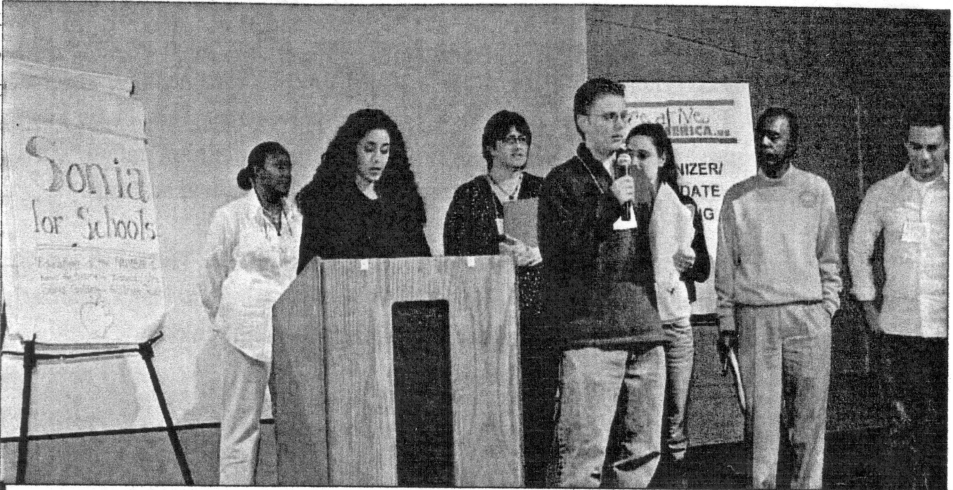


Creative America Project

Seeks to *Make Artists Heard*

By Anna Poplawska

Creativity is merely the ability to look at the same thing as everybody else, but to see something different. It's something that everybody has, but it also needs to be nurtured by a society, in order to reach its full potential as a social and economic asset. This is the message of Chicago-based Creative America Project, which, on May 14, sponsored its second all-day workshop to train arts professionals and other creative problem solvers to enter into the public arena. Tom Tresser, who has been the force behind the Creative America Project, used to work in the arts himself, specifically in theater, as an actor in the Free Shakespeare Company, and later as a producer with Pegasus Players Theater.



The day concluded with small groups forming campaign teams for a city council race. Participants took on roles of campaign manager, finance director, field organizer and candidate. They fashioned campaigns and had to include the subject of creativity in their campaigns as well as creative elements. Here Sonia Marissa Goldstein, a musician and filmmaker, makes her stump speech on education and local economic development.

In 1990, when the cultural wars became heated, Tresser opted to leave his own direct involvement in theater, focusing his attention instead on larger political questions, in particular, why it is that the arts are often undervalued, whether it be in education or in funding decisions?

In particular, the arts have been one of the major targets of the Christian Coalition, which opposes what it calls "Tax funding for Obscene Art." This issue came particularly into the public eye in 1992, when they objected to a Florida exhibit of homoerotic photographs, which had been partially funded by the Florida Arts Council. Pat Robertson spearheaded a very successful letter writing campaign, protesting what he called, "this outrageous use of your tax dollars on pornography and Christian bashing." Later that year, when the Christian Coalition put out their voter's guide, one of the issues targeted, among such other hot button issues as abortion and women's rights, was whether a politi-

cian had voted in favor of supporting the National Endowment for the Arts.

Out of Tresser's research came the conviction that the only way for artists to be heard in the political arena is by similarly organizing ourselves to become more involved in the political process. While at least some of the focus of his training program is on running for political office, he also reminds participants who aren't necessarily looking to change careers, that there are many other ways of getting involved, which we may not be aware of. This begins with voting. Using the Christian Coalition as a model, he points out that they may not seem like they're very large in number, but they have a lot of power because so many of them are out there voting, whereas a lot of artists choose to stay home.

He also suggests writing letters, pointing out that every letter received is read and carefully counted by a politician's staff, and is a very important tool used to help him or her make



Kitty Kurth, president of the political strategy and communications firm, Kurth Lampe, was the principal trainer giving the attendees the basics on grassroots organizing and campaigning.

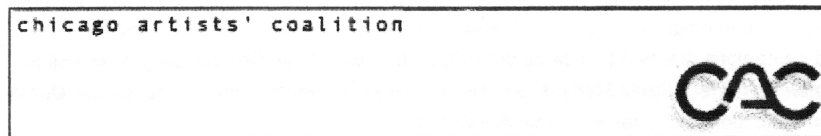
decisions. If we ourselves don't want to run for political office, we can still contribute money to candidates who support our issues and volunteer to help with campaigns. For those who may think that their small contributions

don't count, he notes that the Democrats actually have more contributors than the Republicans at the million dollar plus range. Where the Democrats really lose out financially is that the Republicans are much better at mobilizing the smaller contributors of \$200 and less. But, there are also many other ways to help a campaign, such as by organizing fundraising events and benefits, talking to people or contributing our professional skills.

Of the twenty-seven attendees on May 14, around half were in the arts, and they had a wide range of ideas about what they were actually going to take home from the experience. Many, such as artist Hugh Specter, were already active in politics. Specter commented, "Being an artist, I can't afford to contribute money, and I can't imagine writing anymore letters than I already do now. I write someone or make a call nearly everyday. But, I saw this as an opportunity to become connected and part of a larger movement." Specter is working to organize an exhibit called "Envisioning and Revisioning America 2006", in which he hopes to bring artists and performers together with political activists.

For information about Creative America Project, contact Tom Tresser at torn@creativeamerica.us or 312.804-3230 or visit www.creativeamerica.us. If you are interested in participating in Hugh Specter's upcoming art exhibit, "Envisioning and Revisioning America 2006," his e-mail address is hughspector@rcn.com.

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Photos: Thomas Tresser*



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