours east of Los Angeles. "I was interested in experimental colleges — schools that were innovative in their structure and in a warm climate," she says. "And I knew I wanted to go to a much smaller school. It kind of fit the bill in all those ways."

Her focus was in the social sciences — psychology and women's studies — but she was also in touch with her creative side. "I was a passionate young photographer," she explains. "In the creative space, my mother was active in community theater and art. That was always a part of our life. I was always interested in the psychology of creativity — how it is expressed and developed."

She followed this dream to Antioch University, then based at 2nd and Rose, to earn her Master's in Clinical Psychology. That's when she discovered Venice. "Being from Wisconsin, being able to live near the beach in a super creative community that I could afford was really appealing to me," she says. Warshafsky settled into the community and, in 1986, purchased a house.

Even in the 1980s, Venice was a town of contrasts, with a range of income levels, races and immigration statuses. It also had a bustling artist community. "It sometimes seemed as if every extra space was converted to an artist's studio," she says. "There was this huge and thriving artist community but there was no real intersection with kids living in poverty. There were limited resources for poor and low-income kids."

Warshafsky describes what she saw as a lack of, "creative justice." "Equity doesn't only have to do with jobs and housing and access to services," she explains. "It also has to do with those people and spaces that develop your creative being. All kids should have that — it should be available to all young people."

Warshafsky says this awareness was part of her very fabric — she had grown up in a family that was politically and socially active. "It was in my mother's milk so to speak — concerns about other human beings, social justice, the war in Vietnam, racism," she says.



"These were formative experiences that taught me about contributing to the greater good."

She worked as a clinical psychologist but the needs of the community were tugging at her heart. "I wanted to break out of the intimacy of that one-on-one kind of work and use the skill to contribute to my broader community," she says.

To extend her reach, Warshafsky began consulting for various groups and organizations. "I really enjoyed bringing my clinical skills and knowledge to an organizational setting," she says. "I started to build a consulting business — consulting with nonprofits, foundations and areas of the public sector."

Her roots in the Venice community were growing deeper at a time when artists were flourishing but funding for the arts in local schools was drying up. Warshafsky and other locals decided to help fill the gap. They gathered a group of local artists, who were skilled in visual storytelling, and started a workshop for kids. "We were really interested in how young people could express themselves creatively and tell their stories through their own eyes," Warshafsky says.

### **"Without story, we can't organize our world"**

They chose kids from neighborhoods that were frequently represented in one-dimensional ways — often with images of poverty and violence — and taught them how to use a single-lens reflex camera. They encouraged the kids to take a deep look at their own worlds, explore their cultures, and to share their stories through the camera. "Giving a kid a camera was really a radical concept," Warshafsky says. "It was 1993 — there was no digital media."

It was during these pioneering efforts that she met Jim Hubbard, a photographer and journalist who would become her life partner. "He was a photojournalist with UPI at the time," Warshafsky says. "Part of the presidential press pool, and making personal work about the growing poverty, family evictions, and homelessness in the DC area. We were very much inspired by his work."

Hubbard's series *Homeless in America* had earned him the 1988 Leica Award for Excellence. He was also the first photographer to receive the National Child Labor Committee's Lewis Hine Distinguished Service Award and received three Pulitzer Prize nominations. "He is considered a pioneer in what is now known as *participatory* or *participant-produced* photography, having first worked with homeless young people living in the DC area in the 1980s," Warshafsky says. "Teaching them to use the camera to be the creators of their



own visual stories, rather than the subjects, solely. This evolved into a renowned youth documentary photo organization called *Shooting Back*."

Warshafsky says Venice artists gave their all. "Putting money out of their own pockets, all of our artists volunteered," Warshafsky explains. "They would open their doors to teach the kids. They opened their studios, the old Venice library, basement space — people were very generous."

She describes Venice Arts as a natural evolution. "In the earliest days, we were all volunteers," she says. "An art space for kids was kind of a dream in the minds of a small group of community members. I was one of them."

Her name may be at the top of the roster but Warshafsky says, "It was a community effort. There were key leaders in the organization who were really building the programs and the board. An individual might get acknowledgment but they rarely do things alone. That's certainly the case here."

The participant-produced work they started with is still part of their programs today. "We kind of honed our focus on story-based forms of art," she says. "It took that form because of my interests in photo and storytelling. It's a part of the world I grew up in."

Her parents, both first generation Americans, met at the University of Wisconsin. Her dad was from Chicago and her mom grew up in New Jersey. Warshafsky was raised on the stories of her grandparents, all of whom were immigrants. "In brain science, we learn that storytelling is intrinsic to the human experience," she says. "It's essential to process meaning. Things we're trying to grapple with in very profound ways, we process that through story in ways that we don't even feel like we're doing it. It's so powerful. In making meaning, story is how we do that."

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Simply hearing stories is only part of the equation. Warshafsky says sharing your own stories with the world is equally important. "For me, creativity is the powerful sister of storytelling," she says. "The opportunity to be in your own creative process, your own creative flow — whatever you call it — with imagination and experimentation. It's also fundamental to what it means to be a human being."



“To look deeply within, and to communicate out stories in a creative way — I’ve seen, time and time again, how transforming that process is. On a personal and intimate level, being able to articulate your own lived experience is very powerful for an individual.”

Story remains the focus of her work, which expands beyond Venice. She’s served on the Youth Media Steering Committee of National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC), and as a board officer of the Social Change Institute. She’s been involved with the California Alliance for Arts Education and the National Guild for Community Arts Education.

Warshafsky says she stepped back from many of her Venice-specific activities, like the Venice Neighborhood Council, before the couple’s daughter Sofie was born 21-years ago. “My work kind of consumes most of my time,” she says. “I still keep a small consulting process. It feeds me in a different way.”

She still finds time to enjoy local events, like the Masters in the Chapel concerts at Venice’s Lutheran Church. “Their church has beautiful acoustics,” she says. “Not only is the music really lovely, I can see tons of people that I know — newcomers and old timers alike. You connect and find that community — we’re social animals, it’s a hard thing to break from.”

A self-described “avid theater goer,” Warshafsky has been a member of the nearby Kirk Douglas Theater. “I love live performance and I love theater,” she says. “I like to think that some of my mother’s passion for acting and theater has influenced my daughter.”

Sofie, who was once the co-president of the theater department at SAMOHI, is a recent graduate of The New School in New York City,

with degrees in Global Studies and Theater. “She has been in New York for the past three-and-a-half years and she moved home,” Warshafsky explains. “She loves what everyone loves about New York but also really hates what everyone hates about it.”

These days, Hubbard is putting his skills as a photojournalist and documentary-producer to work in academia. In 2007, he joined the adjunct faculty at USC, where he teaches Visual Communication and Social Change. The class examines the effectiveness of photography in the digital age and its role in raising awareness.

As for Sofie’s future plans, the possibilities are wide open. “Acting, writing, directing or being an attorney — she’s trying to sort that out,” her mom says. In the meantime, she’s had some interesting internships and classes. “Her theater classes were in the federal jail in lower Manhattan,” Warshafsky says. “Half of the students were inmates and half were students from her school. She also had a really profound internship with the ACLU in their jails project.”

However, like her parents, Sofie has strong ties to the local beach community. “She considers herself old Venice,” Warshafsky says. “She was there before a lot of the gentrification. She remembers enough of it and knows it through our stories.”

In today’s Venice, Warshafsky says she enjoys biking every day and being near the water. “Being a 10-minute walk to the beach is a very good thing,” she says. “I love the beach, I love to swim, and that sense of awe at the beauty — there’s so much natural beauty around us and accessible to us. I built my life here. The rhythms of life just become part of who you are.”