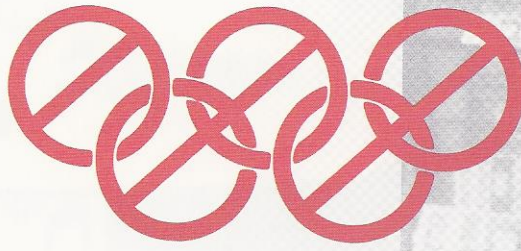


KARINA CORONA



GAME OVER

WHEN CHICAGO WENT FOR GOLD,
ACTIVISTS CALLED FOUL



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2009

It's about 9 a.m. and Ben Joravsky is battling rush hour traffic on his way to Washington Park on Chicago's South Side for the International Olympic Committee's announcement about whether Chicago will remain a possible host for the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. After two years of reporting for the Chicago Reader on Chicago's Olympic bid, Joravsky can't believe it still might happen.

Meanwhile, in Denmark, Tom Tresser is resting in his hotel room. The co-founder of No Games Chicago had spent the past days protesting Chicago's 2016 Olympic bid—the culmination of years of work by him and countless volunteers. He turns on the television to watch International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge announce the first city to lose its place among the finalists.

SERIOUS GAMES

Athletes aren't the only ones who compete at the Olympics. Host cities have a struggle of their own—surviving the crippling debt of winning an Olympic bid. And if history has taught us anything, the host city never wins any medals.

First they must compete to host the games. In 2009, Chicago was caught up in pro-host propaganda—the culmination of a two-year campaign to bring the world's top athletes to the Midwest. This effort had many prominent supporters, including Mayor Richard M. Daley, Oprah Winfrey and President Barack Obama. "I love and believe in Chicago, and I think it would be the perfect host city for the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games," Winfrey was quoted saying in the Huffington Post in November 2009. But she and other celebrity backers were distracted by the gleam of Olympic gold far too soon.

The glamour of winning the bid overshadows the economic and environmental destruction that plague host cities. According to an analysis by Christopher Shaw, author of "Five Ring Circus: Myths and Realities of the Olympic Games," only one of the 13 Olympic Summer Games held between 1964 and 2012 made a profit. Beijing and Sochi are the latest countries to have vastly overspent on the games.

According to a report by Lee M. Sands for China Business Review, China spent \$40 billion between 2002 and 2006 on infrastructure reconstruction, \$200 million on "urban renewal" (which included the demolition of homes and historic sites), and \$3.6 billion in an effort to turn Beijing into a "digital city." Sochi was the most expensive winter Olympics ever, with a final price of over \$51 billion dollars—

nearly eight times what Vancouver spent in 2010.

In addition to the economic toll, many residents suffer from displacements, even here in the U.S. According to the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, gentrification associated with the Atlanta Olympic games caused the demolition of 2,000 public housing units, displacing nearly 6,000 impoverished residents. This Olympic effect led the quarterly magazine Ceasefire to issue a "special report" on April 12, 2012 titled, "Want to cleanse your city of its poor? Host the Olympics."

"Put all the publications and reports together from past [Olympics] and it turns into this pretty awful story of financial misery and greed and corruption and just horrible policy," Tresser says.

SECOND CITY

This wasn't the Windy City's first close call with hosting the Olympics. In 1952, Chicago lost the bid during the first round to Helsinki, Finland, and in 1956, to Melbourne, Australia. The closest Chicago ever got to hosting the Olympics was in 1904, but it lost to St. Louis. However, things looked better for the 2016 Olympics. Chicago offered a rowing course in Monroe Harbor, a velodrome in Douglas Park, field hockey fields in Jackson Park, and an Olympic stadium in Washington Park; the Olympic Village would have been built on the site of the former Michael Reese Hospital. And it was now down to Chicago and Rio.

Tresser, a longtime organizer and activist who has, among other things, opposed privatization of Chicago's parklands, knew that the Olympics would come at no fair price for Chicago's public spaces and its residents. He was certain that if Chicago won the 2016 Olympic games, it would come at the cost of building on public parklands and displacing poor residents. "Chicago has a terrible record of corruption," Tresser says.

On Sept. 14, 2007, when the IOC announced that Chicago was a candidate for hosting the 2016 Summer Olympics, these issues weren't widely known. To many Chicagoans, this sounded like a great opportunity to boost tourism, civic morale and the economy. Tresser and Joravsky were among the few to sound the alarm.

"Chicago's bid for the Olympics would have destroyed most of our parks. That's where the venues were going to be built," Tresser says. "Stadiums and other facilities were going to be built on public parklands when it's not really the Olympic Committee's to own or desecrate. These lands are owned and entrusted to the public."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOM TRESSER

In fact, the land grab had already begun. The construction of Olympic Village—the \$1 billion building where athletes would have been housed—would have displaced a number of Chicago residents. After the Olympics, the land would have been sold to a private developer, who would have erected luxury condos and apartments. The price of housing would have raised the market value in the neighborhood beyond affordability for residents currently there.

THE OPPOSITION

Posters from the No Games Chicago campaign are still on the walls in Tresser's open office space at Civic Lab, a co-working space located in Chicago's West Loop. "Welcome to Civic Lab," says Tresser, a full-time promoter of civic engagement and part-time educator at DePaul University, with a voice that carries throughout the office space—the voice heard in Copenhagen during the 2009 Summer Olympic bid.

Tresser and architect Robert Quellos founded No Games Chicago at a rally of 250 people on Jan. 2, 2009. The organization was made up of volunteers, who researched the effects the Olympics would have on the city and put together a 150-page report. Some of their information was provided by a secret, inside source—a "deep throat" who has yet to be identified. On Oct. 2, 2009, Tresser and two other volunteers went to Denmark to share their report with the IOC.

"We're talking about an expenditure of over \$10 billion at least," Tresser says of the findings in the report. "They were talking about sectioning off a lane of Lake Shore Drive for when the Olympics actually started. Can you imagine a piece of Lake Shore Drive being closed for eight weeks? You would think that there would be debates and public forums and discussions up and down the city."

So, just who would have benefitted from this big budgeted bid? The report documented this, too. While the Chicago bid organizers projected the games would bring 300,000 new jobs, there was no real proof to make this number tangible.

"There weren't any jobs, so the irony was that some of the poorest groups thought they were going to get something, but in reality they were going to get nothing," Tresser says. "Very smart people were either suckered or scared into saying, 'Yes. If the Olympics come to Chicago, my community will get jobs.'"

In fact, there was never any evidence that the Olympics would actually create a significant number of jobs or bring in enough money to pay for its costs. Rather, it would leave the city in debt and locked into a seven-year privatization deal with Olympic contractors.

Joravsky has nearly 20 years of political reporting, much of it for the weekly Chicago Reader, whose tagline is "Kickin' ass since 1971." He wrote several articles filled with facts about the consequences of hosting the Olympics. But he was trying to convince readers to go against the Daley-driven Olympic craze, which proved a challenge.

"What Mayor Daley did was to essentially get City Council to sign a blank check. It was one outrageous claim after another," Joravsky says. "They kept saying that they were going to build a swimming pool in a park that could then be moved and used in another, and I didn't believe any of that. I thought they were making it all up as they were going."

Although it was clear to him how outrageous Mayor Daley's claims and numbers were, there appeared to be a small number of people publicly standing against the Olympic bid. Even most local media were supportive.



"Put all the publications and reports together from past [Olympics] and it turns into this pretty awful story of [redacted] and [redacted] and just horrible policy,"

"There are a number of media companies who are listed as both financial givers and givers of services," Tresser says. "This is our media, you know? You would hope that the local media would do their jobs and report, but how could that be when the local media were backing the bid?"

A Chicago Tribune poll reported that roughly 53 percent of Chicagoans were in favor of the Olympics coming to their city. However, that changed once a follow-up poll asked whether Chicagoans wanted to pay for the Olympics. Then 80 percent were opposed.

MEDIA SCRUTINY

"All of these things were great on paper, but we have to look at the history," says Martin Macias, Jr., a journalist for a community radio station in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. "And the history of Chicago is that there is a lot of corruption, there is a lot of cost overruns for construction jobs, and there are a lot of major projects that have experienced delays and extra costs that have fallen on taxpayers."

Macias invited some of the organizers of No Games Chicago as guests on his program. "The conversation that we had when I interviewed them really pushed me to get involved not just as a journalist, but as an activist," he says. He joined Tresser on the trip to Switzerland and Copenhagen.

But while Macias and Joravsky sought to shed light on the dark side of a Chicago Olympics, other media were helping support the city's bid for the games. The cash contributions and pro bono page for the 2016 Summer Olympic bid includes several media companies that contributed \$50,000 to \$100,000: Fred Eychaner (chairman of Newsweb Corporation), Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., NBC5-Telemundo Chicago, Sun-Times Media Group, NBC 5 Chicago, ABC 7 Chicago, CBS 2 Chicago, Chicago Life, Chicago Magazine, Daily Herald, FOX-TV Chicago, The Korea Times, The Korean American Broadcasting Company, South Town Star, USA Today, WPWR and WTTW. (For the most part, reporters didn't let their employers' support for the bid taint their stories, Joravsky notes).

POST-GAME ANALYSIS

Simply typing the words "Chicago 2016 Olympics" into Google yields plenty of analysis of why Chicago lost the bid. Some say the IOC was put off by the city's history of corruption; others assert that the city just didn't have enough money to cover it. Few acknowledge the unusual coalition that came together to successfully oppose the bid and how No Games Chicago helped raise awareness about the details of what Chicagoans were potentially signing up for.

They don't know what happened in Copenhagen on October 2, 2009. With their No Games booklets printed, the anti-bid team arrived at IOC headquarters at the Marriott Hotel. "We

were working against a committee with a lot of power," Macias says. "We had to get past the Danish army, the secret service and a private security firm that Daley had brought with him," Tresser adds with glee.

After delivering the report, Tresser and the others returned to their hotel room to await the results of their campaign; 4,126 miles away, Joravsky pulled into Washington Park to see the reaction. He anticipated a large crowd filling the public space, but found only a small number of people he assumed to be city employees whose presence was required.

The official announcement: "The city of Chicago, having obtained the least number of votes, will not participate."

Tresser's Danish hotel phone began ringing manically with urgent news he was already aware of. He ran out of his room to celebrate with the other No Games members.

"I was so happy that we lost," Joravsky recalls. "The whole thing was just so ridiculous. Not too long after we had lost, the Tribune ran an article saying 'Dry your eye, Chicago.'" He breaks into a quiet, mocking laughter. "I was saying 'what!' Nobody was crying!"

"The Olympics would have been, in my opinion, a freaking disaster. Chicago can't do anything without corruption. We can't even win a Little League title."

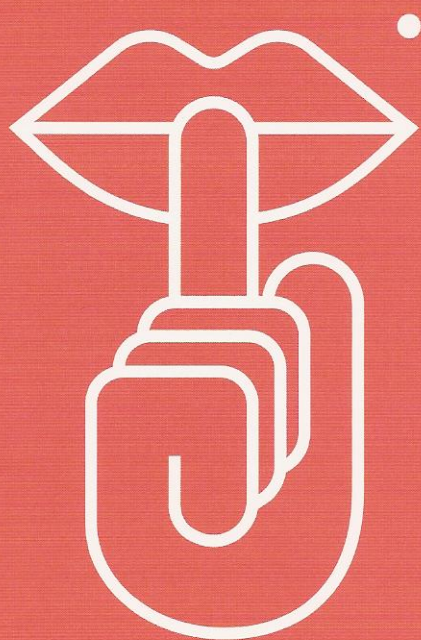
"I was so [redacted] that we lost. The whole thing was just so ridiculous."

In the hallway of their hotel room, the No Games team embraced. Tears of relief washing away their stress. It had been worth the time and the money—some raised from donors, some from Tresser's two maxed-out credit cards. Years of campaigning and countless hours of volunteer work had destroyed the seven-year privatization deal, which would have destroyed the lakefront and multiple public parks and displaced thousands of Chicagoans. They felt like David having defeated the powerful Goliath. However, in this case, David consisted of No Games Chicago and others who refused to stay quiet.

It's been nearly five years since No Games Chicago came together, accomplished its mission and disappeared. Yet the spirit of the fight remains.

"What we were saying was that we understand that they want to bring the Olympics because Chicago is a world-class city," Macias says. "But in order to that, we need to have world-class schools, world-class health care and world-class education. All of those things needed to be addressed first." ✕

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THE SECRETS ISSUE