

SNL offers activism class

by Stephanie Ratanas

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This Spring Quarter, students in the School for New Learning (SNL) have had the opportunity to take a class that will show them how to bring creativity into their professional lives; the course entitled "How to be a Cultural Activist" is offered for the first time at DePaul.

Tom Tresser, who brings the course to the school, has been involved in creative activism for many years. He is a former Shakespearean actor turned theatre producer turned community organizer. Tresser has been in Chicago since 1980 but left the theatre in 1990 as a result of the cultural wars when conservative, right-wing religious groups were attacking the National Endowment for the Arts, objecting to a few grants that were made for certain artists whose work they found objectionable.

"I was taken by surprise ... why were these groups so vehement in hating the arts? The National Endowment for the Arts is such a tiny amount of money, it's a rounding error in the federal budget," said Tresser, "I got into this idea of, what is the role of art and creativity in the life of the nation, and who's sticking up for it?"

The artists and creative professionals that Tresser knew were pretty politically uninvolved. He said that there were individuals who were working for a candidate, or working on some issues but as a field or industry, the artistic world was mostly helpless in the political sense.

In response to this, Tresser worked to start a Center for Arts and Cultural Policy in the early 90s at Roosevelt University, as well as teach a class on arts and public policy. Over the past two years, he has been working on getting artists and creative professionals to run for local office through something called the Creative America project.

Tresser had been thinking about how to make a class out of this, and a few years ago he approached Michael DeAngelis in the SNL who helped him understand the school so he could create something that would benefit non-traditional students; he put in a proposal and was accepted. Tresser emphasized that The SNL is a great place for non-traditional classes like this.



"There are 17 students, [and] it's an interesting group of students. These are all adult learners and some of them are people enrolled who are just pursuing learning just because they love learning and it's not attached to an agenda or their careers," said Tresser. "Others are there because they need to get some skills to try and develop their careers, others are exploring their future, they're working but they're making space to decide 'well, maybe I'm going to change my career.'"

The class has formed four teams that are each looking at one issue and one organization in Chicago. The issues the students have selected are: freedom of expression; diversity and the gay marriage act; immigration; and funding of arts education in Illinois. The students work on getting familiar with the issues, what they mean

and who they affect and then explain to the class what the issue is about. They are then required to explain the organization that is working on that issue and eventually visit the organization to see them in action.

"This class has so far broadened my viewpoints on many issues, specifically by enabling me to explore and discover the importance of strategy, planning, goals, different forms of action, the effectiveness of such strategies and so forth," said Lori Vieri, senior social work student in the School of New Learning and student in the class. "All these tools will be beneficial in any future endeavor, even as they are helpful in my journey as a student at the present time."

The class is held Monday nights, but, so far, has been far from a normal three hour lecture experience.

"I tried to mix the experiences in the past, this class contains not just me lecturing, but we have guest performers and guest experts," said Tresser.

Two weeks ago, guest performers from "Billionaires for Bush" visited the class to present. BFB are volunteer performers who use street theatre for social protest against politicians who support corporate interests at the expense of the general American public.

The week before that the class watched a video on the "Yes Men," two men who are also activists working in the area of globalization. The "Yes Men" pretend to be members of the World Trade Organization and will show up around the world and give outrageous presentation on topics like capitalism, or bringing back slavery, and because they are perceived to be representatives of a great powerful body, government officials will nod their heads at their satirical performances while everything is video taped and documented.

This week, the class will hear from a female rapper and activist, who will talk to the class about the politics of hip-hop.

Tresser said that many of the students have expressed that they would like to be involved in activism some more when the class ends, not necessarily as a profession but to be more involved as citizens.

"Hopefully when students go off and they get involved in whatever they choose to get involved with, they'll be more effective and more creative," Tresser said.

Tom Tresser is a consultant, producer, educator and trainer who can help individuals, companies and communities leverage and amplify their creative assets in order to solve problems, create economic value and trigger civic engagement. Tom has been a long-time advocate for an increased appreciation for the role of creativity in the life of the community. In 1991 he started an organization that organized artists and cultural workers for political activism and taught "Arts and Public Policy" at Roosevelt University, where he organized a center for the study of cultural policy. Tom was Director Cultural Development at Peoples Housing, a nonprofit community development corporation operating in northeast Chicago, where he organized a community arts program that combined culture and economic development. Tom served as lead organizer for the Chicago Park District for two years in a pilot project that transformed a major regional park into a community cultural center. In April 2004, Tom was elected to a two-year term for the Local School Council for the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. He lectures on "The Politics of Creativity" and conducts leadership training sessions for artists and creative professionals. He teaches classes on arts and civic engagement at DePaul University and Loyola University.



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