

## **The Weaving of Design and Community**

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***"Devote yourself to a cause."***

***—Robert Bellah***

This essay is about how artists, specifically graphic designers, are weaving a strong bond between themselves and the communities in which they live. It is about humanity, generosity, and characteristics innate to human beings that encourage us to try to make this a better world.

Graphic design has experienced a drastic change even during my short career of the past fifteen years. When I started using the Macintosh and doing work for nonprofit organizations in 1987, the economy was somewhat depressed in the Midwest. Designers took the projects they could get and worked on budgets that were controlled by reasonable profit margins. The world of design was very tame and practical and it seemed to do the job that it had done in the past—to carefully plan and implement a project such as a brochure, a poster, a logo, a symbol, a newsletter, etc. This work seemed very distant from the advertising world. Many designers discouraged work that looked too blatant and showy or full of hype. We looked at advertising as more material and commercial; design was an artistic approach. Designers liked working alone. The short history of design reveals that designers were very much aligned with artists and very interested in aesthetics and beauty.

If you look back at the nineties, you'll see attitudes have changed. Design has merged more with advertising. The information and computer age has allowed us all to change our modus operandi. Design is no longer about methodically and physically cutting and pasting materials together. It is a fast operation of pressing, clicking, and sending, thus without deep thinking and/or meaning. The surge in this design-advertising mode relates to our rampant consumerism and well-to-do economy. Everything seems to be over-advertised and over-designed, which has led to consumers over-buying. Another change in the design procedure is that many graphic artists now work directly with marketing professionals and are inextricably linked to advertising. And with this link comes many political and ethical questions for the designer. For example, many artists working in larger design studios are faced with decisions such as whether to design new cigarette labels or logos for major corporations they may not agree with. They are involved in many dilemmas. Do they express their opinions or say no to certain projects? Or do they just go along with the status quo and disregard the ethical and political implications?

This new approach to design has brought about many articles. This summer, a manifesto was put out by leading designers and educators, and published in seven of the most influential design magazines. The title was "First Things First Manifesto 2000."<sup>1</sup> It blatantly accused designers of using their best energies and skills to "sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer, and heavy-duty recreational vehicles." The manifesto goes on to say "Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing, and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond, and interact." The manifesto calls for "a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication—a shift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning."

These are some of the issues in graphic design today. The manifesto calls for meaning in design and asks designers to question themselves. It asks us to look at our culture and our communities not just to see how we can make money, but to see how we can weave a stronger thread into the fabric of our society.

This brings me to the core of this essay. I would like to focus on a few unsung heroes of the design community in Minnesota and show you how they are helping various organizations that cannot afford to hire a designer to give them a look that matches the professional work they do.

First, I'd like to talk about the work from The Spangler Design Team. Mark Spangler has worked in the Twin Cities community for over twenty years. He spent much of his time teaching at the College of Visual Arts while continuing his professional work. His design studio has grown into a team of thirteen. Early on, when Mark thought about doing something for the community he realized it would be very easy to donate some money to a cause. After more thought he realized that he could utilize his own talents by becoming involved in pro bono design work—that is, "work for the public good." For him, this seemed more rewarding than just writ-

ing a check. He had a sense of wanting to be more involved with people and realized that what he had to offer—simply good design—could be more effective in raising money for key nonprofit groups of his choice. Mark's view is that today's nonprofits must become more competitive. To do this their image must look professional and they must have a strategy. His design team has helped many nonprofit groups in the Twin Cities area. When he works on large campaigns he sees his work out in the community and immediately feels a sense of pride. Mark likes the civic engagement and he says he feels a fulfillment just knowing he's doing something for someone that is helpful to the community. His philosophy in life is that "The positive energy you expel will always come back to you." Currently, the Spangler Design Team donates 13 percent of their gross sales to community work. A few of their pro bono clients include the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, the Minnesota Orchestra Volunteer Association, and the Minneapolis Aquatennial.

A similar understanding and involvement in the community comes from Ken Friberg Design in St. Paul. Ken had an early start in his career when he taught himself photography. In his early twenties he did many projects without pay mostly because it benefited both him and his client. The pro bono work helped him build up a portfolio while doing professional photo shoots for organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Minnesota Homeless Project. Ken says it wasn't always a conscious decision to do something for nothing—he just really enjoyed doing the work and added that his monetary concerns were not important in his younger days. Extra work allowed him to practice what he really enjoyed—the creative process. His experiences with working for these organizations were always positive and while doing the work he realized he was also making friends. When he takes on a project Ken says his relationship becomes a close connection to the organization and the people. This changes the environment of the work in a way that becomes more valuable and personal to him.

These are two designers that have small studios and are in charge of what they want to do and have created lives in design that are closely linked to their philosophy of helping others in their communities. There are many other designers in the Twin Cities and around the country that portray these beliefs. Together they are the ones that are balancing the imposing commercial ventures that we see everyday.

For designers who are lesser known and are looking for this type of volunteerism, there is an organization in the Twin Cities that will match a graphic designer to a needy nonprofit group. At the Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits (MAP) it is the job of Annie Lewis to find designers willing to do pro bono work. Annie admits that this is often a hard task, since some designers are less experienced and not quite ready to take on a large project. Most often the projects work well and the nonprofits are happy to get the help of a professional organization that can steer them in the right direction. MAP offers expert help in many areas, such as organizational development, consultation, marketing, and staff development. MAP was set up over twenty years ago when top corporate executives from Honeywell, NSP, St. Paul Companies, Bemis, and 1st Bank saw that the nonprofit organizations needed help in order to achieve their missions and goals. Without the work of MAP and the volunteer designers, many of these organizations would go unnoticed because they lack a visual presence.

Sui Lee, a regular volunteer, admits that she is busy working as a designer forty hours a week, but she volunteers for MAP because she truly wants to give nonprofit organizations a helping hand. Her work for the Midwest Rural Assistance Program demonstrates that the work of an artist can give integrity to an organization. Many graphic designers have worked with MAP on projects for organizations such as the Children's Dental Service.

Finally, I would like to talk about Sue Crolick. As a graphic designer she has a slightly different way of offering her help to the community. After spending over thirty years in design she reconsidered what she was doing in her career while recovering from a health problem. After some thought, she decided to team up with the Aliveness Project, a group working with people living with AIDS. Her first creative endeavor, a Paintbox Party, was a huge success. She developed a project where designers gathered together for a day and painted over 650 flat, corrugated boxes. She recognized some of the strong points of graphic designers—they're good colorists, great painters, and they don't mind getting messy. The Aliveness Project filled the boxes with various gifts to be delivered to people living with AIDS during the December holiday season. Sue became well known for her service through this project. She still continues to work with people and to reach out to the community. In 1994 she founded a nonprofit organization called Creatives for Causes. Its mission is to use the power of creativity and self-expression to help children at risk develop new visions of themselves. This project is more interactive than traditional pro bono work. She pairs a graphic designer with a young child for an intensive self-esteem project. The creatives become "Art Buddies" to the kids. In one event design volunteers worked with three hundred children from eighteen emergency shelters. In the "Animal Mask" workshops kids are asked about their favorite animals. They talk about the positive characteristics of an animal and they create their own masks with the help of their "Art Buddy." The event ends in a parade where the children are cheered on and have their pictures taken in a studio by a professional photographer. Sue believes that children at risk need mentoring and she has seen many positive results, including academic improvement, changes in a child's attitude, and higher self-esteem. This program has been a tremendous success and shows the strength of the art process in shaping a child's world.

In the book *The Good Society*,<sup>2</sup> Robert Bellah and others ask us to "devote ourselves to a cause." They encourage us to contribute to a "common good." These designers have all found their own interests and fulfillment by working with a cause that gives them satisfaction and enjoyment. In a similar book, *Soul of a Citizen Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*,<sup>3</sup> Paul Loeb asks some very big questions. "Which issues should we take on in this complex and demanding time? When do we act, and how do we do it?" More than ever before, our students are faced with these decisions. And as educators we can help them prepare. At St. Cloud State, we are taking small steps and adding this element into our curriculum. We have set up an Open Design Studio, which is run by my colleague Keith Christensen. Each semester Keith works with between six and eight design students on community-based projects. Most recently the students have designed a set of signs. Keith was approached by some members of the East St. Cloud Community Association who

were looking for a way to improve and uplift the image of their community. They wanted something that would give the people a sense of definition and show that East St. Cloud is an important place to live. Keith and the students talked with residents and asked them for words about what they thought was important in their lives. Our design students developed icons and added text to create bold signs that are now displayed prominently in an area that is becoming much more livable.

The students working on this project gained an understanding of community and were given the opportunity to work directly with a client in a professional situation. They now have a unique project to show in their portfolios. This is just one example of how we as educators can help students understand the importance of pro bono work and its benefits.

For this sampling of Twin City designers, design and the work they do is very meaningful and reflects the call of the Manifesto 2000. They determine value not by money, fame, or hype, but by meaningful, useful exchange. They take pride in weaving together a stronger fabric that is helping to strengthen our society.

#### Notes

1. Jonathan Barnbrook et al., "First Things First Manifesto 2000," *Adbusters*, Autumn 1999.
2. Robert Bellah et al., Eds., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
3. Paul Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction in a Cynical Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).