

Practicing Democracy Final Report

by Jennifer Girard, Outreach Coordinator

Outreach involves any activity that generated momentum for this “experiment in Legislative Theatre”. This included making links with community organizers, maintaining contacts through outgoing communications, attending events, keeping organized records, and generally building a high profile for the project. While outreach is a collaborative effort, my goals are not only that people not only come out in droves, but they also bring to it an awareness and enthusiasm for it’s scope. My hope is that our audiences are keen to actively join us in Practicing Democracy.

January 2003

David had conversations with City staff and councilors at City Hall who know and support Headlines' work.

February

Vancouver City Council announced their support of the project. I wrote our first announcement in the newsletter.

March

We constructed a plan for how to distribute the poll. I made an initial contact assessment in particular, who is in our database and where are the most current contacts. We began the ongoing process of gathering letters of support. This month, support letters came from Junie Desil at the kinex Youth Initiative (a project of the Self Help Resources Association) and Tanya Davis, Youth Driven Coordinator (a project of Environmental Youth Alliance).

April

David, Dylan and I met with Councilors Woodsworth and Cadman. Together we came up with four topics that would be relevant to Council in March of 2004 and have "currency" in a theatrical form. Then we devised a poll form to ask residents of Vancouver to select a topic for the show.

We created the poll and with the assistance of Monica Lee at Asian Society for the Intervention of AIDS (ASIA), we had the poll translated into Cantonese, Japanese and Korean. The poll was sent out through Vancouver Public Libraries and Community Centres, and through our community networks (in particular, those who had been supportive during Don't Say A Word). We also sent the poll through our email and mailing contacts and published it on our website.

May

The results of the poll came in. The theme that Vancouver residents chose was "How will the City of Vancouver respond to the results of the cuts to Welfare?"

We gathered background research materials on this issue. The report published by Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) and the Social Planning Research Council of BC (SPARC BC) titled, "A Bad Time to Be Poor: An Analysis of British Columbia's New Welfare Policies" by Seth Klein and Andrea Long was particularly insightful in understanding these changes.

Dylan and I met with Lisa Wulwik and Ann Gillespie at End Legislated Poverty to explain the project and ask for their support. Also met with Heather Pritchard at Farm Folk/City Folk. Heather is a member of the Food Providers Network, a group who works to distribute food that would otherwise go to waste. Both these meetings gave us a sense of how the cuts are being felt. There is profound anger and sadness about how people get caught in a system that doesn't work, a system that serves the system, not the people who we hope would benefit.

Met with John Gotowic a union member and aid worker at Pacific Community Resources. We explored possible funding from BCGEU and discovered that while we are working in solidarity, our focus is quite different than their campaign to recall the Provincial Government.

June

Continued to research not only the welfare policies and their impacts, but also civic democracy. And more specifically to the project we began asking, "How will we pay welfare recipients when the consequence for them will be a dollar for dollar deduction from their cheque?"

Also a puzzle for me was the question, "How do we want to evaluate this project?" Began an email dialogue on evaluation methodology with David W. Silver, MD, MPH, Assistant Clinical Professor at the Department of Preventive Medicine and Biometrics at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center. Please see the appendix attached for our conversation.

This month, we received support letters from Ann Gillespie at End Legislated Poverty and Ann Judge at WE*ACT (Women Elders in Action, a project of the 411 Seniors Centre).

July

The direct mail campaign (DMC) began with investigating mailing houses, graphic artists, layout designers, printers, looking into the database (and its myriad of challenges!) and trying to estimate what we could accomplish. With over 8,500 contacts (and more than 6,600 being untouched in the past three years) it was quite a time-consuming task to figure out our goals and priorities that would also fit our budget. Then there was copy writing and editing, layout and design, and lots of

phone calls and website checking to make sure as many contacts as possible were current. This continued for the next three months.

I took part in the Think City series; meeting with Vancouverites in discussion settings and talking about electoral reform, neighbourhood democracy and participatory budgeting. Practicing Democracy got a plug (or several) at each gathering. While it seemed a long time in advance of the event to bring audiences, my hope was to become more immersed in the collective energy around civic democracy. The participants at ThinkCity were keen to support this kind of work, however the organizers were not available to take on promoting our project in any formal way so the momentum was not really linear, if it happened at all.

More support letters came in; this month from Julianna Torjek, Youth Outreach Team Coordinator for the City of Vancouver's Civic Youth Strategy and Ingrid Steenhuisen, President of Little Mountain Neighbourhood House.

Announced a "call-out" for lawyers through the newsletter and began conversations with folks interested in applying.

August

Three local academics contacted me about getting involved with the project. Each found their way to Headlines in hopes of pursuing a volunteer opportunity that could tie into their research or interests – a PhD candidate from the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, a Masters student from University of Toronto, Studies in Democracy, and a Masters student from the UBC Department of Psychology.

As a way to give these inquiring researchers some direction on what they could contribute to Headlines, I structured an evaluation “sub-project”. This grew out of not only my talks with the students, but also inspired that the dialogue I had with David Silver (Appendix “B”). The task was to conduct interviews with Vancouver residents asking for their perspectives on what the City is presently doing about poverty and what they could do. Here is an excerpt from my outline:

Theatre offers a unique vantage point into the realm of human relations. It can allow us to hear the unspoken in a way that no other dialogue process can. Because this is a creative, intuitive, innovative and spontaneous way to examine these issues, I suspect that we will come up with solutions "outside the box" of everyday thought.

As many organizations are not built to readily adapt to such leaps of creativity, I suspect we may possibly hit walls when it comes to implementing our ideas, particularly if there is no connecting force or organizing structure to leverage change after the lawyer's report is published.

Therefore, I believe *what happens in the room, in the minds and hearts of participants - during the event and after - will be the stuff of meaningful transformation. My hope is that this 'sub-project' will in some way document (and perhaps at the same time solidify through a reflection process) this*

moment of transformative learning for use as a springboard to others who are seeking innovative tools for participatory democracy.

After some good discussions on evaluation and inclusion, we discovered that there was not really enough time in their already busy lives to do this. Essentially, this one died on the vine as I didn't have the personal capacity to do this on my own. Curiously, while we did keep in touch, only one of the three ended up even seeing the show.

This raises some questions about how to effectively direct the resources of Outreach. Was it a waste of my time to devise a plan for volunteers? Or was it in the way I devised it? Even though it seems like the company didn't get a "direct benefit", I really feel like the process was valuable. It seems to me that if we are creating a project on democracy we should be keen to make its structure transparent. As this is also a new style of theatre, building in a mechanism to reflect on it's impacts would benefit anyone looking at this as a potential model of Legislative Theatre. To me a key component in any "experiment" is monitoring the variables, staying very curious about the environment in which the experiment is happening. This is what I had hoped to accomplish in this sub-project.

It is worth jumping out of chronology to mention, on my last day at Headlines, I had a meeting with Caleb Johnston, a geography student who will be beginning his Masters at SFU next year. He knows Headlines work very well and had taken part in the Community Workshop. With UBC Professor Geraldine Pratt, he is creating a report on Practicing Democracy using interviews with other workshop participants, cast members, Headlines staff and City Councillors and City staff. In fact, it sounds like he is independently coming with a wonderful evaluation, better by far than what I could have done from within the organization. It is lovely how life works!

Also since the show closed, I have heard about how Practicing Democracy has been the source of lively discussions for students and professors (from the Social Work courses in Capilano College to UBC Landscape Architecture). There are more ripples going out than we can ever know.

Some time in late August, I also began designing the web pages for Practicing Democracy. This was a combination of breaking the proposal into readable chunks, looking at the **Don't Say A Word** (2003) site for other pieces, and brainstorming what kinds of outreaching could be accomplished using the web and other tools.

September

The logo design was a team effort. Hooray team! After coming up with themes and ideas, meeting a few designers and selecting Mia Hansen, after many ensuing sketches and conversations, we found ballot-head gal! who we are very fond of.



Meetings with the "Research Sub-Committee" of Check Your Head's Democracy Project joyfully embrace a new structure and title. Rather than pre-suppose what the content of the discussions with youth (in order to supply research) the committee decided to continue meeting for our own interest. Renamed "The Connections Experiment", we continued to explore themes on democracy through guided discussions, open to the public. Practicing Democracy was given a plug at each of these events.

October

The complete fundraising mail campaign hit the doorsteps of 2,500 Headlines contacts. The package included a letter from David, a brochure and a return envelope. By this time everyone on staff had made significant contributions! In the following months, we discovered that aside from dollars raised, it assisted in giving people some context for Practicing Democracy prior to our outreach and publicity phone calls.

I attended the First Call Coalition meeting and briefly presented to about 35 people. The focus of the meeting was the cuts to welfare (and their main issue for the coming year is child and family poverty). Seth Klein (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives) and Andrea Long (Social Planning and Research Council) presented information from their report, "A Bad Time to Be Poor."

Attended the 8th Annual Cross-Cultural Mental Health Conference "Immigrant and Refugee Mental Health Symposium: Strengthening & Building Supports for Children and Youth" where I met several contacts who are interested in the project (see database).

Also met with Ingrid Steenhuisen (President of Little Mountain Neighbourhood House). She is very supportive of our work and will assist in outreaching this through the Neighbourhood House associations. Ingrid and Joel Bronstein (Executive Director of LMNH) wrote a support letter for the project.

Dylan and I went to the very eclectic and lively "We Ain't Down Yet" ELP Benefit Concert at the Unitarian Church. Made contacts with organizers Leslie Kemp and Jenny Podlecki.

Attended a "Standing Committee of Council on City services and budgets" meeting. The task at hand was a review of the funding criteria for Community Services Grants. In particular, local agencies (in particular, Caryn Duncan from the Women's Health Collective and Linda Mix from Tenants Rights Action Coalition), were telling the Councilors and staff that the Provincial cuts have seriously

jeopardized their capacity to deliver quality services. The City's bind: to make criteria to the grants that allow for most equitable and innovative allocation of finite resources.

November

Over the past months I had been collecting resources - from "van-announce" emails to brochures at local events, from contact info sheets gathered at meetings (ie/ First Call coalition meeting and Mental Health Symposium), to email lists from the Social Planning Department at the City. I had filed away any material with contact info for folks who should know about this project. From mid to late November, I did a big clean through my files and entered info into the database, took out old info and created email address books where email addresses were available. I began sending out calls for participants through the email networks, following up with phone calls and then sending printed brochures as requested.

From: Jennifer Girard <mailto:outreach@headlinestheatre.com>
Sent: Tuesday, November 18, 2003 4:16 PM
Subject: Practicing Democracy

Greetings!

I am the Outreach Coordinator for Headlines Theatre. Our upcoming production is called, **Practicing Democracy**. Using interactive theatre, we will create community-based law.

The topic it will focus on is, "How can the City of Vancouver and its residents respond to the welfare cuts?" If you or someone you know is living this issue, we invite you to join us in creating this production!

The community workshop will happen February 1-6. The public performances will take place March 3-21 in three Vancouver venues.

I have pasted below more information and I would be delighted to have an opportunity to speak to you in person. Please contact me when you get this message.

Cheers,
Jennifer

By honing and flagging "PD OR" contacts in our main database, I could easily track my communications. For more detail, I have attached the list of the 87 local organizations that received information from me directly (while there were many many more that got info through volunteers, publicity and through the ripples of these networking organizations). I have also attached a list of organizations who brought materials to our information tables where audience members could hook in to local advocacy groups, resources and events.

Also in November, all of Headlines attended "In the Heart of the City", the Downtown Eastside Community play, presented by Vancouver Moving Theatre.

December

By December, lots of applications started coming in - emails, phone calls, faxes. I made presentations at First United Church during a lunch gathering and at the

Women's Centre (before bingo!). I had some lovely conversations with people who are living with poverty about the project and there was a lot of respect and enthusiastic support.

Early on in the process, David recognized that to get participants who are living in the street, they needed to be approached by someone with street credibility. As things happen here, the phone rang and our hope found us, or so it seemed. I received a phone call from a woman who was interested a work placement. Rae was interested in getting a job at Headlines and she was calling as part of a career training course offered through Vancouver Community College. While talking with her, I said that we would have a short-term job if she wanted to apply for the workshop or cast. I asked if she was affected by the cuts to welfare. She replied, "Well, I am in this training program because I have a degree and yet have lived on the street and presently I live in the Downtown Eastside." And in a coy way she added, "Oh! and I am a member of the Living Room Drop-In and I am also a recovering drug user! Yeah, I think I have relevant experience."

After our conversation, David and I agreed that we might could offer her a small contract ahead of the interviews to talk with people who would bring in a representation that I may not be able to reach. While Rae did line me up with her professor and I made a presentation for the students of this program, I never heard from her after our initial contact and I never met her face to face. For us it meant that we didn't have a "street rep" to assist with outreach and we were out of time for finding one.

However, in terms of doing "street outreach", I did have good start. After presenting at the Women's Centre, I was unlocking my bike on Hastings Street and I had a conversation with a man who was selling the Long Haul newspapers and End Legislated Poverty t-shirts. As I learned more about his story, I told him about this project. We went to the café by the co-op radio station and continued to talk. Since he was presently without a home or contact, I gave him my number on a napkin and told him when he should call to arrange an interview. However he called on a Saturday when no one was in the office and of course, he left no return contact information. This story continues in January...

We got another academic inquiry, this time from two UBC Geography scholars. Geraldine Pratt is a Professor of Geography and a member of the "Friends of Women and Children of BC". This is a group of BC feminist scholars who are publishing monthly report cards on the Provincial Government. Caleb Johnston, Gerry's student, was in the Community Workshop along with Cynthia Lee Andruske, another member/writer of the "Friends". My time was very full at this point and I was also feeling a bit protective about turning the workshop participants into research subjects. When we met I discovered that they were very open about their approach and also they requested little more of me than one follow-up discussion, which I appreciated.

Our first ticket reservation came - from Suzanne Schryer-Belair, the Manager of Administrative Services for the Law Commission of Canada in Ottawa!

Linked up with Network of East Vancouver Community Organizations (NEVCO) a coalition of over 60 organisations. They were working on a document called "From Welfare to Wellness" which they submitted to the Minister of Human Resources in January. The document was in response to the changes in Welfare policy changes and its intent was to ensure that some measures be taken to buffer the effects of the cuts to individuals and organizations. A copy is attached.

By the end of December, we had selected from the pile of 80 applications, 31 to interview for the Community Workshop.

January 2004

Spent three days conducting the interview/auditions with David, welcoming them to the office, reviewing the details of project, and assisting in the role-play portion.

After the interviews, we returned to the discussions about how to gather together a workshop group that fully represent the people in Vancouver who are affected by the issue, namely someone living on the street. Given that we had set aside money for providing housing, we wanted to be able to do that. However, "do you need housing?" was not one of the questions we asked during the application process, so we had no way to know which applicants needed housing until during the interviews when we posed the question. In hindsight, it might have been a good idea to include this so we had a better sense of the applicants going in, but applicants may have reasons to withhold this information.

We went back to Ann at First United (where I had done a presentation) and asked for some assistance. She had provided some names before the interviews, but since they did not contact us directly, David did not bring them into the interview. With her generous assistance, we got one more person into the workshop.

Finally, it also dawned on me that the man I spoke with on the street had been selling Long Haul newspapers and would know Lisa at End Legislated Poverty. Lisa had also helped us to get applicants for the workshop. She did know this man. With her assistance, we got in touch with him. He did an interview and we got him into housing just a few days before the workshop.

Dylan and I contacted those not selected via email or phone. Many were interested in joining the newsletter list or assisting the project in some way. Since the application process was so open, we had to explain that the criteria we were looking for was not talent, desire, thoroughness of application or even the quality of life experience, but a diversity of experiences which would represent the ways in which Vancouver residents are affected by poverty.

The postcards and posters came in. They were soon packaged with cover letters and sent out. Subsequently, there were lots of phone calls and emails to follow-up. At this point, I was letting people know that aside from bringing people to the show, they could contribute to the information tables. The list of contributors is attached. During these calls I was asking if people knew about newsletters, community gatherings or meetings where the project could be announced.

David and I attended the Mayor's Forum on "Safety in the City". During the summary of the discussions, we heard from every table that Vancouver residents want to see more police. While this did not necessarily reflect the majority of people in the room, there was no way to know how many supported the statement, only that there was at least one supporter from each of the twelve tables. From my table there was disagreement with this, but that didn't get reflected in the notes or the report-back and there was no formal mediator for the discussion. It was definitely a learning experience about the challenges of democracy.

While there, I connected with some very lovely people. Shane Simpson from Smart Growth BC and Jean Swanson from ELP were at my table, along with two activists from the Downtown Eastside who had applied to be in the Practicing Democracy Community Workshop.

One of the Mayor's assistants put us in touch with Nancy Eng at Corporate Communications in the City. In addition to sending posters and postcards through Nancy to the Vancouver Public Libraries and Community Centres, I created envelopes for each City Staff member listed (by name, department and title) on the City of Vancouver website. The envelopes read, "What does Practicing Democracy mean to you, _____?" By the end of February, 372 invites had been sent through Nancy (via inter-office mail). We also sent special invites to the Mayor and Councillors.

I collected and contacted volunteers - many of who were students interested in arts, politics and social change. Nadja Rence, a law student at UBC, invited me and Carrie Gallant (Legal Consultant to the project) to present in the law faculty. She put out posters and talked it up, arranged a room and booked a TV/VCR unit (for screening Squeegie). It was a small but thoughtful and inspired crowd. Nadja (along with other UBC volunteers) had put the word out, however it was a beautiful sunny day; a lunch hour on the warmest day we'd had in months and three other talks were going on in the law building at that time, two of which were offering food! (Tough competition for a crowd!) Nadja also got me in touch with Agnes Huang, former editor of Kinesis Magazine and present editor of The Legal Eye. The Legal Eye published a small promo piece about Practicing Democracy in their February/March issue.

February

This month involved lots of following up on mail and email, talking with people about how to get the word out through all possible networks.

I collected logos and brief summaries from organizations to include in the program: Anti-Poverty Committee, BC Public Interest Advocacy, End Legislated Poverty, Friends of Women and Children in BC, Legal services Society, PovNet, the Poverty and Human Rights Project, Social Planning and Research Council (SPARC) BC, West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), Vancouver Women's Health Collective and the Fulcrum Project. For more details, please see the program. I also collected brochures, pamphlets, bookmarks and posters for display on the information tables in the lobbies.

I lined up volunteers to join the "grassroots publicity crew" to get the word-on-the-street spreading in as many venues as possible. After the screenings of *The Corporation* (a locally-produced documentary), we had volunteers hand out postcards. While the effect is not immediate, it surely was a factor in helping the general public recognise the image of our posters and plant the "meme" in the minds of the general public!

Flyers went out via volunteer help to a local folk concert (David Rovics at the WISE Hall), to a Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives fundraiser, and to more of the Mayor's Forums by way of the Civic Youth Strategy (a program of Social Planning at the City).

Emily Mayne, one of the cast members, sent e-mail out to many people in the Ministry of Human Resources and a few in the Solicitor General and the Ministry of Public Safety, to a number of contacts at SFU (Criminology, Anthropology, Political Science), to people at the John Howard Society, and the Fraser Burrard Community Justice Society, "as well as my friends".

Ingrid Steenhuisen, workshop participant and president of the Little Mountain Neighbourhood House (LMNH), put posters up around the building (including the Library next door and the Learning Centre in the basement), to the Little Mountain Senior Livewires, and to board, staff and committee members as well as family and friends. She put a piece in the LMNH newsletter VOICES, sent postcards out to CityPlan & Social Planning department contacts at Vancouver City Hall, as well as community residents groups. She put out postcards at the Grand Opening of the South Vancouver Neighbourhood House, and distributed them to staff at other the other Vancouver Neighbourhood Houses. She forwarded emails to Patrick Wong, MLA Vancouver-Kensington, Gary Collins, MLA Vancouver-Fraserview, Sophia Leung, M.P. Vancouver-Kingsway and asked them to share it with colleagues, family & friends. Also, on Feb 13th she distributed more postcards at the Community Visions Fair at Riley Park. And then while getting her teeth cleaned, she talked up the show at the UBC Dental School!

Also, I was invited to write an article for the SPARC BC newsletter. Their April issue is on the theme of democracy. I created an 800-word piece and sent a photo.

March

Lots of momentum... From early in March on, reservations came trickling in not only for the first week, but for the entire run. To indicate a bit of the excitement, here is a lovely email I got from someone who I had helped to produce a write-up for the program:

Jennifer:

I have been thinking about your play and wondering how your previews went yesterday. I wanted to wish you a really enriching and moving Opening Night. May it be all you hoped it would be and MORE! ...

Thank you on behalf of The Fulcrum Project for all you are doing to support our Project by your promotion of it. People working together DO make a difference at the end of the day
Jennifer!

Wishing you and everyone involved with "Practicing Democracy" a truly meaningful experience. You are giving a voice to those normally without one...and that in itself is a very powerful gift.

In Peace and with Hope that each of us will make a difference
joy

Just before the telecast, we also "put on the push" to make sure the audience was full for the taped and televised show. This involved postering the neighbourhood (thanks to one very dedicated volunteer), flyering at the Women's Day rally (another passionate volunteer) and calling up folks through the networks asking people to book for this night - both from the office and through the networks of volunteers, workshop participants and community contacts.

Further into the run, I also called up the City Councillors who had not yet booked to remind them of the production and sent a follow-up email. At this point our audience members had started asking who from City Council was representing - and I let the Councillors know this. Raymond Louis responded and booked. Councillors David Cadman, Fred Bass and Ellen Woodsworth attended. Councillor Sam Sullivan's secretary phoned me after the production ended to say he had been in Los Angeles. Mayor Campbell had booked for Opening Night, but then had other plans come up and Deputy Mayor, Anne Roberts came in his place. She was quite impressed and intended to promote the production to the Councillors at the following (televised) meeting. There was other business that happened in that meeting which pre-empted any announcement, however.

My role during production also extended to box office. Each night I also had a volunteer to assist. Since the event was by donation, the only challenge was to track how many people came in each night. The Saturday night at the Croatian Cultural Centre was our first over-sold show (where more than 100 people came and more seats had to be put out). Just when I thought we had seen the last wave of people, another flock came through the door. Finally when I announced, 'It's standing room only', no one looked doubtful or asked "what do you think, should we stand?". Instead there was a big "hurrah" as they stormed in!

The last few nights at the St. James Community Square were a bit of a zoo! It was our smallest venue and so there was no option of pulling in a few extra chairs. However, people came and we somehow found space for them. On our closing night people were seated on the floor, standing in the balcony, nearly hanging off the rafters - 158 in all!

When asked how they heard about the show, over the course of the run more and more people said, "everywhere" And also, "Congratulations to whoever is doing the publicity for this". I extend that congratulations of course to Jen Cressey, our publicist, to the workshop participants and cast, to the many volunteers who are so passionate about these issues and of course, to David for creating a piece that made people so excited about this event that they were telling their friends and acquaintances.

The show closed with high spirits. There was a real sense that this had been an historic event in the city. While talking to people each night after the show and in phone and email conversations since closing, people are continuing to think on the dilemmas that the play poses and the solutions that may exist within City mechanisms. Regardless of the actions of Council, the energy and dynamism of the dialogue process was inspiring. I continue to be impressed with the compassion and creativity that Practicing Democracy revealed.