

Mr. Smith Goes To D.C.

The fight for the NEA continues

BY LEIDA SNOW

Garth Brooks and Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich: The predictable media frenzy zeroed in on that riveting photo, emphasizing how pop stars like Brooks, Michael Bolton, and Kenny G. had lent their middle-of-the-road credentials to the fight to save the National Endowment for the Arts. As Congressman Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) said at the press conference: "It is wonderful to have the kind of star-power we have with us today. In addition, I hope you will remember that America for the NEA was formed as a bipartisan, grass-roots, nationwide drive [to bring] people from across the political spectrum, from all across the nation, and from all walks of life to Washington."

With the groupies squealing, the quieter story didn't get much attention; but while Members of Congress like to star-gaze as much as the rest of us, they don't change their votes based on star-power—they respond to constituents who personally contact them; and in Washington, on March 14, hundreds of people from 40 states were in the halls of Congress, talking to their Representatives and Senators, urging their support for reauthorization of the arts funding agencies, and their promise not to undermine them through rescission votes that cut into current funding.

A vote the next day was instructive: An attempt to cut an additional ten percent of the NEA's funding was beaten back, with 75 Republicans joining 184 Democrats.

For years there has been an annual arts and culture advocacy day in Washington, a day for institutional leaders to talk about the importance of the arts. This year, Congressmen Nadler and Amo Houghton (R-NY) created America for the NEA specifically to do more than institutional public relations for the arts: In dozens of Congressional appointments, constituents made specific requests of their Representatives and Senators, pressing them to become co-sponsors of legislation to reauthorize the NEA and other federal art, cul-



Leida Snow and U.S. Representatives Jerrold Nadler and Amo Houghton at an America for the NEA rally. © Lou Sepersky

ture and humanities agencies and to oppose abolishing these agencies through back-door means of zeroing out their funding.

At the Rally that ended the America for the NEA lobbying day, Michael Greene (National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences) spoke passionately about how federal arts funding democratizes the arts, making them accessible and anything but "elite." Business and labor union leaders like Jack Valenti (Motion Picture Academy), Bill Hannauer (Unions for the Performing Arts), George Wachtel (League of American Theaters and Producers), and Mona Mangin (AFL-CIO and Writers' Guild of America), talked about the jobs created and what the NEA seed money means to the nation's economy:

One Endowment dollar attracts at least eleven more for the arts from state, regional and local arts agencies, foundations, corporations, businesses and individuals; every NEA dollar invested in communities brings a 20-fold return in jobs, services and contracts; the not-for-profit arts return \$37 billion annually to the federal treasury; the arts generate tourism, stimulate business develop-

ment, attract new businesses, drive urban renewal, and contribute to the economic vitality of the entire nation.

Speakers at the Rally also talked about the symbiotic relationship between the not-for-profit sector and the world of commercial entertainment, about the commercial films and theatrical productions that have reached millions of Americans after being made possible through Endowment funding.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was used as a poignant example of a controversial project that now is a source of wonder and comfort to untold numbers of us. And we were reminded that logic and facts are up against politically powerful extremists who want to use art and culture as a wedge issue to divide America.

Tom Chapin and Freda Payne sang, Savion Glover tap-danced on a make-shift wooden floor, and some were surprised to learn that the commercial 1992 Broadway hit *Jelly's Last Jam*, still providing jobs for performers and suppliers, and still giving pleasure and boosting local economies wherever it tours, was developed at an NEA funded theater in Los Angeles, and

with an NEA development grant.

Through America for the NEA, Congressmen Nadler and Houghton repositioned the fight to save federal arts funding as bipartisan. Representative Houghton, with solid conservative and business credentials, placed himself squarely in opposition to the Republican leadership that is on record with its arts funding hit list. At the Rally, Representative Nadler emphasized the broad sweep of American art and culture, saying that extremists "want to make it seem as though those of us who enjoy the 'popular' arts are different from those who like what some call the 'serious' arts.... [But] American art and culture is the Grand Ole Opry and grand opera, symphonies and Sinatra."

The stars brought the media attention that would make it much harder for extremists to dismiss the lobbying as "special interest" driven and "elite." Then there were the arts professionals, the organizations that are the backbone of any industry, from the American Federation of Musicians to the American Association of Museums, from the American Council for the Arts to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, from the Art Dealers Association to the American Arts Alliance. Then, the business and labor leaders, from the Recording Industry Association of America to ASCAP, IATSE, Actors Equity, the Shubert Organization, the Arts and Business Council, Phillip Morris, Unions for the Performing Arts, and on and on and on. And the stacks of letters and telegrams; Even form letters and telegrams had impact because they were backed with the presence of real people in Washington.

Who were these "real people"? Well, the extended family of the New York City Ballet—59 strong—included company dancers, staff, students of the school, New York State Theater ushers, husbands, sisters, brothers, and friends. These "lobbyists" reached into the home districts of 34 different Representatives and Senators. The America for the NEA delegation that met with Senator Alfonse D'Amato's (R-NY) office numbered over 250.

America for the NEA helped to mobilize American citizens from 40 states and Guam, from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii—people who made the effort to be heard. By their presence, they vividly demonstrated to Congress that federal arts

funding is something people care about in a deep and personal way.

So what happens now? As this goes to press, Congressman Nadler is testifying before an appropriations subcommittee, in support of increased federal arts funding. He will note that the city of Berlin has an arts budget of roughly \$800 million a year—more than four times the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts; and he will ask if the greatest country in the world can't afford a quarter of what one European city spends to support its art and culture. There will be a Budget Resolution, there will be appropriations bills, there will be authorizing legislation. Opponents have introduced bills that would abolish the NEA; they will have to be dealt with.

The people who were in Washington on March 14 know they will have to stay involved. At the Rally, the business manager of one company said when his group performs in Washington later this year he plans to set up appointments for its members with their Members of Congress. Perhaps he will remember to reach out to their audiences, too, to ask them to contact their elected officials.

A New York University co-ed at the Rally confided that she was chagrined that Juilliard had a busload of people in Washington and she plans to organize her NYU colleagues.

And every time Congressman Nadler speaks to arts groups he reminds them that "advocating" for the arts is not enough anymore: Supporters must be specific, asking their Senators and Representatives to support reauthorization of the arts funding agencies and to actively oppose defunding them.

America for the NEA was created expressly to mobilize people from across the nation to go to Washington on March 14, but the energy released by that effort continues, and may turn into the kind of grass-roots effort that can turn back those who want to use America's great cultural diversity as a wedge to divide Americans. As Nadler noted, "Those who emphasize our differences want people to forget that what makes America great is that we are a spectacularly diverse people."

Leida Snow is Chair of the 8th Congressional District Advisory Committee on Culture and the Arts (U.S. Representative Jerrold Nadler, D-NY). She was Spokesperson for America for the NEA.

APRIL 24, 1995
TheaterWeek