



tel: 216/231-2300

fax: 216/231-2331

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Near West Theatre Stephanie Morrison-Hrbek, Executive Director

Most Significant Change

Please tell us a story about the SVP-related activity that has led to the most significant change in your organizational capacity during your relationship with SVP.

It was in November, 2002 when our board consultant Thomas Mulready—now known for his work with Cool Cleveland—looked me in the eye having worked with me for 4 months and said, “Stephanie you need to get a vision for yourself.” I took those words to heart, deeply disturbed at the implication of Thomas’ advice and perspective.

At that juncture, I had a part-time development person. I was deeply embroiled in all the development activities; I was driving all the funding development except for the benefit event. Our fiscal operations were outsourced at a cost of over \$14,000 annually, and the information was not as accessible as I needed it to be.

I had an appreciation for our board but did not understand the preciousness of every seat and that they should be the FIRST to step to the plate as ambassadors and in providing leadership gifts.

Our offices were housed in one room, and there simply was no room in the inn for me or my development person. So the office had our business manager and a part-time marketing sales person and often a volunteer from AARP getting training from our business manager.

Individual giving was at \$59,000. There were no special cultivation activities—there was NO TIME to cultivate!

Fortunately, the mission was strong. The programs were strong. The vision hadn’t changed from the first summer in 1978 when I was hired to start Near West Theatre (NWT) and had the vision of using the theatre arts to engage young people in something that would both inspire their growth and participation as well as inspire adults who could see young people as contributing members rather than as delinquents.

My vision was to create a theatre where every one and anyone interested is invited to participate and to offer something meaningful to the community regardless of skill level, previous experience, or economic status. That vision of inclusion has been consistent and is still central to our artistic vision today; we now have five productions a year with a minimum of 40 in a cast and as many as 75 onstage and scores of young people working in the wings and in the balcony to support the productions. And we maintain accessibility to the experience of a Broadway-scale production at the cost of \$6.

I don't believe that I formulated that vision that Thomas asked me about, but I do believe in my bones that the universe heard my prayers, and I was sent the support of Cleveland SVP and the angel (sometimes wrestling angel) and team leader, Kevin Shaw. One of Kevin's first articles he shared was from the Harvard Review, and it was the basic—but NEW TO ME—concept of the monkey on your back—giving and taking the MONKEY/the responsibility. I now see that Kevin saw me burdened with monkeys all over my being! And I was unaware.

So the Shaw Institute of Learning began.

Shortly after Kevin's engagement with NWT, NWT was being considered as a semi-finalist with the Cleveland Foundation and a new arts funding initiative. They enlisted a national panel that reviewed and scrutinized our organization. I was deeply disappointed when we were turned down, because they relayed that we have so much work to do that we could not be a part of this new funding initiative that would take so much time – as many as eight full days a year for an organizational team. I showed Kevin their review document and he said, "Everything you have ever expressed or named as an issue is written right here before you, Stephanie."

Suddenly I finally was getting it. And that we had a lot of work to undertake to move our organization to a new level where I was not at the center of so many of the critical functions.

So here we are, a little more than three years later. We are settled into an office with five times the space at the same price in the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood just steps from where we intend to build our new theatre. Our fiscal operations and controls have been established resulting in simplified, efficient in-house systems with a very part-time bookkeeper (one hour every two weeks) costing the organization less than \$3,000 annually.

We have a full-time development director who is in charge of the operating budget's revenue generation. She reports daily on cash in hand. Projections are a part of life rather than what had been our final-quarter-of-the-fiscal-year-panic-time. She oversees a newly established position of Associate Director of Development & Marketing, We have a full time Office & Support Specialist, a position established in August, 2005. We have an organizational culture for the first time in our 29-year history with expectations and accountability and systems that are predictable and organized.

Individual giving grew 60% by 6/30/06 to \$95,000 and to \$107,370 by 6/30/07. Donors are provided cards, tickets, cultivation and attention that they deserve.

We have a business plan that analyses a five-year fiscal history and a plan to run our dream building. We have a strong partnership with Gordon Square Arts District (GSAD), and I am able to be fully engaged as needed, going on tours of the district sharing the vision of our new home and the economic development model that GSAD exemplifies using the arts as an economic catalyst.

We have a board with seven new members from strong companies who joined NWT this past year (2005-06) and who created a plan in March, 2005---with Kevin's participation (oh and Kevin is now on our board!)---to become more fully engaged with functional, strong committees. In addition to spending time on the capital endeavor, I was appointed to six-member County Commissioner's Advisory Board for Issue 18 revenue distribution and newly appointed to the Community Relations Board by the Mayor of Cleveland.

CSVP saved my life. But you also gave life and sustainability to NWT and to our continued growth and development. I am so thankful for the honest, persistent, patient teaching, advice, and coaching of Kevin Shaw, periodic meetings with other Venture Partners who shared their expertise in fundraising and earned-income revenue generation. And we offer our thanks for the financial support and significant anonymous contributions we've received through Cleveland SVP.