



Tom Tresser Public Defender Civic Educator



TOM TRESSER ON THE STATE OF THE NONPROFIT SECTOR + WRITING ON ARTS AND POLITICS

This document contains some key writings and links to presentations made by Tom Tresser on the state of the nonprofit sector and the need for creative workers to lead in public life – including running for public office, helping someone to run and building power for justice.

1. "[How to Use Arts Spaces to Build Civic and Political Power](#)," Nonprofit Quarterly, 12/4/25
2. "[The Case for a Nonprofit Version of the Powell Memo](#)," Nonprofit Quarterly, 9/26/25
3. "[From Service to Power – Retooling the Nonprofit Sector](#)" w. Dr. Quance Floyd, Nonprofit Quarterly, 7/29/25
4. "[US Nonprofit Sector Documents Its Own Powerlessness, but What Will We Do?](#)" Nonprofit Quarterly, 5/6/25
5. "[What Now? Creating a Civic Infrastructure of 100,000 Local Elected Officials](#)," Nonprofit Quarterly, 12/18/24
6. "The Artist as Leader," Artworks, 2013
7. "If you're reading this: (1) You're a Leader, and (2) Run!" Arts for LA, 11/29/11
8. "If You're Reading This: Run!" Inside Arts, Association of Performing Arts Presenters, 5/07
9. "Run, Baby, Run! Why America's theatre artists should get themselves on the ballot," American Theatre, 9/04
10. "Artists and Community Organizing," Cultural Democracy, The Alliance for Cultural Democracy, Winter 1994
11. "The Artist as Citizen" – First piece from my "Arts & Politics" column, that ran in PerformInk, 12/18/91
12. "25 Things We Can Do To Boost the Art Eco-System." One City, Chicago Council on Urban Affairs, 3/91. I was on the Editorial Board and guest curated this issue, titled "State of the Arts in Chicago." This was the first time the CCUA examined the arts and culture as a city-wide policy issue.

VIDEOS

- "[Tom Remarks at Closing of Arts+Politics Rally](#)," Produced by [Greater Chicago Citizens for the Arts](#) at Club Lower Links, 5/20/91 (5:25).
- "[On the Future of Nonprofits](#)" – At the 10th anniversary celebration of the Online Certificate in Nonprofit Management Program at the University of Illinois Chicago, 11/11 (10:40).
- "[Justice is Losing](#)" Forum at Adler University, with special guests Kim Foxx, then candidate for Cook County State's Attorney and Illinois State Representative Will Guzzardi, 2/6/16 (58:25).
- "[Justice Has Lost](#)" address at the Chicago Philanthropy Forum, 2/7/17 (39:04).
- "[Arts & Politics Organizing in Chicago 1990-2000ish](#)," 12/24 (17:35).
- "[Culture War Briefing](#)" presentation, 4/12/25 (54:50)
- "[Artists as Leaders?](#)" Training at Co-Prosperity Subversion Summer Camp, 7/21/25 (1 hour, 44 min).

THE 100K PROJECT

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How to Use Art Spaces to Build Civic and Political Power



[Tom Tresser](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-to-use-art-spaces-to-build-civic-and-political-power) - December 4, 2025 - <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-to-use-art-spaces-to-build-civic-and-political-power>



Image Credit: People listen intently at a community forum held at Black-owned [Zucot Gallery](#), in Atlanta, GA. Photo courtesy of Zucot Gallery and The Art Brothers Foundation.

How does one build a movement? It often helps to begin with people who are already in one place, are easy to reach, and share the values and goals of your proposed cause or campaign.

That's what the far right has been [doing for over 50 years](#). As a former actor, theater manager, and arts activist, I can attest to the power of this approach. It is far past time for

the nation's arts and culture organizations to do the same thing.

An Approach That Works

In the early 1990s, Rev. Pat Robertson of the [Christian Coalition](#) (and his allies) used the installed customer base of their evangelical parishes to build a mailing list and then a following that they activated for political engagement.

There is a lot one could say about how these groups leveraged the base of likely supporters and first messaged them, then activated them, then raised money from them, then incentivized thousands of them to get trained to lead, then helped them to run for office, and then—once in office—to govern.

The main point is that the Christian Coalition and its allies accessed their people in their spaces (churches) and then moved those people up what Sherry Arnstein, an influential public policy thinker and writer, famously called the [ladder of participation](#). This model of civic engagement demonstrates the process of moving people from a state of passive receptivity to a place of co-creation and co-authority.

Those of us at arts and culture nonprofits may not have church pews, but we do have gathering spaces in museums, theaters, and so on. Our organizations can use those spaces and de facto “installed bases” for power building to meet the needs of our members. How might we do so?

Start at the Beginning: Registering Members to Vote

In US politics, the basic unit is the vote. Local politicians keep track of which organizations bring new voters to the political table. I believe all nonprofits, at least those with a decent-sized staff, ought to have one employee who is responsible for registering staff, members, and visitors to vote. This requires a modicum of training and upkeep.

Back in 1991, during a campaign to save the National Endowment for the Arts from being dismantled, my colleagues and I organized with the League of Women Voters to place voter registration tables in the lobbies of member theaters for one weekend. Even though many patrons were registered, this show of civic force made an impression on our public and showed them how important voting was to our sector.

For social service organizations, I would make voter registration a normal part of the service offering or screening. While nonprofits cannot advocate for specific political candidates, they [can and should mobilize and engage voters](#). In some cases, nonprofits might need to help the people they serve understand how voting for local public officials translates (or doesn't) to tangible support for services in their community.

The Association of Performing Arts Presenters has an online space called “[How the Arts Can Get Out the Vote](#),” which offers a host of helpful tips and resources to engage with the public. Vote.org, the largest nonpartisan voter engagement platform, has tools on its [Vote.org+](#) site for organizational partners (including nonprofits) to get out the vote.

Community Forums

A second step beyond voter registration is to use nonprofits' physical spaces to host community forums, for example, opening creative spaces to community groups for their large meetings or conferences. There is an organizational cost for keeping space open for events that don't generate revenue, but building a small welcoming or hosting budget into a nonprofit's annual plan can allow for a few community meetings while keeping costs within reason.

The University of Chicago's [Arts & Public Life program](#) (APL) offers a wealth of programming ideas and blended events. As described on its website, “APL is a neighborhood platform for arts and culture...Grounded in cultural stewardship and community partnership, APL provides residencies for local artists and creative entrepreneurs, arts education for youth, and artist-led programming and exhibitions.”

Another notable Chicago example is [Pilsen Arts & Community House](#), a nonprofit that offers space and resources through exhibitions, art instruction, and mentorship. On its website, the nonprofit explains this work: “We believe in fostering positive relationships with artists and community members to ensure continued growth and service in Pilsen while providing creative opportunities for all.”

Candidate Forums

A third and powerful step to build civic power is for a nonprofit to host local candidates to pitch their campaigns to an informed and engaged audience. Candidates are used to going to places to either speak, debate, or answer questions. Candidate forums are organized events where all candidates for a position are invited to speak and answer questions devised by the host. In my experience, it is quite rare for the arts and culture community to organize such a forum.

Organizing a candidate forum is not to be attempted lightly—it requires considerable organizing and preparation. But this can be mitigated by working in coalition with other organizations and with a committee of cultural leaders who agree to make this event a priority and help pull the logistics together.

Here are the broad steps involved:

1. **Decide what race to focus on.** A local race, such as for mayor or city council, brings a high return on effort, as the nonprofit is more likely to interact with and influence the local office holder.
2. **Decide on time and place.** A theater or auditorium is ideal. If the space has sound, lights, and a projector, great. Otherwise, make sure you have a plan for how the audience will be able to see and hear the candidate. Ensure accessibility.
3. **Identify questions to ask.** This is a great opportunity for broad-based civic engagement. The coalition of organizations working on the forum can ask their members about what relevant issues stand out to them and then sort and order these questions for the forum. This also allows for deeper engagement with stakeholders beyond normal and repetitive commercial messages.
4. **Secure the candidates.** This is the real work of the organizing committee. Convincing a busy candidate to do the homework necessary to make a great impression at a forum focused on arts and culture is not necessarily an easy assignment. You may have to create a briefing package that summarizes the power and reach of the arts and culture organizations in the district. It helps if your local arts leaders already have relationships with local political staffers and campaigners. Your goal is to convince candidates that they can NOT afford to dismiss the forum you are producing.
5. **Market the event.** If a nonprofit or coalition does the work of hosting a candidate forum, the goal should be to pack the house. Consider performances before and after the main speakers come on. Most forums allow the candidates to be heard one at a time, not in a debate format, but rather allowing the candidates to all respond to the same questions. The event should be livestreamed and recorded and posted online for future viewing and accessibility. The results of the forum should be summarized in a press release and email sent to the combined audiences of all the organizers and all their allies. You want to promise and deliver that the results will be communicated to a very large audience: people who care about the arts, culture, education, and literacy.

Overall, the goal of the candidate forum is for local candidates to get used to advocating for the arts and culture for all the great reasons we know and love, *and* because they realize it is how they get elected and reelected.

A Massachusetts Example

These civic events really happen. On July 30, 2025, for example, the [Boston Mayoral Forum on Arts and Culture](#) was held at the Strand Theatre in Boston.

Richeline Cadet is the director of organizing for MASSCreative and was one of the forum's lead organizers. Cadet had previously been a regional organizing director for the 2022 state ballot measure called the [Fair Share Amendment](#) and had been a deputy campaign manager for State Senator Liz Miranda. In short, Cadet gets the mechanics of local campaigning and brings her political experience to this work.

She and her colleagues started working on the event in October 2024. It took some time to convince some of her artistic executive peers that this was an important project that deserved their collective time and resources. Cadet explained to *NPQ* that having relationships with people on the mayor's staff and with other candidates' campaign workers helped get the event on their official schedules. Many groups were vying for these people's attention, she noted.

Emily Ruddock, the executive director of MASSCreative, welcomed people to the event and laid out the flow and format. The host and moderator was Jared Bowen, host of public radio GBH's [The Culture Show](#). There was an opening performance by Regie Gibson, the state's [first Poet Laureate](#).

Cadet was thrilled with the outcome, as several hundred people packed the Strand Theatre. She added that there was great energy and buzz around the forum.

All candidates, including the incumbent (and now second-term mayor), Michelle Wu, spoke powerfully to the power of the arts in the life of the city and pledged to improve the conditions for the arts, culture, and education sectors in Boston. As Cadet put it, "Organizing a forum, round tables, and an event that brings candidates and voters/attendees together is exactly how you build political momentum and create a strong foundation for real, sustainable change."

You can [view the entire forum here](#). A three-minute clip of Mayor Wu's [opening remarks](#) revealed the importance of music and the arts in her family.

Time to Get Started!

These are just a few ways that arts nonprofits can use creative spaces to build civic and political power. The potential for nonprofit-led community events and candidate forums is enormous and the event in Boston should be less exceptional than it is.

Nonprofits have the potential to engage tens of millions of people who visit our institutions, connect with us, and spend dozens of hours with us every year. The people at MASSCreative showed one path to do so.



Are you a leader? Hell, yes!

Book a training on leadership and grassroots campaigning designed for artists, nonprofit and cultural workers!

See The 100K Project at <https://100kproject.us/workshops>

tom@100kproject.us



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The Case for a Nonprofit Version of the Powell Memo



[Tom Tresser](#) - September 26, 2025

<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-case-for-a-nonprofit-version-of-the-powell-memo>



Image Credit: Photo by cottonbro studio on Pexels

How did the United States get into the civic fix it finds itself in?

It seems that the very concepts of democracy, the rule of law, science, and the role of government to create opportunity for all are being trashed and negated.

There are many reasons for this shift, but one of them, certainly, involved a lawyer's memo, written in 1971 by an attorney in Richmond, VA, named [Lewis Powell](#). And in the story of that memo is a potential lesson for nonprofit

advocates today.

What Was the Powell Memo?

Robert Reich, the former US labor secretary, in a recent article titled "[How a single memo gave us the disaster that is President Donald Trump.](#)" wrote:

On August 23, 1971, less than two months before he was nominated to serve as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, Lewis F. Powell Jr. wrote a memo to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. It was titled "Attack On American Free Enterprise System" and it outlined ways in which corporate America should defend and counterattack against "disquieting voices"—environmentalists, consumer advocates, civil rights groups, and labor unions....

Corporate America duly followed Powell's advice. An entire corporate-political complex was born, including tens of thousands of lobbyists, lawyers, political operatives, and public relations flacks.

You can [read the full memo here](#). Former US Senator Sheldon Whitehouse wrote a book called [Captured: The Corporate Infiltration of American Democracy](#), which recounted "how corporations buy influence over our government." He dedicated a full chapter to the Powell memo and noted that it was swiftly embraced by US business leaders.

Whitehouse documented the political might of American business and the increasingly pro-business decisions of the US Supreme Court under the influence of Justice Powell (who served until 1987):

The results of this meld of political ambition, ideological positioning, and activist judicial appointments have been terrible....The mainstream of American law has been shifted steadily to the right by the force of this effort, backed by seemingly endless corporate funds. This new “rights movement”—for the rights of corporations, the rich, the powerful, and the fortunate—has been aggressive and explicit (76).

Powell’s memo was headlined “Attack on American Free Enterprise System.” Perhaps a 2025 memo to nonprofits could be titled, “Answering the Attack on American Democracy, Rule of Law, and Freedom of Expression.” It should come from a well-known civic leader of a national organization that serves our nonprofit and service sectors.

What should this memo contain? Powell’s 1971 memo offers a possible roadmap for a nonprofit memo today.

Getting People Agitated and Energized

The Powell memo started with a bang: “No thoughtful person can question that the American economic system is under broad attack...the assault on the enterprise system is broadly based and consistently pursued. It is gaining momentum and converts.”

Powell went on to source the origins and key players—naming US universities and the media. He singled out activist lawyer William Kunstler and reformer Ralph Nader as wielding outsized influence.

The memo castigated the business sector for its lack of leadership. Powell wrote, “The painfully sad truth is that business, including boards of directors and the top executives of corporations great and small...have responded—if at all—by appeasement, ineptitude and ignoring the problem.”

Just substitute the word “nonprofits” for “business” and you have a painfully accurate description of the current state of play.

A memo today must sound a call to arms and get nonprofits energized to respond creatively. It ought to name names and be unashamed to call out the leaders who are burning our civic house down and the people who are paying the bills to get it done.

Focus, Priority, Resources

The Powell memo challenged the leaders of the business sector to step up. In his words, “The first essential—a prerequisite to any effective action—is for businessmen to confront this problem [the supposed attack on the free enterprise system] as a primary responsibility of corporate management.”

The memo demanded that US business act as if its house were on fire and to focus all necessary talent and resources on a counterattack, to shore up capitalism. For Powell, it was not enough to just *do* business—a responsible business leader *must also* be about lifting up and protecting the very nature of commerce. Powell suggested that a national organization with heft, history, and staffing be the leader in this fight—namely the US Chamber of Commerce—calling for increasing funding to the chamber so that it could handle this new urgent responsibility.

A nonprofit memo today must challenge the sector in a similar no-holds-barred manner. Who will step up and take on this role? Will funders answer the challenge and fund this work robustly and resolutely? Powell challenged US business to pitch in and contribute heavily to the chamber and this project. We need a similarly robust challenge today to nonprofit leaders, donors, and funders.

Campus Organizing, Developing Pedagogy

The Powell memo laid out the role of US universities in what he saw as a broad-based attack on capitalism and called on business to fund its own university research, develop course curricula, write op-eds, and more to change the national conversation about the role of business.

A nonprofit memo ought to call for something like mandatory arts, civics, and public policy classes at all training programs for creative professionals. It might sketch out some first principles that knit creativity, democracy, and economic progress together. It should seek to eliminate crony capitalism while also creating space and resources for models that operate differently—such as co-ops, a public bank, and other civic innovations.

Movement Building and Politics

This is a long game, and we *are very* late to the dugout. Powell wrote his memo some 54 years ago, “This is a long road and not one for the fainthearted,” he noted. Powell went on to advocate for massive efforts to shape public opinion through popular media, television, and paid advertising.

Nonprofits today have a similar challenge—only now we have to add social media to the pot. Our memo must call for movement building over years—likely decades.

To me, the heart of the Powell memo was his entreaty to get political. Powell did not mince words: “Business must learn the lesson long ago learned by labor and other self-interest groups. This is the lesson that political power is necessary; that such power must be assiduously cultivated; and that, when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination.”

A nonprofit memo today must blow this trumpet loudly and compellingly. Powell pointed out the impact of galvanizing America’s stockholders, which, at that time, he estimated to be 20 million Americans: “The question which merits the most thorough examination is how can the weight and influence of stockholders—20 million voters—be mobilized to support (i) an education program, and (ii) a political action program.”

In 1991 I asked Arthur Levitt, the publisher of the monthly theater magazine *Stagebill*, to give me a page in every program he published to run a monthly column with contributions from experts to enlighten theatergoers on the role of creativity in the life of the nation. The offer was declined.

This missed opportunity still haunts me. According to the National Endowment for the Arts report [Arts Participation Patterns in 2022](#), some 48 percent of all US adults—that is a staggering 122 million people—attended at least one arts event in person that year!

Think of it. Year after and year. Decade after decade. Hundreds of millions—possibly billions—of visits to our theaters, galleries, museums. And what did we do with all that connection, that potential for deepened civic engagement? Nothing. Our cultural sector’s total message to our most treasured constituents was simply, “Visit me.”

A nonprofit memo written today must note this and offer solid suggestions on how to leverage tens of millions of annual visits of patrons, clients, and supporters.

Powell concluded with this mandate. “Business has shunted confrontation politics....It is essential that spokesmen for the enterprise system—at all levels and at every opportunity—be far more aggressive than in the past.”

What Now?

How about it, [Americans for the Arts](#)? Are you up for this [Independent Sector](#) or [National Council of Nonprofits](#)?

Who will rally nonprofits to fight for democracy, creativity, freedom of expression, the rule of law, compassion, and service? Who knows? If you are good at this, a seat on the US Supreme Court may await you.



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From Service to Power—Retooling the Nonprofit Sector

[Tom Tresser](#) and [Dr. Quanice Floyd](#) - July 29, 2025

<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/from-service-to-power-retooling-the-nonprofit-sector>



Image credit: VaskaPhotography, [Detroit Institute of Art ~ Diego Rivera Mural](#)

Insanity, it has been said, in a quote [attributed to Albert Einstein](#), is “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

What does this have to do with nonprofits? Well, in the months since last January’s inauguration of Donald Trump as president, we have seen [lawsuit](#) after [lawsuit](#) and an avalanche of [pleas for money](#) and [statements of solidarity](#).

These tactics may bring temporary relief, but are they working? And will doing more of the same advance the values that the nation’s progressive and community-facing nonprofit sector holds dear?

We suggest, respectfully, maybe not.

What *will* work? That is a matter open to debate, but we believe it is a vital debate to be had.

Here are some of our thoughts. For us, it all starts with one very simple observation: *There is no such thing as an apolitical nonprofit sector*. Nonprofits, at least the ones that claim to have social justice in their missions, have their politics, acknowledged or otherwise. A quick review of the so-called [Big Beautiful Bill](#) that was [signed into law](#) on July 4 should make it obvious to anyone paying attention that the social justice missions of many nonprofits are at odds with the US government in power.

As it is often said in community organizing, [you're either at the table or on the menu](#). Nonprofits have, too often, found themselves on the menu. It is time to be at the table.

Turning Potential Power into Actual Power: A Starter Agenda

How can nonprofits move from being on the menu to at the table? This is not an easy question, but it begins with a simple shift—from thinking of a nonprofit's role as providing a service to *building community power*.

How might a nonprofit build community power? Here are some starter ideas.

1. **Center registration and voting.** Some nonprofits have a mission of advancing voter turnout, but most do not. If you are a social justice-oriented nonprofit, then promoting registration and voting at work, among clients, and in the community, must be a priority. Message voting is not just a bedrock of democracy but something vital to ensure that the basic community services that the nonprofit favors will be maintained and improved as needed.
2. **Be a community enabler.** Nonprofits with physical spaces—like theaters, galleries, and museums—should open those spaces to community groups to hold meetings and trainings at no cost. Let the business and issues of the community be sorted out and dealt with inside our cultural spaces. This will connect allies that have for too long been disconnected.
3. **Be politically active at the state and local levels.** Nonprofit organizations must band together to poll their constituents on the issues of the day and survey candidates for city council, mayor, and governor. Nonprofits can work in coalitions that issue a candidate questionnaire to the relevant office seekers and ask them to respond. Their responses are then recorded and transmitted back to the constituents. Groups might even grade candidates on how well they responded to the constituents' concerns. When you combine a sustained and powerful voter registration drive with a candidate forum process, you will discover that candidates for local office will suddenly make themselves experts on your chosen issues.
4. **Defend the public sector.** Progressive nonprofits need to do a lot of repair work around lifting up and defending the very notion of “public” in America. The Republican Party, starting with the [Powell Memo in 1971](#), has systematically attacked the very notion of government social services. This campaign has been well-documented in the book [The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market](#) by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway—which [NPQ covered](#) in 2023. Ultimately, as Carmen Rojas of the Marguerite Casey Foundation [wrote in NPQ](#), the nonprofit sector needs to mobilize to “shift public dollars to support the public goods our nation so desperately needs.”

The long-standing assault on the very nature of “public” is going to require a massive public response.

We propose training leaders from our ranks and paying them to hit the road and go from venue to venue, to teach and preach the virtues of “public.”

Why? Because only a robust, excellent, and evolving public sector has a prayer of solving the persistent and pernicious problems that threaten equity, democracy, and our physical environment.

We will not charity our way out of racism, global warming, or the staggering wealth gaps that now dwarf the Gilded Age of the 1890s. The [citizenship schools](#) that helped defeat Jim Crow in the South give a model for what we are suggesting.

5. **Enter the public arena.** Yes, this means nonprofit members must be trained to be candidates that contest for office—from Congress to state legislatures to city councils to school boards. Power, of course, is built from the ground up.

This work is already in motion. Both of us are part of the [100K Project](#), profiled last December at *NPQ*, that has the audacious goal of inspiring 100,000 people to get involved and at least 10,000 to run as candidates at the local level.

The National Guild for Community Arts Education, for example, is partnering with the 100K Project to launch a pilot training program designed specifically for community-based artists and cultural workers to run for office, serve on boards and commissions, or take up civic leadership roles in their communities. Starting in the fall of 2025, this eight-week virtual program will equip participants with the tools to lead with values, organize with intention, and govern with justice.

We know that artists and culture bearers have always been movement leaders, translators of truth, and protectors of public memory. So why shouldn't they also be council members, commissioners, or even mayors?

This is your invitation to join us. Or, if for some reason you don't want to join us, at least *copy* us—and build local candidate pipelines and networks of your own.

If you're tired of lobbying systems that weren't built for you, maybe it's time to change them from the inside out.

So, if you are in a leadership position at an organization that deals with the nonprofit sector—be it the Independent Sector, Americans for the Arts, the National Council of Nonprofits, the National Association of Social Workers, the American Institute of Architects, the National Council of Teachers of English, and so on, we call on you to recalibrate and add this training to your organization's year-round programming. Devote a leadership development track to this work—and keep at it consistently.

Why Organizing Matters

Organizing matters. The recent history of the United States proves this point.

Back in 1992, a *New York Times* headline [read](#), “Christian Conservatives Counting Hundreds of Gains in Local Votes”—this, in an election where Bill Clinton prevailed at the national level. Thirty years later, in 2022, a different *New York Times* headline on page one [read](#), “The Far-Right Christian Quest for Power: ‘We Are Seeing Them Emboldened.’” The long feature article profiled how local candidate organizing had over time elevated far-right candidates from the fringes to the mainstream.

There is no headline along the lines of “Artists and Nonprofit Workers Win Hundreds of Elections Across America.” Yet. Let's work together to build a national movement to inspire and equip our peers from the arts, nonprofit services, social work, nursing, library, science, and education sectors to run, or help someone run, for local office in 2026 and 2028.

If that happens, all across the country our peers will be telling their stories and asking for the votes of their neighbors as they pledge to be effective champions of the public sector, of science, of the rule of law, of equity, of justice, and of creativity. The 100K Project in collaboration with the [National Guild for Community Arts Education](#) will hold an initial training in October.

Are you in?



Contact Tom Tresser at tom@tresser.com

Join the 100K Project at www.100kproject.us



US Nonprofit Sector Documents Its Own Powerlessness, but What Will We Do?



[Tom Tresser](#) - May 6, 2025

<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/us-nonprofit-sector-documents-its-own-powerlessness-but-what-will-we-do>



Since 1973, I have started or led 14 nonprofit enterprises in the arts, community development, and civic engagement sectors. I have been a managing director, a board member, a board president, a consultant to nonprofits, and taught college courses on nonprofit management and policy at several Chicago universities. Lately, I have been growing tired of the limits of the nonprofit sector, however, both in terms of its dependence on funders and, most importantly, in terms of its political power.

The lack of power is concerning, especially in the wake of the 2024 election. Even as the total number of nonprofits, number of workers, total of combined budgets, and their economic impacts rise, the nonprofit sector remains a surprisingly weak actor when it comes to effecting meaningful social change.

You could say that this is by design. After all, 501c3 nonprofits cannot endorse candidates for public office. But, even with that restriction, nonprofits can—and ought to—engage in a wide range of civic and get-out-the-vote and related [election activities](#). These permitted activities include lobbying, voter registration, voter education, candidate forums, issue forums, leadership training, and even training people to run for office and to manage political and issue campaigns. Two extremely effective organizations pushing work in this space are the Alliance for Justice's [Bolder Advocacy program](#) and [Nonprofit VOTE](#). But too many nonprofits remain on the political sidelines.

Decades of Studies Document Nonprofits' Advocacy Shortfalls

The idea that nonprofits should engage in more advocacy than they do is hardly novel. One early critique of the nonprofit sector's ability to impact large-scale change appears in the 2001 paper, "[The Decline of Progressive Policy and the New Philanthropy](#)" by [Robert O. Bothwell](#), professor emeritus at the University of Toronto. Bothwell charts the arc of American philanthropy over the prior 40 years with a focus on progressive, issue-oriented advocacy work. He wrote, "[P]rogressive advocacy organizations continue to work within their policy silos, often hampered as much by their foundation funding as helped." Based on Bothwell's writings, the conclusion is stark: *Our funders have killed this work.*

Jump forward to 2007: The book [Seen but not Heard—Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy](#), authored by a team of researchers and published by [the Aspen Institute](#), reported that nonprofits participate sporadically and infrequently on public policy, based on a survey of 1,738 organizations. In a summary of the book, the Aspen Institute asserts, "[I]f nonprofits want to pursue their organizational missions effectively, they need to be

actively engaged in public policy. . . . [A] cultural change is needed that returns the country to an earlier time when nonprofit advocacy, including lobbying, was a more frequent activity.”

Five years later, in 2012, [Independent Sector](#) published a 254-page study called [Beyond the Cause: The Art and Science of Advocacy](#). The study, funded by the Gates Foundation, was based on more than 100 interviews, three surveys, three case studies, four coalition profiles, and a detailed examination of the nonprofit sector’s track record and approach to advocacy. The study concluded, not very helpfully, that “*the way in which organizations engage in sector-wide issues will not yield consistently positive results except in isolated instances, because these organizations lack the incentives to work together and a structure that enables the pooling of resources* [emphasis added], among other considerations.”

Next, we jump to a 2019 report from the [National Council of Nonprofits](#) called [Nonprofit Impact Matters: How America’s Charitable Nonprofits Strengthen Communities and Improve Lives](#), that sought to find “emerging trends, common concerns, and adaptable solutions” in the nonprofit sector.

Filled with many assertions of nonprofits’ benefits to society, this report buries the lede, noting on page 34:

“Research shows that nonprofits with the most extraordinary levels of impact do not focus exclusively on either advocacy or direct service; rather, the highest-performing nonprofits do both, creating a virtuous cycle in which policy advocacy and service delivery each inform and enhance the impact of the other. *Yet, compared to the business sector and government sector, nonprofits have been sitting silently on the sidelines* [emphasis added].”

On average, the study found that fewer than 3 percent of nonprofits engaged in any lobbying at the local, state, or federal levels. Just 3 percent, compared to the 100 percent with the legal right to do so.

Most recently, in 2023, Independent Sector published a report titled [The Retreat of Influence: Exploring the Decline of Nonprofit Advocacy and Public Engagement](#) that focuses specifically on the participation of nonprofits on public policy. A press release laid out some of the report’s depressing findings:

- **A significantly lower proportion of nonprofits report advocating or lobbying compared to 20 years ago.** Only 31% of nonprofits report engaging in advocacy or lobbying over the last five years—less than half the percentage in 2000.
- **Significantly fewer nonprofits know what advocacy activities are legally allowed compared to 20 years ago.** In 2000, over half of 501(c)(3) nonprofit public charities knew they could support or oppose federal legislation, compared to fewer than one-third [in 2023].
- **Only 13% of nonprofits conduct nonpartisan activities to help people vote**, despite being more effective than any other type of organization in getting people of all political persuasions to vote. Among nonprofits that advocate, 1 in 5 provide people with nonpartisan voter information.
- **Although the majority of nonprofits have a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statement, only 36% engage in policy activities to create more equitable systems.** However, nonprofits that engage in public policy invest more time and resources in DEI activities than nonprofits that do not engage in public policy.

A Learned Helplessness

Even when nonprofits *do* engage in advocacy, such efforts often fail to mobilize sector supporters, where nonprofits’ true power lies. Take, for example, the [joint statement](#) issued by the Council on Foundations, Independent Sector, National Council of Nonprofits, and United Philanthropy Forum in April to condemn federal’s attacks on Harvard University and the politicization of the Internal Revenue Service. The statement

speaks to a learned helplessness, meekly concluding: “Our democracy depends on a strong, vibrant and independent civil society. Undermining it—for any reason, by any leader—is a threat we cannot and will not ignore.”

This may sound supportive, but lacks a call for action. There is no mention of the millions of people who are [employed by the nonprofit sector](#), the tens of millions who support it, or the hundreds of millions who benefit from it—to say nothing of the millions who will be voting in the next election. This statement, in short, gives people nothing to do. It fails to live up to the moment and the contemporary crisis facing US democratic institutions, and I daresay, this example is far from unique. We must do better.

It’s Time to Get Serious About Advocacy

Let’s dig deeper and change the order of business. Contributions to nonprofits in 2023 [exceeded \\$577 billion](#). But when it comes to advocacy, there is very little to show for that.

We need some specific advocacy goals if we want to be effective. Here is my short list of some very objective possible movement goals:

1. Register 10 million people to vote—especially people of color, people younger than 25, people in neglected and disinvested communities.
2. Inspire and train 10,000 [servant leaders](#) (that is, leaders who seek to serve the community rather than dominate or profit) to conduct public meetings, lift up the public sector, and lead a new movement: [“More Love. More Power. More Public!”](#)
3. [Recruit, inspire, train, and equip 100,000 of these transformative leaders to run for local office](#) in 2026 (assuming we still have elections) as advocates for the public sector, science, equity, justice, peace, and prosperity—and who pledge to champion those values once in office.
4. Build a national platform to continue this work and support these leaders in their journey to serve and govern. One such attempt at this sort of organizing is the [100K Project](#), which I lead, together with a [steering committee](#), and is just getting off the ground.

Maybe this can occur through the nonprofit sector. Maybe this will require operating *outside* the nonprofit framework. What is clear, however, is that America’s democracy will survive only if we learn to ditch our powerlessness and get serious about political advocacy.



Impact of all these economic impact studies? Nothing. Zip.

No more studies.

It’s time to organize. Join the 100K Project today!

www.100kproject.us



What Now? Creating a Civic Infrastructure of 100,000 Local Elected Officials



Tom Tresser - December 18, 2024 - www.tinyurl.com/TT-NPQ-What-Now



Image credit: [Sincerely Media](#) on Unsplash

I am still reeling from the results of the 2024 election. It was [far worse](#) than I could have imagined. There is so much I don't pretend to understand about why Donald Trump was elected. While numbers can be viewed in countless ways, here are a few ways to look at who voted for Trump. Some sample numbers: Trump won 47 percent of voters ages 18 to 29, 53 percent of White women of all ages, 43 percent of all voters with a college degree, and 35 percent of all urban voters.

I've been on several calls with activist leaders, and honestly, no one has a clue. I am sure there will be many books written, papers published, conferences convened, and theories put forth.

But you know what the labor activist and songwriter [Joe Hill said](#), just before his execution in Utah in 1915, "Don't waste any time mourning. Organize!"

A Basic Theory of Political Action

When it comes to effective organizing, I have a unified theory of civics that looks something like this: **Message** leads to **Members** leads to **Money** leads to **Means**.

That is, people become politically engaged by first hearing a message that resonates powerfully with them. They see something, hear something, experience something that speaks to them. It may be a call to action or some inspirational or inflammatory communication that addresses a need or a desire of theirs.

Only after hearing and aligning with a powerful and meaningful message will a person decide to affiliate and join some effort or campaign.

And only after identifying as a supporter or member will a person donate money or volunteer.

If this cycle is powerful and attracts the right mix of supporters, it can establish the means of sustainability—some permanent architecture or civic infrastructure to perpetuate itself. Nonprofits, labor unions, and cause-fired campaigns exemplify how this cycle plays out.

Political campaigns mobilize for an intense period of time, but after the election, that architecture dissolves, and there is little left to engage—until the next campaign.

How the Right Built Their Civic Infrastructure

I wrote about how the far right and their big business allies built a civic ecosystem in a [HuffPost Chicago column in 2017](#) and more recently in my CivicNotes newsletter [here](#) and [here](#). Robert Reich offers a [similar explanation](#) in “The Memo that Broke American Politics.”

In my take on this narrative, I also emphasize the role of the [religious right](#) and the [Christian Coalition](#), which I first had to [confront directly](#) when the [group was attempting to dismantle](#) the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) back in 1991.

Long story short: Too much of the US civic ecosystem for the last 50 years has been driven by forces that favor a limited social welfare role for the federal government (sometimes misleadingly labeled “small government”), a paternalistic White male-dominated view of reality, and a desire to have America ruled by a particularly cruel version of the Christian Bible.

This architecture [is fueled](#) by powerful messaging, and of course by money from members of the base, rich individuals, and [well-endowed foundations](#) (themselves [legacies of rich White businesspeople](#)).

A key component of this architecture is an ongoing and methodic process of vetting and training candidates to run for local office. The religious right has been using the tools and infrastructure of their evangelical religious movement and member institutions for decades. [The Christian Coalition](#) adroitly uses its installed base of members and connections to evangelical religious organizations to recruit members, raise money, and develop leaders and candidates.

This sort of political work happens across the country, and is out in the open and well documented. See [Evangelicals at the Ballot Box](#) (1996), [The Christian Coalition: Dreams of Restoration, Demands for Recognition](#) (1997), [Religion and Politics in the United States](#) (2003), [The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America](#) (2005), and [The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism](#) (2019), to name a few books.

So, we have a sketch of how we got here. But what do we do now? And what would a liberal civic infrastructure look like?

Toward a Civic Infrastructure of “Servant Leaders”

As noted above, civic infrastructure starts with a message, builds membership, raises money, and develops a means to sustain itself to thrive.

So, let’s begin with the message. The message I propose is a call for “More public!” The right has worked relentlessly to [degrade the concept of “public”](#) and encourage Americans to hate and fear the government. To say the obvious, we are not going to charity our way out of structural inequality or the climate crisis. Perhaps it would be better expressed as “Put Us to Work (Great Jobs), Deliver Happiness, Save the Planet.”

This view resonates with at least some in philanthropy. Not long ago, [Dr. Carmen Rojas](#), president of [Marguerite Casey Foundation](#), [argued](#) that “this moment provides an opening for movements to shift public dollars to support the public goods our nation so desperately needs and to ensure that our dollars, in the public sector, are used to realize our dreams.”

Regardless of the exact message, the next step is to organize and [elect servant leaders](#) to local office in 2026. I offer the aspirational goal of electing 100,000 progressive leaders, which, given that there are over [500,000 local officials](#) in the United States, works out to one leader in five.

These candidates would pledge themselves to fight for service, science, justice, equity, beauty, and peace. We must chart a path to power in order to govern. Everything else must be put on hold.

Mobilizing Money and Partnerships to Support Local Leaders

Let's say the effort to develop and elect 100,000 local leaders succeeds. Congratulations! But winning a local office is merely one step.

To understand what is required, every nonprofit leader and movement activist should know about [the Leadership Institute](#). As its website indicates, "Founded in 1979 by its president, Morton Blackwell, the Leadership Institute increases the number and effectiveness of conservative leaders in the public policy process. More than 300,000 conservatives have become leaders through Leadership Institute training."

The Leadership Institute has a spiffy headquarters in Arlington, VA, that includes offices, classrooms, and a broadcast studio. It offers hundreds of [political trainings](#) annually and [raised \\$39.2 million in 2022](#). It is super effective at what it does. Some of its fabled alumni include [Karl Rove](#), [Ralph Reed](#), and [Grover Norquist](#). The institute combines thinking and action across the sectors of big business, religious fundamentalism, and raw power politics.

What exists on the left? Nothing to that scale.

Don't get me wrong, there are great organizations like [re:power](#) (the evolved Wellstone Action organization), [Vote Run Lead](#), [She Should Run](#), and [Run for Something](#). But in 2022, these groups took in a combined total of \$16.9 million, less than half of what the Leadership Institute took in. And, of course, the Leadership Institute also has more than 40 years of history behind it.

How can this gap be closed? One possible path involves [the Movement Voter Project](#), which raises millions of dollars annually to fund on-the-ground, frontline grassroots political organizing work in battleground states. They are in intimate contact with dozens of effective groups which are, in turn, deeply connected to thousands—if not tens of thousands—of grassroots organizers and leaders.

But we should think of the mobilizing effort more broadly. Consider the [American Library Association \(ALA\)](#), a professional organization serving America's librarians. It has some 48,000 members from across America's 123,000 public libraries. Our [public libraries](#) have seen some of the most ferocious and sustained political attacks—with book bans and state laws designed to punish and even jail librarians who circulate the "wrong" sorts of books ([especially LGBTQ+ books](#)). According to the [School Library Journal](#), 24 percent of school librarians were harassed in 2023 over their jobs.

Our local librarians are well-known and trusted people who have devoted their lives to education, access, freedom of expression, and advancing knowledge. And they have been politically effective, [successfully organizing](#) for a ban on book bans in Illinois last year.

What if the Movement Voter Project teamed up with the ALA and one or more candidate training operations mentioned above and aggressively recruited members to get prepped to run for local office—say, library board, school board, or city council? You can see how a civic infrastructure begins to emerge.

Although this is just a sketch, it's worth noting that librarians aren't the only potential allies. What if there were similar partnerships with the [American Federation of Teachers](#), [Americans for the Arts](#), the [American Institute of Architects](#), the [National School Boards Association](#), the [National Association of Social Workers](#), and the [National Academy of Sciences](#)?

If the goal were 100,000 servant leaders, these bodies—and others like them—could inspire and propel 10,000 members from their ranks to get trained and run. They could also potentially help raise funds—[even if they must set up parallel structures](#) like 501c4 organizations to do it—thereby providing a possible basis to sustain candidate development over time.

I can see a grand center or space, either physical or virtual, where all such prospective candidates can access mentorship, connect with progressive vendors (printing, polling, and so on), get access to research and legal advice, and meet one another to share and collaborate.

Next Steps

Social justice advocates *can* organize on this scale. But it requires a shift in the nation’s political culture, and we must think big and go big. Only in this way will social justice values of civic love, civic opportunity, civic equity, and civic justice find their way into the public sphere.

If you agree, I invite you to follow [@More_Public](#) on Blue Sky. Share ideas, methods, and means. Share stories of your most #LovedPublic—perhaps testimony about your experiences with public places and spaces as well as ideas for making More Public happen.



About the author



Tom Tresser is a Chicago-based civic educator and public defender who has spent 50 years doing grassroots democracy, community organizing, and work in the defense of public assets and services. He is the author of *No Games Chicago: How a Small Group of Citizens Derailed the City’s 2016 Olympic Bid* (Routledge, forthcoming). He can be reached at: www.tresser.com. tom@tresser.com – 312-804-3230

Get Tom’s book on the No Games Chicago campaign published in September 2024 by Routledge Press!
www.tinyurl.com/Get-NGC-book. **We saved Chicago \$24 billion! You’re welcome.**



“Tom Tresser, public citizen to his core, has gone to extraordinary lengths to document his role in leading a coalition of activists to oppose Chicago’s Olympic Games bid. Tirelessly, he has crafted a riveting story of the uphill battle to bring daylight and transparency to public policy, asking vital questions about an enormous event with dubious benefits for Chicagoans. The narrative is part David vs Goliath, part Saul Alinsky, and part Tresser’s own dog-with-a-bone persistence. Placing the events in context and with detail, Tresser reasserts throughout a “public interest” over private and public-private interests, a central political battle in our neoliberal age.” - [D. Bradford Hunt](#), Professor and Chair, Department of History, Loyola University Chicago. Co-author of *Planning Chicago*

THE ARTIST AS LEADER

Educator and democratic champion of creativity Tom Tresser suggests “POETICS” is a useful acronym for the creative process and business leadership

WORDS
Tom Tresser

2013

As we come together to explore the intersections of art, creativity and business, let's offer the best lessons that the arts and creative practice teach about the generative and transformative powers of creativity.

I offer seven mindsets or practices from the arts and creative practice as markers of leadership for business and civic life.

P Passion and persistence

One of the leadership attributes that creative people – creatives – possess is a burning passion to create and when they are involved in the creative process, the clock and calendar become meaningless. This passion or drive makes creatives sometimes seem single-minded or oblivious to the rest of the world. But this passion also makes the creative person hard to stop when they get going and inspires others to join in. This is a very useful trait in a public or business leader.

Related to this state of being and doing is a feeling of optimism. To create is to hope. To have hope is often irrational, but it powers so much of what is valuable and worth cherishing in the world.

O Out-of-the-box thinking and outrageous questions

Has being told “that’s impossible” stopped you from doing the “impossible”? If you can recall a few instances of this, then I submit you have an extraordinary attribute of leadership. Somehow you did the “impossible”.

This ability to challenge old assumptions, to ask new and provocative questions and to take an unorthodox approach to problem-solving, is a persistent feature of the creative person. You don't care that it hasn't been done or it looks hopeless or your idea seems “off the wall” and “out of the box”.

E Empathy and easy inclusion

Creatives are extremely empathetic. They routinely take the viewpoint of the other. They can put themselves in another person's shoes and see the world from their viewpoint. They do this when they write, when they act, when they create a new product, prepare a lesson plan, plan a special event. “What does it feel like to be another person?” is a question they regularly grapple with.

This aspect of the creative persona is extremely important when we're looking at civic and business leadership. Being open; being willing to accept the new and different; being not just tolerant, but eager to accommodate difference is now an absolutely vital mindset for leadership.

These mindsets or practices from the arts and creative practice are markers of leadership for business and civic life

T Truth

Creatives are explorers and investigators seeking what is true. Not that anyone can claim to have actually found the fount of all truth, but rather much of our creative work is aimed at discovering and uncovering truth. Creatives are concerned with being authentic, with trying to separate what they believe to be true from trends, fads and outright lies.

I Intrinsic worth

Who gets to decide what is valuable? It seems the current school of thought tips the argument in favour of government getting out of the way of private enterprise and not to think big thoughts or try to fix any persistent social problems.

One of the features of creative work is that, for many, it is its own reward. Sure, many of us hope to earn a living from our creative work. However, making money is not what drives the creative process. There is an intrinsic value to making and experiencing creative work. Sometimes this is deemed impractical and irresponsible.

But aren't the best and most precious things in life beyond price? It seems to me that we need leaders who can balance the overwhelming drive to create short-term profit against harm to the planet and the body politic. It would be wise to have some leaders who can envision, give voice to and champion some notion of the greater good. Artists and creatives do this all the time and we should welcome this mindset to the business sector.

C Creatives

Creatives create stuff. They have the ability to take an empty page, empty canvas or empty space and re-arrange, apply and build something. This something is often provocative, beautiful, thoughtful, inspiring and perplexing. But before the assembling and applying can begin, they first have a vision or inspiration which fires up creative work. Even if the assignment is a business problem or engineering application, the creative ideation comes first.

You can't move towards a better vision of the world without a vision that moves you. To do otherwise is purposeless reaction, and is likely to take your organising effort in an unpredictable and undesirable direction.

S Sharing

Creative professionals get creativity and see that it's an essential ingredient in problem-solving, community-building and democratic practice. They can help explain this undervalued and misunderstood dynamic to the general public, and they can help everyone exercise and apply their creative abilities towards the common good.

Creative professionals are used to working in a team environment. In fact, although creativity resides in a person and is expressed by a person's actions, it's often the fact that creativity is the result of a context. For many creatives, creativity takes place as a social transaction; producing creative work as a reaction to a shared experience with inputs from others.

Theatre and dance performers routinely work in an ensemble-setting where the group must quickly assimilate the combined talents of the whole to produce a seamless product. The jazz ensemble is a great example of fluid democracy and collaboration.

We need a healthy dose of ensemble-building in politics and business affairs. We need this skill-set to facilitate the bringing together of diverse groups to solve pressing problems.

These seven qualities are a short list of the qualities I believe artists and creative professionals possess. ■

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Tom Tresser wants the creative sector to consider running for election in 2012.

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If you're reading this: (1) You're a Leader, and (2) Run!

By Thomas Tresser- November 29, 2011

Got creativity?

If you're reading this, no doubt you do.

Are you an artist, manager, producer, cultural activist, owner of an architectural practice, band manager, designer, performer, theater director or board member of a cultural organization? And if you've laboring in the creative sector, my guess is you're already leading in any number of projects, organizations, and local efforts.

You may have no trouble claiming the mantle of a creative professional. But what about a leader in the public sector?

My point to you is that they are one and the same.

After all, the establishment of our country was a creative act. The Declaration of Independence was a profoundly innovative document that sparked the public imagination and gave life to a revolutionary idea. Readings of the declaration across the 13 colonies in 1776 were civic *performances* that formed the colonies into the United States of America in the minds of the listeners.

Creativity and the passion to pursue the dreams released by creativity lie at the heart of America's success as a nation and as a people. The chance to re-invent themselves is why over 30 million who were not born here are in the USA right now.

Collectively, our creative industries are leading the world in new products, entertainment and scientific advancement. America's creative class of artists, cultural workers, writers, software developers, inventors, change agents, community organizers and others live to generate new visions, products and solutions. We also innovate in social change and challenging authority. Jane Addams was just a great an innovator as was Louis Armstrong or Steve Jobs.

In 2007 the total value added to the economy by all the copyright industries was \$152 trillion or 11.05% of our Gross Domestic Product. Over 38 million Americans work in creativity-related industries. Creativity is where the action is for post-Industrial, post-Service and post-Modern societies. This is where the most value will be created and the highest-paying jobs will be. It's also where the fun is. And it's projected to grow by a 4.6 percent compound annual growth rate through 2015.

A 2010 global survey by IBM interviewed 1,500 CEOs from 60 countries and asked them what sort of skills were they looking for from their managers over the next five years to lead their businesses to success? The Number One quality these CEOs said they are looking for is CREATIVITY. [<http://www-935.ibm.com/services/us/ceo/ceostudy2010/index.html>]

I imagine the logic chain in laying out the frame behind a call for a Creative America going something like this: You can't have a prosperous and successful America unless you have an innovative America. You need a creative America to have an innovative America. And you need a literate, tolerant and inquisitive America to have a creative America. Put it another way: Openness+Literacy+Opportunity=Creativity->Innovation->Prosperity (AND a robust democracy).

In a sense, creativity is an energy source inside every individual, renewable and endless like sunlight. In fact, creativity is one energy source that is non-polluting, available everywhere in inexhaustible abundance.

As creative professionals, we live these truths every day. And as creatives, we are already in positions of leadership. **So why not run for public office** and formalize your commitment to creativity? Declare yourselves Creativity Champions and take your passions, values and skills into public life!

Here's how I see your experience and talents as creative professionals benefiting the public arena:

- You know how to think outside the box and how to challenge assumptions.
- You know how to create ensembles and high-performance teams.
- You know how to use resources wisely, creatively and effectively.
- You know how to assume diverse perspectives and to emphasize with outsider viewpoints.
- You know how to create beauty and new things.
- You are essentially an optimist and idealist.
- You seek truth and reveal contradictions and ask basic and sometimes troubling questions.
- You are passionate, compassionate and relentless in your pursuit of excellence.

To me, that looks like a list of “must haves” for any civic leader today. What do you say? Will you stand up for a Creative America? If so, consider running for local office in 2012.

IF YOU'RE READING THIS: RUN!

BY THOMAS TRESSER



GOT CREATIVITY?

If you're reading this, no doubt you do and you've been a leader in the creative industries for some time. Are you an artist, manager, producer, cultural activist, owner of an architectural practice, band

manager, theater director or board member of a cultural organization?

If you're in this camp of creative industry workers and doers, then you are a leader in a field that is at the heart of the American heritage and spirit:

creativity. And where better to use your skills than in public service?

After all, the establishment of our country was a creative act. The Declaration of Independence was a profoundly innovative document that sparked the public imagination and gave life to a revolutionary idea. Readings of the declaration across the 13 colonies in 1776 were civic *performances* that formed the colonies into the United States of America in the minds of the listeners.

Creativity and the passion to pursue the dreams released by creativity lie at the heart of America's success as a nation and as a people.

Collectively, our creative industries are leading the world in new products, entertainment and scientific advancement. America's creative class of artists, cultural workers, writers, software developers, inventors, change agents, community organizers and others live to generate new visions, products and solutions.

This Creative Economy produced some \$960 billion in revenue in America in 1999. Included in this are the "core copyright industries." Additionally, more than 38 million Americans work in creative industries.

This Creative Economy is where the action is for post-Industrial, post-Service and post-Modern societies. This is where the most value will be created and the highest-

paying jobs are found. It's also where the fun is. And it's projected to grow by a 6.6 percent compound annual growth rate through 2010.

I imagine the logic chain like this: You can't have a prosperous and successful America unless you have an innovative America. You need a creative America to have an innovative America. And you need a literate, tolerant and inquisitive America to have a creative America.

In a sense, creativity is an energy source inside every individual, renewable and endless like sunlight.

In fact, creativity is one energy source that is non-polluting, available everywhere in inexhaustible abundance.

As creative professionals, we live these truths every day. And as creatives, we are already in positions of leadership. So why not run for public office and formalize your commitment to creativity?

Here's how I see your experience and talents as creative

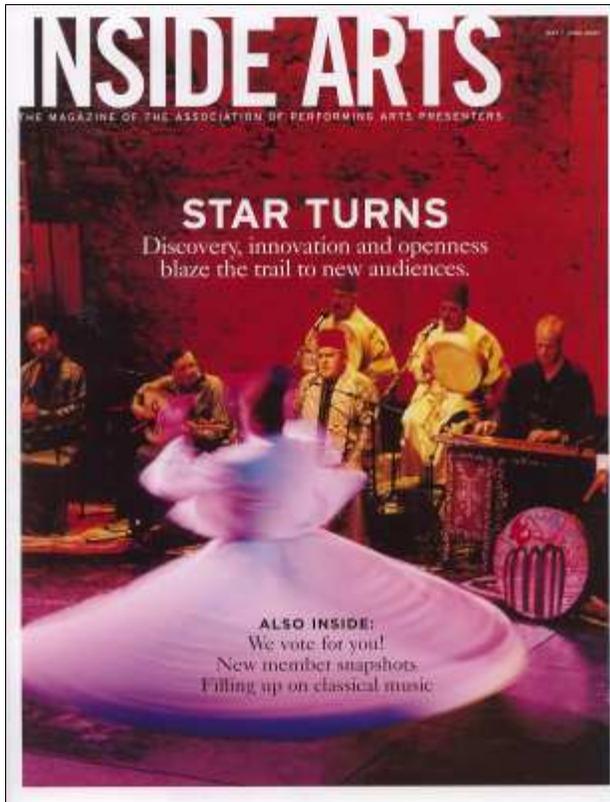
professionals benefiting the public arena:

- You know how to think outside the box and how to challenge assumptions.
- You know how to create ensembles and high-performance teams.
- You know how to use resources wisely, creatively and effectively.
- You know how to assume diverse perspectives and to emphasize outsider viewpoints.
- You know how to create beauty and new things.
- You are essentially an optimist and idealist.
- You are passionate, compassionate and relentless in your pursuit of excellence.

To me, that looks like a list of "must haves" for any civic leader today. What do you say? Will you stand up for a Creative America? If so, consider running for local office in 2008. IA

A version of this essay appeared in the September 2004 issue of American Theatre.





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TOM TRESSER is the lead organizer for the Creative America Project, a volunteer effort to involve more creativity in politics and policies. He started exploring the intersection of arts, creativity and politics in 1990, when he organized Greater Chicago Citizens for the Arts. In April 2004, Tresser 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 teaches classes on arts and civic engagement at DePaul University and Loyola University.



After studying art at Dartmouth College, **JENNA RUSSELL** lived in Maine for several years while writing for the *Bangor Daily News* and the *Portland Phoenix*. She now lives in Plymouth, Mass., and roves around New England as a regional reporter for *The Boston Globe*. She recently made her first trip to London, where she saw two plays and toured the reconstructed Globe Theatre.

commentary

Run, Baby, Run!

Why America's theatre artists should get themselves on the ballot

America is a work in progress and it desperately needs a rewrite.

It's time for theatre artists and professionals of all stripe and inclination to seriously consider running for local office. The sooner the better.

Why now? Here are three compelling reasons:

- We live and work under the protection of the First Amendment, and so we have a calling to celebrate freedom of expression and a special responsibility to defend it when it comes under attack. Not only is the First Amendment in trouble today, but a host of other assaults on creativity loom large in 2004. Just look at the erosion of church and state that threatens public education, scientific research and the teaching of science in America.

- We lost the first round of culture wars. Remember the nasty headlines, the law suits, the constant sludge of hate speech against artists and "tax-funded obscenity" from the far right in the early-to-mid 1990s? The arts in America lost ground as a result of those attacks.

Arts councils across the country felt the sting of huge (and in some cases, total) cuts post-Sept. 11 as states reeled under budget deficits and unfunded federal mandates. Worse, the far right succeeded in electing officials at all levels of government who are, at best, indifferent to the agendas of America's arts and theatre industries.

- America needs you.

Here's the logic behind reason number three. Creativity is an essential and irreplaceable element of the American character. Our ability to invent new ideas, things and ways of relating to one another has been the engine that created our country and that drives our economic and spiritual well-being.

The establishment of America was a creative act. The Declaration of Independence was a profoundly innovative document that helped spark the public's imagination and gave life to a revolutionary idea. The public readings of the Declaration across the 13 colonies in 1776 were kinds of civic performance that helped turn those colonies

BY TOM TRESSER

into the United States of America in the minds of listeners.

Creativity and the passion to pursue

the dreams released by one's creativity lie at the heart of America's success as a nation and as a people.

America's creative class—artists, cultural workers, writers, software developers, inventors, change agents, community organizers and others who live to create new visions, products and solutions—add immeasurable value to the American fabric of life as well as to its economy.

Taken together, our creativity-based industries produced \$960 billion in revenue in America in 1999. More than 38 million Americans work in the industries that comprise what has been called the Creative Economy.

The Creative Economy is where the action is for post-industrial, post-service and post-

modern societies. This is where the most value will be created and the highest-paying jobs will be.

It's also where the fun is. And it's projected to grow by a 4.8-percent compound annual growth rate through 2007.

In a sense, creativity is an energy source, a source that lies inside every individual and that is renewable and endless—like sunlight. In fact, creativity is the one energy source that is non-polluting, available everywhere and exists in inexhaustible abundance.

Only by unleashing American ingenuity and the drive to create will we find the path to continued prosperity and economic security.

We don't know where the next Steve Jobs, Jimi Hendrix, Jonas Salk, Jane Addams or Cesar Chavez will come from. Who will be the next pioneers and innovators whose work will immeasurably enrich the national life? If we want to increase the likelihood that they will be American-born or American-based, we need to think creatively about how to nourish, maximize and accelerate creativity here.

Every person has something precious and important to offer our community and our economy. Great ideas don't respect skin color, religious preference, sexual orientation or economic circumstance. If we, as a nation, restrict opportunity and access to resources



creative
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to certain people because of some pre-conceived prejudice, then we risk losing the ideas and creations those people might generate.

The American creed might be stated as: "We don't care where you came from, who your parents were, who you sleep with or what color you are or what you had for breakfast—we just want to know what's in your head and what's in your heart. If we like it, we try it—and if we buy into it, we'll take it and run with it."

As theatre artists, you live this creed every day.

As candidates for local office, and then as successful elected officials, you would inject this mind-set, this set of values into your public function—you would be blending your private role as a creative being with your public role as a leader.

Here's how I see your experience and talents as artists and theatre-makers benefiting the public arena:

You know how to think outside the box and how to challenge assumptions;

You know how to create ensembles and high-performance teams;

You know how to use resources wisely, creatively and effectively;

You know how to assume the perspective of the other

and to emphasize with outsider viewpoints;

You know how to create beauty and new things;

You are essentially an optimist and an idealist.

Call me crazy, but that list looks like a list of "must haves" for any civic leader today. So,

what do you say? Will you stand up for a creative America? It's not for everyone, but it may be for you.

Consider running for office in 2006. **AT**

"Creativity is an energy source, a source that lies inside every individual and that is renewable and endless—like sunlight."

Tom Tresser is the lead organizer for the Creative America Project (www.creativeamerica.us) and creator of the Chicago Young Playwrights Festival, now in its 19th season. Sources for this article include John Howkins's The Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas (Penguin UK, 2001); Richard Florida's The Rise of the Creative Class (Basic Books, 2002); and publications by PricewaterhouseCoopers (www.materiallogic.com and www.pwcglobal.com) and the United Nations Population Division (www.un.org).

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CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

A Magazine Devoted to Cultural Rights, Neighborhood, Ecology and Arts Activism

Artists & Community Organizers: Possibilities for Partnerships

by Thomas Tresser

This article was submitted by Tom Tresser, a long time ACD member from Chicago. It is important because it gives us a snapshot of how one community is using the arts as a tool for urban revitalization.

This strategy is becoming increasingly popular as policy makers begin to realize the vital social role of the arts. More often than not our cultural institutions have left low income communities off their agenda. Now communities are developing arts programs that are responsive to their needs from the grassroots. We will continue to explore this phenomenon in future issues of Cultural Democracy.

I have recently joined the staff of People's Housing, a 17-year-old nonprofit community development organization located in Rogers Park.

Peoples Housing creates affordable rental and cooperative housing and trains residents to manage their buildings. We also conduct a number of community organizing activities such as creating block clubs, community policing, youth activities and local school reform.

I was hired to be Director of Cultural Development and helped organize a community arts program for north Rogers Park. The keystone of this program is the 75-year-old Howard Theater, which we are renovating into the Howard Theater Culture Center.

People's Housing believes that the arts are a vital part of a community's infrastructure, both in a physical and spiritual sense.

Over the past six months, I have been learning from the developers and organizers on staff at Peoples Housing and I think there are some very exciting possibilities for collaboration between artists and agents of community change.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING?

The way I see it, community organizing means getting people together who share some common interest or condition to improve their lives by some type of shared action. This action is grass roots in nature and is aimed at some entity or person that can either make the desired change or is in the way of the desired change.

Community organizing, in the words of the Midwest Academy, a training center for organizers, is about building personal relationships with people, to change the world and how people act together.

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People's Housing

Sweetgrass Hills

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UDC Conference

It is about getting people together who have no apparent power to act together to improve their lives and their neighborhoods.

This can be done by getting existing institutions to make the desired improvement, or to get existing resources that affect a neighborhood reallocated for neighborhood improvement or by collaborative efforts to create the needed resources at the neighborhood level.

Organizing activities and strategies depend upon the goals being sought and the target person or organization which can make the desired changes. One type of strategy which is practiced extensively in Chicago is referred to as direct action organizing.

"Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990's" by long time organizers Kim Bobo, Steve Max, and Jackie Kendall (all associated with the Midwest Academy) identifies three principles of direct action organizing. 1) Win real, immediate, concrete improvements in people's lives. 2) Give people a sense of their own power. 3) Alter the relationships of power.

Today in Chicago, people are organizing to keep our public schools open and effective. We are working to create safe neighborhoods, build affordable and locally controlled housing, leverage jobs for young people and the underemployed, ensure plant and worker safety, clean up toxic commercial sites and keep public transportation available for all citizens. These are just a few examples.

HOW ARTISTS AND ARTS EVENTS CAN HELP

1. Putting together a community arts event. Using residents as volunteers and as talent is a positive and exciting action, around which to bring people together and build a volunteer base.

People's Housing recently produced a two day Howard Theater Family Arts Festival in the lobby of the Howard Theater. This was two days of live music, dance and performance showcasing cultures from around the world. Over 100 volunteers from Rogers Park



Photo by Carolyn Prieb

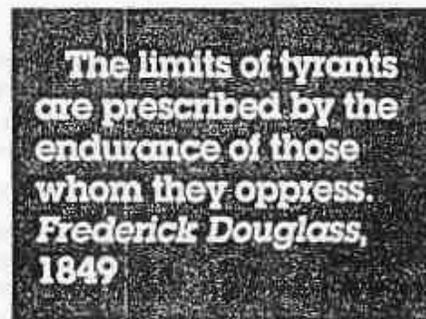
Inkú Native Americans perform at first Howard Theater Family Arts Festival, Sept. 11-12, 1993, produced by People's Housing

pitched in to pull off this event.

2. Community arts projects help to develop community talents and skills, encouraging people's creative powers and leadership abilities.

We constructed a community arts survey over three weeks. A team of seven residents from north Rogers Park were trained in survey and interviewing techniques and they helped our staff draft a survey questionnaire which was then taken in to the streets.

1,080 people told surveyors what



kinds of activities they wanted to see in the Howard Theater. Over 450 people said they would like to help the community arts program in some way. More importantly, they were asked what skills and talents they possessed. People were surprised and pleased at this part of the

survey. Results of this survey will be a strong guide for our programming choices.

The single most popular type of activity was street fairs and festivals, with 57% of those surveyed checking that category. After that, 48% said they wanted dance, 48% programming for children, 47% rap events, and 45% listed theater events. We will start to build programs in these areas to reflect what we have learned.

These findings suggest that a community chorus, dance class, and a photography program would be very popular.

As an extra bonus, several members of the survey team became experts at soliciting opinions and programming needs. They will be hired as part time producers to help organize the very projects they helped call forth, via the survey process.

3. Arts events bring people together in a safe, public place where they share experiences and meet the organizing host group.

Over 600 people attended the Family Arts Festival. Members of our staff sat at information tables and gave out information about our community arts

Continued on page 5

and cooperative housing programs. For the two days of the festival the streetscape in front of the Howard Theater was transformed into a music-filled public square. Families, young and old lingered about, watching performances and chatting beside the outdoor information tables.

4. The arts can help people voice their concerns and help communicate complex issues and enable them to visualize solutions to problems.

We believe that over time our community arts programs — through on going classes, workshops and performances, and cultural enterprises, involving our neighbors — will help people to re-imagine their neighborhoods and their own lives. More immediately, People's Housing is planning to use the arts to assist in its other program areas. We are planning to produce a short video that explains how our cooperative housing program works. We would like to use Roger Park video artists, and members of our existing coop, to explain how the process works and the feelings of owning your own home. We are currently renovating two future co-op buildings that will have 62 units. These will be available to families on a rent to own basis.

5. Artists help "release" pent-up community creativity while helping build new opportunities for themselves by sharing their skills with community members.

We have established an Artists Committee of Rogers Park visual artists. They created a temporary gallery on the first floor of a building we are renovating as our future offices. Local artists were invited to display work during the Family Arts Festival. This committee is discussing future projects, including life model-



Photo by Thomas Tresser

Howard Theater, Rogers Park, Chicago

ing, workshops for young people and a Rogers Park studio tour.

We would like this to be a model for establishing collaborative projects with Rogers Park artists from other disciplines. We envision a mix of exhibits,

Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.
Bertolt Brecht

classes, mentoring situations with young people, and marketplace opportunities for selling work.

We feel these programs will help our neighbors to meet their neighbors who are artists and learn about what they can do, and we feel that Rogers Park artists will be put in closer touch with their community—a winning situation for everyone.

6. The arts offer creative techniques to enhance community organizing groups' internal capacity.

The executive director of Peoples Housing is very interested in applying creative processes to the non-arts work of the organization. We will be experimenting with improvisational techniques, game playing, public speaking, song, drawing and mini-play acting to improve our internal communications, brainstorming, problem solving, and public presentations.

7. Finally, artists can help the work of community-based organizing efforts by participating as volunteers, board members and resources for communication and fund raising projects.

Chicago is considered to be the birthplace of modern community organizing. Our city is a city of neighborhoods which reflect the cultures and visions of heritages from around the world. Artists and arts groups are found in every neighborhood. As Chicago faces a new century, it is appropriate to ask how we can bring these forces together to solve problems, build our communities and increase the peace.

For more information write Thomas Tresser, Director of Cultural Development, Peoples Housing, 1607 W. Howard St. #207, Chicago, IL 60626 (312)262-5900. □

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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THE ARTIST AS CITIZEN

1992 is landmark year.

We will commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to America and we will elect a President.

It is a perfect time to ask what is your responsibility to participate in these events as an artist as and a citizen.

The commemoration is a process that will help to redefine America's past.

The election is a process that will help to define America's future.

As artists we need to participate creatively in both these events. We should apply our artistic talents toward interpreting and communicating the meaning of these events. I would encourage artists of all disciplines to inquire how these two national undertakings--the remembering of a voyage and its aftermath and the electing of a President--are rich with symbols and how these symbols affect our national imagination and how they affect the way we think of ourselves.

As Columbus left the safe harbors and known shores of Europe for the unknown terrain of America, it is time for artists and arts workers to make a similar voyage. It is time for artists to leave the security of their insular communities and enter the waters of political activism. It is time to act as citizen-artists.

It is especially vital that artists get involved in the upcoming elections. Regardless of whether you choose to devote artistic energy to interpreting the 1992 elections, you should become active in deciding the outcome of the 1992 elections.

Why should you do this?

You should get involved in the electoral process so you can help elect candidates who will support the arts, defend freedom of expression and work to pass budgets and legislation that will respect the pressing needs of people over the needs of an antiquated Cold War military agenda.

The arts, freedom of expression and basic human services in America are all under a potent and persistent attack by a combination of conditions: politicians and fundamentalist religious leaders who wish to cut all public funding for the arts, federal government interference into the lives of its citizens (for example, the so called "Gag Rule" which forbids health care workers in federally funded clinics to discuss abortion with their clients), and public budget priorities which ignore the development of human capital.

You must get involved because you have no choice.

If we artists and arts workers stand idly by while these trends inch us toward the 21st century, there will be no public (and precious little private) support for the arts in the new century.

If we do not fight to protect and champion the First Amendment, it will be whittled away one word at a time and you will not be able to freely practice your art in the new century.

If we do not demand that our government create policies and budgets which reflect our values, then we will continue the trend of the eighties in which wealth and opportunity is transferred from the lower and middle economic strata of our society to the richest, highest strata.

In this bleak scenario, the new century will be a place where artists are seen as criminals and the rich and privileged live apart from the economic and environmental blights wreaked by decades of governmental incompetence and venality.

So, as citizens we need to get involved now.

The most basic way to start being involved is to register to vote. You can become a Deputy Registrar and get others to vote. You can become involved in the campaigns of candidates who believe in what you believe in. You can become involved in the life of your community by participating in civic groups such as service clubs, PTAs and local school councils.

There have been many calls for artists and arts workers to get involved in the political process. Perhaps the most eloquent came from the ultimate arts activist, Vaclav Havel, the President of the Czechoslovak Republic--playwright and former dissident who spent a number of years in his country's jails for his words and work. He was addressing a Joint Session of the United States Congress when he said:

The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility....If I subordinate my political behavior to this imperative mediated to me by my conscience, I can't go far wrong....

This is why I ultimately decided--after resisting for a long time--to accept the burden of political responsibility. I am not the first, nor will I be the last, intellectual to do this....If the hope of the world lies in human consciousness, then it is obvious that intellectuals cannot go on forever avoiding their share of responsibility for the world and hiding their distaste for politics under an alleged need to be independent....

When Thomas Jefferson wrote that "Governments are instituted among Men deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed," it was a simple and important act of the human spirit. What gave meaning to that act, however, was the fact that author backed it up with his life. It was not just the words, it was his deeds as well.

So, as we start the new year, I hope you will accept "the burden" of political involvement and embark on a voyage of discovery in the civic life of your community.

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Tom Tresser is a Chicago-based civic educator and public defender. In the early 1990's to the early 2000's, Tom crossed the country urging creative professionals to lead in public life and run for local office. This work is articulated in his manifesto, "America Needs You!" (<http://tinyurl.com/America-Need-You-Issuu>). Tom co-founded Protect Our Parks in 2008 to stop the privatization of Lincoln Park (www.wesavedlincolnpark.org), and in 2009 was a co-leader of the No Games Chicago campaign that derailed Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics (www.nogameschicago.com). In 2013 he opened the CivicLab in the West Loop as America's first co-working/maker space dedicated to civic engagement and social justice (www.civiclab.us). He is the organizer and publisher of "Chicago Is Not Broke. Funding the City We Deserve" (www.werenotbroke.org), and the Lead Organizer for the TIF Illumination Project (www.tifreports.com). His book on the No Games Chicago campaign was published by Routledge Press in 2024 (www.nogameschicagobook.com).

Follow Tom by subscribing to his email newsletter @ <http://tresser.substack.com>.

ONE CITY

Chicago Council on Urban Affairs

March - April, 1991



STATE OF THE ARTS IN CHICAGO

'Many Chicagos'

- Puerto Ricans
- Filipino Americans

Tom Tresser was on the Editorial Board and guest curated this issue – the first time the Chicago Council on Urban Affairs examined the arts as a city-wide policy matter.

Art is for everyone, and it is important that we keep in touch with what the community is about.

Part of that in our case is working with business and professional groups. The Midwest Association of Hispanic Accountants, for example, is to hold a meeting in our building so that they can appreciate the heritage of art we display. Such white-collar professionals among the Latinos are bound to talk about what they've seen and be influential in stimulating interest both in this museum and the city of Chicago.

It's time for ethnic and neighborhood groups to stand up for themselves and say, "we are the city!" It should not be that cultural funding available in the city is concentrated on the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Lyric Opera, great as these institutions may be.

Our effort here is not only to interest the Mexican people or the 20 nationalities that make up the Latino population of Chicago. It is to interest all kinds of people in a great multicultural effort that breaks down the attitude that there is fine art and then there is ethnic art. Ethnic art is fine art.

It's time for ethnic and neighborhood groups to stand up for themselves and say, "we are the city!"

I mention 20 nationalities of Latinos, and that is important. First of all, we are Latinos, not Hispanics as the government forms would classify us. And we are Mexicans, whether recently arrived here or born in Mexico or born in Chicago.

It is important to note these things because there is cultural diversity within the Latino community and even within the Mexican community. It is only market pressure that tries to lump us all together into some amorphous mass.

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Things We Can Do To Boost the Art Eco-System

By Thomas Tresser, Director
Center for Cultural Policy & Advocacy
Institute for Metropolitan Affairs
Roosevelt University

There is a cultural eco-system in Chicago. It is a complex, inter-related web of organizations, programs and individuals. When an arts patron visits an arts group, he or she is experiencing only a part of this large network. The arts eco-system works in certain respects much like Mother Nature's eco-system.

Our arts eco-system consists of different populations which rely on one another and depend on systems of nourishment to survive and thrive. It produces as its "end product" no chemical exchange or population balance, but rather a steady stream of cultural experience for the citizens of the region.

Major components of the arts eco-system are:

- ARTS WORKERS - Administrators and technicians who perform non-artistic functions at or for arts organizations.
- VOLUNTEERS - Board members of arts organizations and people who perform volunteer services,

usually volunteers who are not artists or arts workers but rather are people from the business sector.

- SPACES - Places where the art is prepared, fashioned or presented. Most artists and arts organizations do not own their spaces.
- VENDORS - People and businesses that provide services and goods to organizations for a fee.
- FUNDERS - People, organizations and units of government that provide funds and other considerations to support the arts.
- CONSUMERS - People and organizations that use, attend or experience the arts, either as paying customers or as recipients of free tickets.
- NON-PATRON BENEFICIARIES - People and organizations that do not fall under any of the above categories but nevertheless receive some benefit from the

arts eco-system. This would include the commercial arts sector.

- **POTENTIAL ARTISTS AND POTENTIAL CONSUMERS** - Strictly speaking not part of the eco-system, but useful to think about as development and encouragement in this area will have a direct impact on the eco-system.
- **PREDATORS** - People and organizations that seek to harm, destroy or reduce the numbers of artists or arts organizations.

Often when we speak of "the arts" in a public policy forum, we are really speaking about organizations in an institutional sense. Many times artists themselves are overlooked, as are the other aspects of the arts eco-system.

Like Mother Nature's eco-system, the arts eco-system can be said to be healthy or endangered. It can be nourished and vitalized by public policy or it can be starved and hindered.

We can outline a framework for nourishing and strengthening Chicago's arts eco-system. To do this, we can borrow the context from the popular book "50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth."

THE CITY CAN:

1. Increase the amount allocated to its direct granting programs: City Arts, Neighborhood Arts, Cultural Outreach and Community Arts Assistance Programs. These programs directly support Chicago's arts organizations, arts workers and artists. For 1990 these programs awarded 589 grants totaling \$1.6 million, or only about 45 cents per Chicago resident. Special support should be developed to assist arts organizations in developing and owning their spaces, perhaps in cooperation with neighborhood-based development groups.
2. Develop more support for the individual artist, perhaps through direct grants, fellowships, school residency support and salary support



Tom Tenover

for developing arts organizations, especially those that serve the African-American, Asian-American and Latino communities.

3. Artists like other working-class people have pressing needs for affordable living space and health care but for many artists their living space also serves as workspace, so they face unusual problems with zoning and occupancy regulations. The city could provide assistance in developing affordable, artist-owned live/work space and a health plan available to the self-employed.
4. Extend arts linkages beyond the Department of Cultural Affairs. Acknowledging the beneficial effects the arts eco-system provides to the city would suggest that arts workers and artists be appointed to city commis-

sions, boards, advisory panels and planning teams, even if the body is not directly related to the arts.

5. Develop an aggressive marketing campaign to help arts organizations reach new audiences within the city and attract visitors from outside the city, perhaps through a city-financed Chicago Arts Festival to run on the off-years of the International Theater Festival.

BUSINESS CAN:

6. Develop new ways to support the arts. For example, a workplace-giving program. The United Performing Arts Fund of Milwaukee collected more than \$915,000 from more than 16,000 workplace givers in 1989. Or it could be done by pooling resources to establish a "Cultural Equity Fund" to make below-market loans to arts groups seeking to purchase their spaces.
7. Bring the arts to you by hiring artists to perform during lunch time or during 15 minute "art breaks," offer classes for employees, or creativity training for managers and residencies to local artists.
8. Establish an "Adopt an Arts Group" program where a corporation "adopts" an arts group and partakes in an ongoing two-way exchange program which employees are encouraged to attend and through which artists visit the business.
9. Participate in a monthly "Arts & Business Roundtable" at a local hotel where a mix of, say, 50 arts and corporate leaders have lunch and hear a brief talk on some aspect of arts current events.
10. Purchase art produced by Chicago artists.

ARTISTS AND ARTS ORGANIZATIONS CAN:

11. Join the Illinois Arts Alliance, the state-wide arts lobbying organization. They are active at both the state and city levels in building the case for increased support for the arts.
12. Diversify and broaden representation of Chicago's ethnic and racial communities on your boards, on your staffs and on your stages. At the same time establish closer ties to the

neighborhoods in which you work and see if you might work with other community-based nonprofits to solve common problems.

13. Encourage, support and produce new work by local artists. Work with schools and youth groups to bring young people into the creative process.
14. Communicate regularly to your patrons or visitors about the need to support the arts in Chicago, inform them of issues in the arts and public policy so that they can better appreciate some of the dynamics artists and arts workers grapple with.
15. Start building relationships with leaders and organizations in the human service nonprofit field, since many of the perpetual problems faced by the arts sector are also ex-

perienced by the human service sector.

PRIVATE FUNDERS CAN:

16. Support efforts to measure, track and document the arts sector in Chicago. It would be easier to suggest ways to improve the arts eco-system when we know its scope, status and health.
17. Support the advocacy and coalition-building efforts of the arts sector. The effort to reauthorize the National Endowment for the Arts caused the arts community in Chicago to enter into a new phase of grass-roots agenda-building and citizen action.
18. Support efforts at creating new works, especially by minority-group and young artists. Perhaps a new works fund, scholarship fund or apprenticeship program could be implemented.
19. Support efforts to decentralize the arts out from five or six wards into Chicago's neighborhoods, perhaps by funding community-based artists

or arts programs that do not necessarily conform to the usual "corporate" model for an arts organization.

20. Support efforts to increase salaries and fees for our artists and arts workers and establish basic benefits such as health care and pensions.

INDIVIDUALS CAN:

21. Purchase, consume and attend arts events and contribute to those groups that they are most fond of.
22. Send a letter to your elected officials and encourage them to support the arts programs that provide other essential human services.
23. Encourage local schools to include the arts in their curriculum as core components of learning.
24. Volunteer to help an arts group. If you have the time, consider joining the board of an arts group.
25. Make art yourself.



"The Frogs," an aquatic play presented by the Pegasus Flyers, was directed by Victoria Buscort.
Photo by Jennifer Girard