

My Story

THE LONG VERSION

From a very early age, I was fortunate enough to experience the unifying power of music. Through my first true mentor and teacher, Michele Higa George, my violin and I were afforded the priceless opportunity of traveling to many corners of the earth to make music. The universal language of the art became very apparent to me on these trips. During performances at the Pittsburgh High School for Creative and Performing Arts, I was greatly inspired by working with people of diverse backgrounds across various artistic channels to create powerful performances that drew everyone together—directors, performers, and audience members alike.

Upon graduating from Vanderbilt University (Nashville, Tennessee, USA) in 2005 with a Bachelors Degree in Violin Performance, I decided to try my hand at forging the powerful connections of music myself. I moved to Arusha, Tanzania in East Africa to teach violin with hopes of doing something broader with people and the arts there. What happened in Arusha was bigger than I could ever imagine – the whole community was ready for a place where children and adults alike could come and make music, and art, together. [Umoja Music School, Community Arts Trust, and Umoja Arts Project \(U.S.\)](#) were born out of this need and have continued to grow and evolve since 2006.

During my time in Africa, my work was stretched far beyond that of a classical violinist, and while my music grew and stretched across genres and mediums through various collaborations, my skills as a social entrepreneur, organizational leader, mentor, cultural ambassador and advocate for the arts began to develop, rising to meet the needs of the job I had created for myself.

In 2010, I began to feel the need to further develop this plethora of skills I was required to use on a daily basis, and I knew that going back to school would be a great way to do it. In 2011, I moved to London to pursue a [Master of Music Leadership degree at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama](#). During my time in London, I collaborated with dancers, visual artists, filmmakers, poets, and technologists. I worked with young people in primary and secondary schools, with elderly groups, with homeless and recovering addicts, with women victims of trafficking, mother and baby groups and the disabled. My work took me from the Barbican Centre to community centers and from Wigmore Hall and BBC Studios to schools, hospitals and care homes in East London. I learned how to research and use inquiry as a starting point for new work in collaborations. I learned how to reflect and evolve as a constant part of artistic practice. I learned how to be open and how to say yes to new ideas that are not my own. These experiences changed me, my work, and my artistic path forever. I graduated with my Master of Music Leadership from the Guildhall School in 2013.

After finishing up in London, I returned to Tanzania for a year and decided it was time to be closer to home and family. After nearly 10 years away from the U.S. and 14 years away from Pittsburgh, I am back in my hometown! I am currently working as a freelance musician, multimedia artist, creative workshop leader and teaching artist as well as running the U.S. non-profit branch of Umoja Arts Project. I live in Squirrel Hill with my partner, Gil Teixeira. When we are not working, we enjoy being outdoors, biking, and preparing and enjoying nice meals together.

the short version!

Liza Barley's work is driven by her belief that the arts are a powerful medium through which to connect people from all walks of life, empower communities, and charge individuals to think creatively. Liza works as a freelance musician and multimedia artist, creative workshop leader, and teaching artist, and is the founder and executive director of Umoja Arts Project, a U.S.-based non-profit that works in the community arts sector both in the U.S. and in Tanzania, East Africa. She lives in Pittsburgh, PA with her partner, Gil Teixeira, and enjoys running, hiking, biking, gardening, generally being outdoors, cooking, and a good cup of coffee.