



Santa Monica Democratic Club

Newsletter

Volume 2, Issue 3

Winter 2013

Presidents' Address

by Jay Johnson and Maryanne Solomon

The October meeting, organized by board member Ben Allen, was loaded w/ info on the increasing cost of higher education as you will find out inside this issue. The whole show and panel discussion is now posted to YouTube. Check it out.

2014 will be another election year with the reelection campaigns of Governor Jerry Brown and Congressperson Henry Waxman, as well as Santa Monica City Council campaigns and other statewide offices. Your involvement is critical in these elections. The California Democratic Party convention will be in Los Angeles in March. This will be a great forum for you to meet the top contenders for national and statewide office. Please join us as we organize to elect more Democrats to office.

The Affordable Care Act continues to roll out, and California is a leader in the implementation. California leads the nation with approximately 37,000 new applicants for Health Insurance.

As former Speaker Jesse Unruh reminded us, "money is the mothers' milk of politics." Please pay your 2014 dues now to be eligible to vote for endorsements next spring and help fund our club endorsement mailing in November to registered Democrats of Santa Monica.

Finally, Happy Holidays to all!

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Can Theater Help Solve California's Prison Overcrowding Crisis? The Answer is Yes

by Tim Robbins and Ted Lieu

One reason for California's prison crowding crisis is its highest-in-the-nation 63.7 percent recidivism rate. That means for every 1,000 inmates who leave prison, 637 commit new crimes and land back in prison. There is a better way — and it saves taxpayer dollars.

Multiple studies show rehabilitation programs can reduce the percentage of prisoners who re-offend. If California could reduce its recidivism rate by just 10 percent, that alone would solve the crowding problem. Any successful system of rehabilitation requires multiple components, ranging from mental health and drug treatment to education and skills training. One aspect that may not be obvious, however, is the power of art and theater.

Arts-in-corrections programs have helped inmates express and manage their emotions; gain new insights; change destructive behaviors; and transform lives. These programs can bring down the recidivism rate.

California used to have a successful arts-in-corrections program. In 1977, Eloise Smith, who Governor Jerry Brown appointed as the first director of the California Arts Council, established the Prison Arts Project. It was the first of its kind and later emulated by other states.

The Prison Arts Project program was evaluated in 1983 with a cost-benefit study by Larry Brewster at the University of San Francisco. The study found taxpayer benefits resulted from fewer incidents and a reduction of disciplinary actions. Additionally, qualitative data — through surveys with inmates, staff and corrections officers — suggested a transformation in attitudes and skill sets among participants.

A 1987 follow-up study by Brewster found that inmates who went through the Prison Arts Project returned to prison at lower rates than the general population of parolees. The study showed that one year after release, Prison Arts Project participants had a favorable status rate of 74.2 percent, compared to 49.6 percent for state parolees as a whole.

Earlier this year, the California Legislative Joint Committee on the Arts held a hearing on the role of art in preventing incarceration. Experts validated the prior success of the Prison Arts Project and testified that the arts can be an effective tool to reduce recidivism.

Due to budget cuts, the Prison Arts Project was

eliminated in 2003. A few nonprofit groups, however, have sustained some arts-in-corrections programs with only private funding. The Actors' Gang Prison Project is one such example. This nonprofit program works with inmates in a handful of California's prisons. The workshops have 20 inmates, run for eight weeks and are intense, progress and, at the end of the eight weeks, they open the doors to allow other inmates and invited guests to watch a workshop and hear firsthand the inmate's experience of transformation.

Thanks to this successful program, some inmates, for the first time, are able to express long repressed emotions or experience and understand new ones. This helps to develop empathy, an essential tool to stop re-offending. Rival prison gang members have developed deep bonds and have transcended race barriers through these acting workshops. What could be seen as merely having fun actually works on a deep, cognitive level and creates lasting effects in the lives of the inmates, their families and the communities they come back to.

One corrections officer wrote: "I see changes in the guys' attitudes. They are more outgoing. They now go up and talk to people. They intermingle more. It really makes a big change in the guys."

Inmates have written:

"I made a major transition. I got to express my emotions I made a real connection with the men here It's made me a better man."

"Barriers are being broken, we are all talking, there is a spirit of peace on the yard."

"I've run from anything that was tough for me all my life. That's how I got here. I don't want to do that anymore thanks to this class."

While the Actors' Gang Prison Project has transformed lives without any state funding, to have a significant effect on recidivism reduction, these programs need to be provided statewide. A federal court recently ordered the governor's administration and attorneys for prisoners to negotiate a solution to the prison crowding crisis. California now has a unique opportunity to provide a durable, transformative solution to the prison crisis by focusing on rehabilitation. Restoring arts-in-corrections programs on a statewide basis needs to be part of that conversation.

As Shakespeare wrote so insightfully in *Hamlet*, "We know what we are, but know not what we may be."

Tim Robbins is an actor, director, and producer and founding artistic director of the Actor's Gang. Ted Lieu is a state senator and chairman of the legislative Joint Committee on the Arts.

Informative Higher Education Panel in October

A college degree has never been more important as a vehicle for social mobility, but with skyrocketing tuition at public universities, there are fears that it may be getting increasingly out of reach for many younger Californians. On October 30, the Santa Monica Democratic Club sponsored a fascinating and insightful panel discussion on the current state of access to public higher education, with a particular focus on California's UC and Cal State systems. The panel was moderated by Ben Allen, who serves on the club's Executive Board and the Santa Monica-Malibu School Board, and who previously served as the student member of the University of California's Board of Regents while he was a law student. He was joined on the panel by Kareem Aref, President of the University of California Students' Association and current UC Riverside undergraduate; Eddie Island, current full-term member of the UC Board of Regents; David Dayen, a political writer and blogger for *The American Prospect*, *Salon*, and *The New Republic*; and Michele Siqueiros, Executive Director of the Campaign for College Opportunity.

The panel explored important issues like the state of financial aid availability and programming and their impact on broader access to the university system; the rise of private for-profit universities such as the University of Phoenix; the relentless disinvestment by the state in its public education system; efforts to make sure that our higher educational system is diverse and represents the population of the state; and the role of the community college system as a vital piece of the puzzle- serving as a critically affordable access point to higher education for so many young people, but with its own funding challenges and limitations.

A number of students from Santa Monica College were in attendance, some of whom asked tough questions about the state of higher education in California. The panel members each approached the various issues raised from a progressive perspective, but had very interesting takes and some fascinating disagreements, all of which that made for a lively and informative evening. The panelists particularly sparred on the issues of administrator salaries, the challenge of raising fees on students so as to have more money available for financial aid, the extent to which the higher educational system is truly accessible, and the broader budgetary challenges faced by the University of California, and how UC should be measuring its priorities.

If you did not have the opportunity to attend the event, please make sure to watch it! A videotaped recording of the discussion is available online at

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6ydX-V_6eY&feature=youtu.be.

Hotels and City Zoning Take Center Stage- Recent Updates

by Julie Lopez Dad

Workers Win/Hotels

On November 12, 2013 the Santa Monica City Council passed Development Agreements with OTO Development for two new hotels downtown: Courtyard by Marriott and Hampton Inn. Capping many months of hard work by activists and Unite/HERE Local 11, the agreements incorporate card check neutrality and a \$15.37 living wage. The Democratic Club was among the groups and individuals calling for those essential needs to be met. More hotel projects, as discussed in the last newsletter, are in the pipeline.

Zoning Ordinance

The City released the draft Zoning Ordinance to the public on November 13. At a hefty 540 pages, it will regulate what is built in Santa Monica for years to come. View the document online at www.smgov.net/planning.

A month-long public review period has begun, after which the Zoning Ordinance goes to the Planning Commission December 11. When the Commission's work and public hearings are completed the document proceeds to the City Council in 2014.

Resident Sentiments

In early fall, a privately funded poll of residents was undertaken by the group opposing the Miramar Hotel expansion. Of the 404 residents polled, 52% favor less development in Santa Monica, 69% oppose changing height and density requirements to allow more high-rise and higher-density buildings in Santa Monica, and 57% oppose the Miramar Hotel expansion plan.

As is common, not all questions and results were released by the polling organization, Lake Research Partners- a respected group well-known by, and often used by, Democratic Party-allied organizations, measures, and candidates.

The City has hired Godbe Research to do polling of its own.

Civic Auditorium

The City Council, in late October, appointed a 9-person panel to explore how and if the Civic Auditorium on Main Street & Pico Boulevard can be saved. The 55-year-old Auditorium has been allowed to deteriorate, which now means huge expenses if it is to be retained.

Movie Theatres

In the downtown area, a cinema proposal, Macerich Cinemas, will be presented to the community on December 12 at Santa Monica Place, 315 Colorado.

Bergamot

With the Bergamot Area Plan now adopted (September 10, 2013), focus on the east side of Santa Monica is on the Hines project, Bergamot Transit Village Center, which is now before the Planning Commission and is expected to be heard by the City Council on January 28, 2014.

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