



**District of Columbia
Arts Center**

2438 18th Street, NW
Washington DC, 20009
202-462-7833 | info@dcartscenter.org
www.dcartscenter.com

DCAC Archive : Director's Letters March : April 2010

I just finished a really long application for us to participate in the Catalogue for Philanthropy, by long I mean over 3500 words. Given that I was filling out a form and not creating a narrative, I thought it was prey long. It's something I do all the time, and in the description of the organization I always state that we are "an artist-run grassroots organization." Sometimes I think that sounds kind of hokey, the sort of throwback language that would only connect to someone who spent their twenties traveling the country in a '68 VW bus with a guitar in a burlap bag promoting peace and love. I hope I'm not right about that, because really, it's an important aspect of who we are and how we operate. For those of you who didn't travel the country in a '68 VW bus etc, etc; let me give you a little clarification on the term as I see it.

A grassroots organization is one driven by and created for the needs of a community. It implies that the creation of the organization and the group supporting it are natural and spontaneous, highlighting the differences between this and an organization that is created by traditional power structures. As someone who has been to DCAC many times, you know that this is definitely not a place that was created by traditional power structures.

Additionally, grassroots means the groundwork or source of something created by people at a local level rather than those in control of the government or those traditional power structures. The people who invented this place did so because they saw a need and were trying to figure out a way to address it. They wanted to start an organization that acted in their shared self-interest, not participate in one that dictated what their interest should be. The people who support us now, twenty-one years later, feel the same way. As do all of us who work here. Supporting and encouraging emerging and underserved artists is serious business to us because we meet these artists and we know the need is out there. To me, it makes a big difference whether or not an arts organization is run by artists. There are many arts institutions out there that were created because the city or state thought they should have one and hired people to take care of business. And so the government funds them. And that's cool, we need those institutions to do what they do, likewise, we need the other organizations in town with foundation funding that provide services to artists that are not artists-run.

My point is that this is what makes us different, this grassroots thing, and it's why you, me, all of us are involved in the mission and the existence of DCAC. Because we are the people who drive this place, the artists and the audiences, we design our programs and present work that addresses the needs we see; needs that we ourselves might have, or our friends, or our

neighbors. Every community needs a place like DCAC, where every voice counts and every dollar raised goes straight to the goals for which the organization was founded. Really, grassroots is more like an ethic than a description. It governs how we behave in our society and defines our responsibility to that society. Not to get all intellectual about it, but Aristotle talks a lot about this. He considered ethics to be a practical rather than theoretical activity. He goes further to talk about the virtue of a thing having to do with the proper function of a thing. Like an eye is only a good eye in as much as it can see, because the proper function of an eye is to see. He said that humans must have a function specific to humans, and that this function must be an activity of the soul in accordance with reason. So here we are, humans in pursuit of an arts organization that attends to the needs of the humans in our arts community. Maybe I'm stretching it, but I don't think so.

All of this really appeals to me, because I think it illustrates so clearly how and why DCAC came into being and how and why we function as we do. We're grassroots. We're focused. We're holding on financially by a thread, but you won't find a glum face here. Because we are also proud; proud to be in service to this mission, knowing that we are doing good work and that it matters to those we serve. Obviously, I can't go on like this when I write those organizational descriptions just to make sure I'm not sounding like a throwback, I just have to trust that people can read all of this into that one phrase: "an artist-run grassroots organization." Yep. That's us. Thank you for helping us keep it that way. I'm counting on seeing you here soon.

B Stanley,
Executive Director