

Toronto's Lola Rasminsky of Arts for Children and Youth wins National "Local Hero" Award

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Toronto, Ontario – Lola Rasminsky's uncomfortable feeling that only children with the financial resources to afford art classes led her to create free instruction in the arts for 40,000 children in Toronto's under-served neighbourhoods. Her efforts have earned her national recognition and the Canadian Urban Institute's 2009 Local Hero Award to be presented June 5 in Toronto at the Urban Leadership Awards.

"Lola Rasminsky has taught us that children from our poorer communities can discover and enjoy art and they can use those talents to give something back, making our neighbourhoods and the City of Toronto a better place for all of us to live," said CUI President and CEO Glen Murray.

About 500 elite members of Canada's who's who of city building will gather in Toronto on June 5 at the Royal York Hotel to honour Lola Rasminsky (<http://www.artsforchildren.org/>) and 17 other groups and individuals (www.canurb.com/awards/ula/leadershipawards2009.php) across the country that are making Canadian cities exciting and dynamic places to live and work.

Rasminsky's vision for the non-profit group, Art for Children (now Arts for Children and Youth) was created shortly after she started the Avenue Road Arts School in 1993.

"I wasn't comfortable with the fact that only kids who could afford it could benefit from private art classes. So I started a scholarship program to remove any financial restrictions on who could attend. I soon recognized that we'd reach many more kids if we took the art to them," said Rasminsky.

Today Arts for Children and Youth (AFCY) has made long term commitments to seven of Toronto's priority neighbourhoods, sending artists into schools and offering after-school programs in these communities. The art instruction often focuses on creating large scale pieces such as murals in school libraries and lunchrooms – lasting and transformational artwork that children and youth can feel proud of, for years and years. For three years, AFCY will partner with the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) to engage youth in the creation of murals that will be mounted on the sides of buses that travel in and out of their neighbourhoods.

"The lesson is that we have no idea how gifted and capable a lot of our young people are. Too often we only see a negative side of youth. I believe that if more at-risk youth were given a chance to develop their talents, we'd have safer cities. Engaging youth in artmaking really does make a difference to our entire city," Rasminsky said.

The Urban Leadership Awards (ULA) Program honours Canadian individuals, groups and organizations that have made significant contributions to improving the quality of life in Canada's cities and urban regions. The 2009 ULA's have been made possible by the generous support of a variety of corporate sponsors including Gold Sponsors - Loblaw Properties Ltd., Scotiabank, TD Bank Financial Group, the Ontario Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, Environics, the City of Toronto, GE Canada and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Community Builder Sponsors include Toronto Hydro, Local 27 of the Union of Carpenters and Allied Workers, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Great West Life, London Life and Canada Life Assurance Companies.

The judges for this year's awards included Canadians who have dedicated their lives to public service and who have detailed knowledge of the local stories and triumphs of Canadians in their home communities. Under the chairmanship of the Honourable David Crombie, the committee included; Al Duerr, former Mayor of Calgary; Newfoundland's Dr. Linda Inkpen; Dr. Antonia Maioni, Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada; John Kim Bell, founder of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation; Ms. Mitzie Hunter, a Vice President at Goodwill Industries; and, Dr. Nola Kate Seymoar, President and CEO, International Centre for Sustainable Cities, based in British Columbia.

The Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of life in urban areas across Canada and throughout the world.

For more information or interviews:

Janis Lynch, Manager Urban Leadership Awards, Canadian Urban Institute
p: 416.365.0816, ext 283, c. 416-986-1771, email: jlynch@canurb.com

Lola Rasminsky, Toronto, Ontario
p. 416-961-5343, email: lolar@rogers.com

Some Facts about Art for Children and Youth (AFCY)

AFCY's core mission is to ally with communities in providing accessible, artistic opportunities for children and youth from underserved communities, enabling them to discover their own capabilities through quality, hands-on programming.

AFCY provides:

- High quality hands-on workshops in visual art, drama, music and dance, film making, digital photography and dub poetry conducted by professional artists.
- Professional Development workshops for teachers and community coordinators/educators.

The following groups are eligible to participate in the Outreach Programs:

- schools and organizations in low-income areas of the Greater Toronto Area with limited access to arts programming
- not-for-profit organizations that service children and youth with financial, social and language barriers.