

MANAGING THE MEDIA:

A Guide for Activists

by Carol Fennelly

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This handbook is dedicated in loving memory of Mitch Snyder Who taught and inspired us And whose genius and brilliance continues to be a guide to good media management

INTRODUCTION

For more than twenty years the Community for Creative Non-Violence has worked in the Nation's Capital on issues of peace and justice. Our work has embraced direct service to homeless and destitute people, as well as resistance to unjust systems and structures. Throughout the years we have tried to raise the consciousness of, and bring needed change to, the world around us through education, direct action, the legal system, and the legislative process. Our most useful tool in this endeavor has been the media.

In Washington, D.C. are more than 3,000 accredited journalists from around the nation and the world. Over the years we have learned many lessons; some particular to this city, others generally applicable everywhere. This handbook is an attempt to communicate these lessons to other activists who may benefit from what we have learned -- our successes as well as our failures.

This handbook discusses ways and means of developing experienced media handlers within organizations, creating effective media events, developing relationships with the media, and "managing" the media. You will also find other useful media tips, a section on creating public service announcements (PSAs) and getting them aired, and a discussion from the perspective of a reporter.

A GENERAL PHILOSOPHY

Creating a Media Team

Within the "movement" there is the inclination to be egalitarian with respect to who should deal with the media. While this may create an atmosphere of internal fairness, it will not always get the desired results.

In our early years, we shared responsibility, taking turns as spokesperson, making press calls, and writing press releases, believing that everyone should have an opportunity to be our PR person. As times changed, and we saw our work in increasingly life and death terms, we recognized that those we serve deserve the best we can provide, rather than it offering an "experience" for those who may not be well suited for the job. Lives depend on what we do, and we must never lose sight of that truth.

Very often, those who are on the other side of issues that we support have more money, more power, more access. We can only create an equality of dialogue through our creativity, our commitment, and a professionalism that is equal to theirs. A professional approach to handling the media thus becomes essential.

A good, solid media team includes three important roles: a media coordinator, a writer, and a spokesperson. Each is critical to the others, and each is also vital independently to the process of effective media management. Roles may overlap, and often can be handled by the same person, but each position must be covered.

The Media Coordinator

The media coordinator must be someone who is personable, can succinctly articulate the issues, and is willing to spend a great deal of time on the telephone. This person makes sure press releases go out on time, keeps media lists updated, makes press calls, and works actively behind the scenes during events.

The media coordinator should become as well known behind the camera as the organization's spokesperson is in front of it. One person handling press calls can cultivate important relationships with assignment desk personnel, news producers, and camera people. These people are key to getting the coverage of events you need, and the kind of coverage you want.

Get to know these important people. Always remember that they are people, too. Find out who they are, if they have children, what they enjoy. Make them your best friends, take them to lunch. Develop a personal and working relationship with these pivotal members of the media. They are used to drones calling with stories, and are disarmed by people who actually care about who they are. Make sure they know you are serious about your issue, but don't be so boring or intense that they don't want to talk to you. Be pushy -- but not obnoxious. The important thing is to make sure that someone who can do something takes your call -- that you are not shuffled off to an intern who simply writes down facts and then puts them aside because they don't understand the importance or the urgency of your call. At the same time, interns may someday become assignment desk editors, so don't discount them entirely.

At an event, the media coordinator ensures that all press people receive a statement or handout, that all those present are acknowledged, that all props and sound equipment are in place, that one-on-one interview requests are satisfied, that the photo-op is the one that has been planned beforehand (i.e., that the right people are standing in the right place, etc.), and that the event runs smoothly. The spokesperson should not have to think about these things -- he or she needs to focus attention on what is to be said and not be distracted by details. Again, get to know the people who are there on and off camera. A friendly camera operator can help you get the picture or image you want to project; a producer can spin the story your way.

The Spokesperson

While the spokesperson must be someone who is articulate, he/she should also be more than that. He/She should be a good listener, have camera presence, be well-informed about your issue, be able to think quickly on his/her feet, have credibility, be able to develop a good rapport with a reporter, and be intuitive enough to know when a reporter is not friendly.

Know your interviewers. Do they have a reputation for honest reporting? Are they sympathetic to your issue? Are they fair? Or combative?

If you want to learn to be a good spokesperson, spend time listening to others who are good at the job. Research your issue until you know it inside and out and can hold your own in a conversation or debate. Think through each question that you are likely to be asked, and consider carefully the possible responses. Always be ready to revise and refine. Listen for "good lines" that others may use. Be humble. You always have more to learn

The Writer

Finally, the writer creates the under girding for all your press events. Clear, concise, effective writing is essential. Because someone is articulate does not mean he/she can write. Have a good editor available to "tighten up" news releases. Everything that is written and released must reflect accurately the position of your organization. Make sure more than one set of eyes from the media team reviews what goes out.

HANDLING THE MEDIA

Never lie to a reporter. If you don't know an answer, simply say so, but add that you will be happy to find out and get back to them. If you are not at liberty to discuss a particular aspect, again, say so, but never lie. Your lie will be discovered, and a good story will turn bad. We learned this the hard way.

The New York Times had learned about a discussion we had been having with the White House regarding the resolution of a campaign in which we were involved. They called for confirmation, and because we had not yet resolved things, as we denied the discussion. The reporter found out the truth, and what should have been a victorious and positive story turned into a negative piece the next day.

Don't be forced into saying something you don't want to say. If you don't feel comfortable answering a particular question, answer the one you want asked. Be clear about the point you want to get across. Always bring the discussion back to your points.

It is important to realize that much of the substance you want to communicate gets lost. The quote that is inevitably used is the one that is the most colorful. Make it count. Everything else becomes background.

Always remember that your story is in competition with many others. Only seventeen minutes of each half-hour news show is actually news. When you consider time spent on sports, entertainment, weather, and other items the time is even shorter. Your event needs to be interesting enough to capture a few of those precious minutes. This will be discussed in-depth in a later chapter.

We learned much from Ronald Reagan about media management. The most important lesson we learned is that it doesn't matter what you say as long as you say it first. What is printed about an issue first is what the public remembers. Everything from there is catch-up and defense. The Reagan Administration used this tactic masterfully. It became known as "disinformation." We are, of course, not advocating lying. We are suggesting that there are lessons to be learned here.

If you have a story, get it out with your own spin instead of waiting for the other side to do their twist on the truth. If you know there is going to be a negative story, counter it someplace else first. Some very damaging personal information about a CCNV member was about to be printed in a local paper. We countered by calling another paper and

giving them the story on our terms. When the other story appeared, it had been completely discredited already by the story we had planted.

Be smart. Be professional. Learn from others. Invite friendly media people to come to your organization to give workshops on interviews, and other topics. Understand the media people you are trying to influence and make sure they understand you.

CREATING A MEDIA EVENT

We often hear complaints from other activists that the media never covers their events, or that their message is distorted. While reporters often lack depth, or the ability or time to investigate a story thoroughly, quite often the problem is with the source. You must not only be able to communicate your story properly, you must also be able to create an interesting story that is worth telling -- and maybe worth retelling. If you are able to generate ongoing debate about your topic, all the better. Controversy is sometimes your best publicity.

Three elements can increase the possibility of coverage of your event: interesting people, interesting places, and interesting subjects.

Interesting People

If you don't have a person in your organization who can attract press attention, try to find someone who can. Whether we like it or not, the reality is that some people are media stars. Build relationships with those people, involve them in your issue, and don't hesitate to ask them to stand with you. Stars also come with egos that need to be stroked, and sometimes handling them can be more difficult than handling the media, so beware.

The other type of person who is a magnet for the media is one who can provide the human-interest story -- the victim of the policy you are addressing. Be sure the person is a sympathetic person who can present himself/herself well. Interview the individual yourself first. Don't take someone else's word for this person's credibility or believability. Ask all the embarrassing questions that a reporter might ask. Don't let yourself be surprised too late when the camera is rolling. In your pre-interview, spend some time helping the person craft answers that better communicate what he/she is trying to say. If necessary, gently recommend grooming changes. If clothes are needed, help out.

Interesting Places

Whenever possible, hold your event somewhere that will reflect your message. Create an effective backdrop. If you are addressing the lack of affordable housing, then go to empty public housing. If you are speaking about militarism, go to a military base. Try to find a place where members of the press don't usually go, but be sure it isn't so far afield that they can't find it (or want to). We once announced the creation of a new housing and homelessness curriculum for public schools. The president of the National Education

Association and the superintendent of our local school district were in attendance, but we held it at a school that was so difficult to find that the press missed the event altogether.

Interesting Subjects

One of the most overlooked and yet important elements in creating an interesting media event is visuals. "Talking heads" at press conferences are boring and commonplace. Find a way to make visible what it is you are trying to communicate. When planning a press event always keep in mind the photo-opt. What photo do you want to appear in the paper or on the evening news? Make sure the picture says something. A picture really can be worth a thousand words.

The best visual is the one that requires the fewest words to explain. The more words that are required, the more obtuse the message. During the war in the Middle East we wanted to find a way to remind people that lives were being lost to war daily. We had a long discussion about the nature of that demonstration. First, what was the symbol? Should we mark the dead from other nations? Which location would most clearly communicate the source of the deaths? We ended up with powerful but simple crosses representing each American killed. We planted them on the Ellipse, with the White House in the background. Only one sentence was needed to communicate our message. The photo virtually said it all.

Create a symbol that will represent what you are trying to communicate. While "talking heads" are boring, graphs and charts are only slightly better. A classic Washington media event took place when the Reagan Administration tried to declare catsup a vegetable in the public school lunch program. The sight of members of Congress sitting at a table with a glob of catsup as a side dish still ranks as one of the best news pictures ever taken. Catsup did not become a vegetable.

If there is an event scheduled by someone else that does not portray the truth as you understand it, then don't be afraid to find a way to change the message. One of our favorite examples of this occurred in 1981 when the Reagan Administration announced the first 10% tax cuts through the Kemp-Roth bill. The National Conservative Caucus had planned to serve the world's largest apple pie -- symbolizing a bigger piece of the pie for everyone -- at the Washington Monument. This was not exactly the truth since only those in upper income brackets would really benefit. Five members of CCNV dressed in large business suits, puffed out with pillows, each wearing large tags that bore the names of Ronald Reagan's rich "kitchen cabinet," ran up on the stage during the speeches and jumped into the pie yelling "It's all for me!" The National Conservative Caucus had done all the groundwork and had gathered the media; we simply redefined the message that was communicated.

If you are planning a large event, find ways to promote it in advance by creating other focal points. It is free advertising, and will build interest in what you really want covered. Maximize every opportunity. Where there isn't an opportunity, create one. A good example of a good opportunity came in 1982 when we planned a luncheon prepared from

food that had been pulled from dumpsters or otherwise discarded. Our intention was to promote food salvaging and focus attention on the amount of food wasted regularly in our nation. We planned the lunch for Capitol Hill, and had commitments for attendance from several senators and congress members. Two days prior to the feast, we took two members of Congress along with some press people to collect trash with us. With cameras rolling and clicking one elected official hoisted himself into a dumpster and began to pull out food. That picture went around the nation, and set the scene for our message to be delivered two days later.

Timing for a media event is critical to maximizing its potential. As a general rule, the best times for an event are Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. until 12noon. Morning hours will guarantee that deadlines are met, and will allow for further development of the story. Some newspapers do not publish on weekends, which means Friday events won't be covered. Stories covered on the evening news quite often have a bonus in weekday morning coverage as well. News offices usually have short crews on weekends, and simply do not have the personnel available at that time to cover your story. In addition, reporters who are regularly assigned to cover particular issues are often off on weekends. Finally, weekends have fewer news viewers.

Sometimes, however, it is worth taking a calculated risk in timing. For instance, CCNV holds an annual Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol. We schedule it in late afternoon to encourage live television coverage. News on weekends and holidays is often so slow that news directors are looking for stories.

One of the best news events I can remember recently revolved around a fund raising dinner for a boarder baby project. Two Motown groups flew in for the event, scheduled in the evening. The organization held a noon press conference at the home for boarder babies with the president of the non-profit, the celebrities, and some beautiful gurgling babies. After the speeches were made, the singers held the babies and crooned songs in an impromptu concert. The press ate it up.

The best of all media events has plenty of action and creativity. Find the ironies in situations. Inject humor when it is appropriate. Deliver your message with vigor and enthusiasm.

CREATING A PRESS LIST

Maintain two press lists: a press mailing list, and a press call list.

The press mailing list should contain the name of the publication, station, or network, its address, and the names of people that you know at each location. While it is important to mail releases to the assignment desk, it is also important to target specific reporters with whom you may have already developed an ongoing relationship. It is all right to send multiple releases to the same place. Your story may not interest one person, but hook someone else.

If you have a computerized press mailing list, organize it according to type and reach of the media organization (i.e., local, national, religious, women, etc.), so that you can target specific areas when necessary. For instance, your story may be strictly a local story, and sending a press release to all of the national media outlets is inappropriate.

Every area of the country falls into a media market. Large cities and the surrounding suburbs make up their own media markets, while rural areas may contain a vast geographic area. For instance, the Washington market includes Washington, D.C., and the areas immediately surrounding the beltway. It does not include Baltimore, which is its own market. Find out the geographic area that your media market covers.

Media markets are usually served by more than one television, radio, or wire service, or "news feed." When local stations are small they can rarely afford to have crews or reporters traveling to cover stories, so they contract with a larger service to get stories for them in other cities. For instance Cox Broadcasting serves Dayton, Atlanta, and Pittsburgh. Capitol Broadcast covers stories for the Hartford, Atlanta, and Philadelphia areas.

Learn about these media services in your area. Also find out which other areas they serve. Add them to your press lists. Your story may have interest in another area where a similar problem is being addressed. If there is some way you can tie your story into a story in another city, it is all the better.

A press call list is also essential. Always keep it handy. Your call list will be considerably smaller than your mailing list. CCNV maintains a mailing list of 1,800, but has a call list of just about 100.

Also organize your call list by category of media organization. Break down this list even further than the mailing list (i.e., wire services, local newspapers, local television, radio stations, network news, etc.). Again, this facilitates the press call process. Call lists should include the agency name, phone number, fax number, assignment desk names, reporters' names, special news areas they cover, and individual direct dial and home numbers when available.

Always keep press mailing lists and call lists up to date. Add new names as you meet new people. Your media coordinator should take names of producers and reporters at press events and make sure those names get added to your lists.

PRESS RELEASES AND CALLS

Timing the Press Release and Call

A press release can serve a number of purposes. It is usually used to announce an event but can be used as a handout, can become a position paper, or can be used to educate the media about a topic. In any case, it is always important to have something in writing.

Timing the release is important. If your event is planned well in advance it is good to mail it out at least a week ahead to ensure its inclusion on calendars. Sometimes, however, this is not possible. If a short lead time is all you have, faxing the release works just as well. When you must fax the release, be sure to target the person most likely to be interested in the event, since it is difficult to send to everyone on your list.

In some cases, there is no time for a press release at all. If you plan a clandestine action, or if something develops quickly and unpredictably, there may be only enough time for a press call as you walk out the door.

On occasions when we wanted to surprise someone, and could not release the information early, we took lots of quarters and a press list with us and called from a pay phone as our action was in progress. Sometimes, if we have been working with a particular reporter we feel we can trust, we release the information in advance to that person only, with the understanding that it must not be leaked to others. On other occasions we have called the media in advance and suggested that they would get a good story and picture if they appeared at a certain corner at a certain time. Because we have enough credibility with our local media, and because we don't use that tactic often, they usually show up.

A good validation of that strategy happened when we announced a march on City Hall. I called my friends in the media and told them that there would be something else that they would not want to miss -- a surprise. When everyone was in place, two members of CCNV climbed out the 12th floor window of the hotel across the street and rappelled off the side of the building with a 100 foot banner. Nobody was disappointed. In situations like that it is critical that a media coordinator be on hand to direct the cameras in the right direction. Don't forget, nobody knows what they are looking for, or what to expect.

All press releases should be followed with a press call. Be thorough with your calls. This is when your past dealings with producers and assignment desk personnel are important. Always ask for the person you know best. Be persistent. Just because your story was not covered after your last call, or even the last ten calls, doesn't mean that it will not be covered this time. Sometimes it depends on what else newsworthy is going on at the time, but good, persistent press work tends to have a cumulative effect.

Writing the Release

Press releases are the first encounter a media outlet will have with your event. While you want to be thorough and include all the information, and the underlying data, you also need to be succinct. In some large media markets, hundreds of press releases can cross an assignment desk each day. If your release is too wordy, it will likely be ignored.

The first paragraph should include the "five W's" -- who, what, where, when, and why. Don't forget, your first goal is to get them to come to your event. If you have a high-profile person who will attract media, include his name in this first paragraph.

The next paragraphs should include an expansion on the purpose of the event, and some history of what led up to it. Don't assume that the person who will be reading the release will necessarily be up to date on recent developments in your issue. If the location of your event is significant, include a discussion of its importance. It is also important to include some brief background material on any special people who will be in attendance.

The release should include a quote from the spokesperson for your organization. Try to be pithy, clear, and to the point. This will very often be the quote used in the print media. Make it count.

Finally, include a brief description of your organization. This is particularly important if you are a new organization, a re-formed organization, or as yet unknown to the media.

Before you write your release, sit down and list the points you wish to make. Be clear. Don't ramble. While you need to include enough background information to educate, you don't need to say everything in the release. That is the purpose of the press event.

The form of the press release can vary. There are, however, a few elements common to all press releases. Always begin with the date the information can be released. Somewhere at the top of the page type "PRESS RELEASE" several times. All press releases end with "# # #" or "-30-" typed in the middle of the page toward the bottom of the release. Be sure to include contact names (it is best to have two names) and their phone numbers. Press releases should always be printed on your letterhead.

Press Calls

In many ways the press calls you make are more important than the press release. Although it is critical to have a written press statement that can be delivered or faxed upon request, it is during the call that you have the opportunity to really sell your story. In addition, press calls give the assignment desk person or the reporter the opportunity to ask questions, clarify the issue, and develop the "background" information that will be necessary to give depth to your story. It is during press calls that important relationships begin to be forged with the media outlet.

Be sensitive to the people on the other end of the telephone. If they seem rushed, don't keep them any longer than you need to. If they seem to have more time, chat them up.

Think through what you have to say very carefully before you ever lift the receiver. Write it down or rehearse it if necessary. Start with the less important calls in order to smooth and develop your "rap."

Be succinct and clear, yet prepared to go into details if there is an opportunity. Always get the "who," "what," "where," and "when" out first. While the "why" is important, your first purpose is to get the news crew to the event.

Learn the names of assignment desk editors, and always keep them updated on your press list. When developing your list it may be useful to call the news outlets and get the names of these important people (weekend assignment editors are often different than weekday editors). Ask for them by name. You are less likely to get shuffled off to an intern if you can ask for a specific person. Always try to work with the same person -- this is how relationships develop.

A typical press call should begin like this: "Hello, this is Carol Fennelly at the Community for Creative Non-Violence. I'm calling to be sure you received the press release we sent about the rally to oppose the closing of city shelters scheduled for Monday, December 2 at 12 noon at the District Building." Be sure to leave your telephone number so you can be reached for follow-up questions. If you can go into greater detail, go for it. But again, be sensitive to the person on the other end of the line. If the reporter seems to be rushing, don't irritate him/her with more verbiage. Your message is out, and they will call back when they have more time. If your press release has been lost among the hundreds that have crossed their desk, fax or deliver another immediately. Have an assistant ready to get it out quickly, while you are still on their mind.

Once you have made a few initial practice calls, follow this procedure. Start with the wire services (i.e., Associated Press and United Press International) since they can rapidly get the news out to everybody else. Follow those calls with television stations, since they have more staff to try to get to the location of your media function. Those contacts should be followed with calls to newspapers next, then radio stations. Don't forget those independent news feeds mentioned earlier. Calls should always be made the morning of the event. You can generally get a good sense of who to expect to show up. If you have enough time, calls should also be made one or two days before as well. If we have a large event scheduled, and know well in advance that it is going to occur, we send out a press release the week before, make calls two days prior, and the morning of the event. Be thorough. What does not get a response the first time, only builds for your next call. No call is a wasted call. Each one helps keep your cause in the forefront.

Community for Creative Non-Violence December 20, 1991
For Immediate Release
PRESS RELEASE

CCNV HOSTS TENTH ANNUAL CHRISTMAS EVE PARTY FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE

The Community for Creative Non-Violence is hosting two parties for homeless people on December 24. The first, a party for homeless families, will be held at The Great Hall of the Hubert Humphrey Building at 3rd and Independence from 2:00 - 3:30 p.m. The second party is for the single residents of CCNV's Federal City Shelter, 425 Second Street, NW, and is scheduled for 5:00 - 7:00 p.m. Boxing great Sugar Ray Leonard, Senator Jesse Jackson, and Washington Redskins Darrell Green, Ron Hiddleton, Raleigh McKenzie, Ed Simmons, George Starke and Ricky Sanders are expected to make

appearances at the party for homeless children and their mothers. Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly and Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis Sullivan have been invited to attend as well.

Polaroid has contributed film and cameras to allow the children to take away pictures of themselves with their favorite athlete or politician. In addition, food will be served, gifts will be distributed clowns and magicians will entertain, and performers will present a show for the children. The District Government will provide transportation for the families from the shelters it operates to the HHS building. At the party for the 1500 single adults housed at CCNV's Federal City Shelter choirs and bands will perform, Senator Jesse Jackson will visit, gifts will be distributed, and a special dinner will be served.

"For those who are homeless, Christmas is a time of enormous emptiness and loneliness and pain. It is a time of memories of better days. A time of hopes and dreams abandoned, just as they themselves, have been abandoned," said CCNV spokesperson Carol Fennelly. "Christmas Eve -- the night of great and joyful expectations -- is particularly difficult for those who little to expect but more of the same. That is why we have had this party for the last ten years." Over fifty organizations, and businesses, and hundreds of individuals have joined with CCNV to plan this year's parties (see attached list).

-30-

For more information contact: Carol Fennelly or Keith Mitchell -- 202-393-1909 or 202-595-1909

425 second Street, NW Washington, D.C. 20001

THE PSA

The public service announcement serves many purposes. It raises consciousness, educates, announces an event, or generates funds or other material needs. Depending upon the type of PSA you create, a radio or TV station may air it at no cost. Most stations have an employee assigned to deal with public affairs. That person is responsible for deciding which public service announcements get on the air. When you have a PSA, contact that person well in advance to find out what kind of lead time they may need. If you are producing a taped PSA find out what format they need (i.e., television stations usually want 3/4" or 1 " tape, while radio stations may want reel-to-reel or cassette).

Stations will usually only run 10, 30, or 60 second announcements. Prepare them in all three lengths. If your public service announcement endorses a candidate, specific legislation, or promotes merchandise, it is considered advertising, and you will be charged a fee. If you are simply educating, you can usually find a station to air it at no cost. In addition, stations often have community billboards to advertise events, volunteer needs, or material needs (although they may not be willing to make fundraising

pleas). Community billboard-type announcements are better submitted in writing for announcers to read on the air. Also, if you do not have the ability to prepare your own taped PSA, write it down (again, in 10, 30 and 60 second versions) and submit it. Be sure to read it out loud to verify the length of each version.

Here is an example:

60 second: The Community for Creative Non-Violence is holding a fundraising party and auction at the Hard Rock Cafe on Tuesday, November 12, from 8 p.m. until midnight. Live music will be provided by Bo Diddley, Jr. and Jennifer Ferguson. A delicious free buffet, cash bar, and a live and silent auction are also planned. Actors Armand Asante and Michael O'Keefe, Channel 7's Paul Berry, and Washington Redskin's Darrell Green and George Stark will be guest auctioneers. Auction items include a dress worn by former Supreme Mary Wilson, a jacket worn by Sugar Ray Leonard during the third Duran fight, and articles of clothing from the entire cast of "L.A. Law." The Hard Rock Cafe is located at 10th and E Streets, NW. Tickets are \$ 15 and available at the door or at Ticket Master. For more information contact CCNV at 202-393-1909.

30 second: The Community for Creative Non-Violence is holding a fundraising party and auction at the Hard Rock Cafe on Tuesday, November 12, from 8 p.m. until midnight. Live music, a free buffet, cash bar, and a live and silent auction are planned. Armand Asante, Michael O'Keefe, Paul Berry, Darrell Green, and George Stark will be guest auctioneers. The Hard Rock Cafe is located at 10th and E Streets, NW. Tickets are \$ 15. Contact CCNV at 393-1909.

10 second: The Community for Creative Non-Violence is holding a fundraising party and auction at the Hard Rock Cafe on Tuesday, November 12, from 8 p.m. until midnight. The Hard Rock Cafe is located at 10th and E Streets, NW.

Creating a public service announcement that educates or raises consciousness is a little more difficult and requires a more thoughtful approach. These are best pre-taped in order to get the desired effect. First, you must identify the particular audience you wish to reach. Is it Middle America? Working people? Women? Parents? It is important to frame your message in a way that will reach that population? What are their concerns in relation to your issue? What myths or misconceptions do you need to overcome? What action do you hope to get them to take?

Here is an example of a PSA we prepared to educate people about homelessness. We were targeting middle-class people, and trying to overcome the image that homeless people do not want to work. It was used in a paid political campaign to stop D.C. City Counsel action that rolled back a right-to-shelter law then effective in the District.

Female Voice: My name is Charlotte Banks. I used to be homeless. But now I'm back on my feet. I used to be a nurse's assistant. Then my hospital had to lay some of us off, and I couldn't find a decent job. I have two boys, three and five. From night to night we didn't know where we were going to sleep. Then we got a spot in a shelter. It wasn't home, but

it was safe and it was clean. The shelter counselor told me about a program where I could get a nursing degree. I graduated this summer. Now I have a full time job and a place of my own. Without the shelter I would still be homeless. Male Voice: D.C. may be closing the book on stories like Charlotte's. The City Council wants to roll back the law that provides overnight shelter. You can help homeless people turn their lives around. Vote for Referendum 5 on November 6.

This did not cost us any money to create. A public relations firm wrote the scripts and supervised production. A local audio visual firm donated use of equipment, and the players donated their time. While we paid for air time, had we replaced the reference to the political campaign with a plea for volunteers it would have been aired free of charge. PSAs are a great way to advertise events, educate the public, get volunteers, and raise awareness of your issue. Don't overlook them as effective media too.

A VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE

This final chapter is an interview with a long-time friend of the Community for Creative Non-Violence. He is a well respected newsman in the Washington area, having practiced his craft for over twenty years. He wishes to remain anonymous.

CAROL: What do you look for when deciding whether or not to cover a media event or press conference? If you have 10 media events, what makes you choose the three that you cover?

REPORTER: We look for high visibility in terms of interest (high interest in the story and the people that are affected by it); how unique or different the story maybe; and the availability of getting the elements that we want for the story. In other words we don't expect the story to be easy, but it is better if the parties that are generating the story understand what our needs are in terms of making people available, making the story visual as opposed to talking head. For instance, if there is a news conference, it is helpful if there is some visual support. Case in point: If you're talking about a particular subject, instead of having your press conference in a room which has nothing to do with the subject, have it at a location where you could demonstrate the issue. What you give to the television station is a "two-for." You're giving them the information, but you're also giving them the visual. You visualize the story, so for the reporter it's a matter of turning from you to the sight. Or it may be that the person who is doing the news conference is also the person involved in some visual aspect of the story. A prime example is the J.W. Marriott story. [To protest the closing of 800 city-funded shelter beds, on August 12, 1991, two members of CCNV rappelled from the 12th floor of the J.W. Marriott Hotel, which is located directly across the street from the office of the mayor.] The news conference was held by a guy hanging from the side of a building. I think that you executed a story in a way that provided you with great coverage and you disposed of the issue in a very forthright manner. How bad is it? It's bad enough for me to hang over the side of this building. And you had a very articulate person there, you had somebody that the people, the movers and shakers could identify with. Young, white, upscale looking fellow, who obviously wasn't homeless but there he hung! He was not my idea of a

homeless person. So you had a number of elements in that story that argued well for the purpose. Every television station had it as a lead story. You can't do that every day, you don't hit a home run every day. The best hitters in baseball usually get a hit every three or four times, the best. Your ratio's not even going to be that good, but if you can do that on occasion and gain a kind of attention, you're ahead.

CAROL: One of the things we struggled with right after that was everyone was so high off of all the press that they wanted to go back and do it again. I said no, because it becomes "gimmicky."

REPORTER: Not only that, you also start to discredit yourselves. One likes to believe, even though we know better, that this was a spontaneous reaction to frustration and/or anger, which is much easier to deal with than if it is the contrived thought from Carol's mind. Reporters are human beings who work for a living, who make money, have houses, babies. They feel about the homeless the same way that maybe 80% of Americans feel about the homeless or would like to feel about the homeless. Hell, if I can work, why can't they? Why are the bums out there? So don't think of the reporters as journalists, or as cameramen, or as your friends. They're not. And the truth be known, some of them probably don't like you. Whatever information that is distilled, will be distilled through that silo. So you have to keep that in mind and keep your efforts in a way that are above reproach -- above criticism for being redundant. You don't want to do everything radically. Because then you destroy the effectiveness of it. Grade your successes based on what you think is important. What you think is important may not be important to the rest of the city. Sure, every day we'd like to be on the front page of the Washington Post or with a lead story on a television station. Well, that's just not the way it's going to be. Look at what you think an event is worth. Decide where you think a story ought to play, and then do enough to get that -- to have that impact. Ask these questions: What is the purpose of publicity and what is the purpose in doing this? Who do we want to get to? If we're trying to impress Ward 3 residents would a story on page three of the Post do that? If we're trying to impress the citywide press do we need to be front page? What do we need to do to generate and put forth that effort? It's a skill. One of the organizations that comes to mind in this city is a hotel and a lady who works there. She sends out all kinds of crap, all the time. I mean she fires it out. The Germans are coming to town and they own the hotel. They're going to have a bed-making contest (we covered it) -- the fastest bed-making in the world. Her idea is that she knows she's not going to hit a home run every day. But it's out there. She also understands another important element. That element is the element of guilt on the part of the reporter and the editors and everybody else. I'm sitting here as a reporter I get ten press releases from you and I don't cover any of them. Eleven of them and I feel really guilty. That's something that no one ever thinks about. One-to-one contact is important. At every station have a contact person, whether it's an assignment editor or a reporter. If he says no, you say, "okay, I just wanted to let you know about this but I understand." "Well, I'll send you the next one."

CAROL: Which leads me to one of my questions. How important is it to develop friendly relationships with reporters, producers, cameramen and assignment desk personnel?

REPORTER: I think that's a good point. It is very important. It can't hurt. You may find that there's resistance on the part of various reporters and/or assignment editors and producers. But relationships are useful. Just like the other day you called me and said, "Are you doing this story?" If I weren't, I'd be able to say to you, "Hey, I may or may not be." And I can do that. Our relationship is that it doesn't violate my ethics or you. And I'll say, "Carol, I can't talk to you about this, but yeah we're taking a look. We've got some calls and reports, and all I'm going to tell you is I'm going to be fair. And that's all I'm going to do." And you'll press me, and when I have had enough I'll say, "Carol, I'm not going to talk to you about that." You know, and you'll stop. When I'm on the beat, however, I may be a lot less willing to develop a relationship with anyone, other than the fact that I'm approachable. It doesn't make any difference, it's not personal. And sometimes it is. But it cannot be personal to your people; it has to be your job, it has to be a part of what you do. As Colleen at the hotel does, she is willing to take "No" and laugh and smile and say, "I'll see you next time." She may get off of the phone and say, "That lowdown son of a bitch! He just never does anything for me." But I don't hear that. What I hear is okay. Because she knows that sooner or later there's going to be something that she's going to hit me with. She also laughs about the stuff that she knows is bullshit. Don't sell chicken shit as chicken soup when you know it's chicken shit. If it's chicken shit, say it's chicken shit. You reach in there and say, "But look, there is a piece of chicken in there, there's a gem in there." A reporter appreciates it. You sit up there talking about how important this event is and he says, "I know it's chicken shit, you know it's chicken shit, the world knows it's chicken shit, so who are you insulting?" Instead, approach it this way. "Look, this is not huge, but I think there's a gem in this, can you pull something out of it for me? We really need to get this to the people." Don't be afraid to have that kind of relationship. You need the media. You can do all the rabble-rousing you want to do, but unless you have the voice to carry that, it doesn't make any difference. You can go down and tear up the street. But if we don't take pictures of the street or the Post doesn't report it, it's just one street torn up. You may piss-off the people on that street, but nobody else knows about it. So it is a love-hate relationship. You can't live with us, and you can't live without us. We don't do what you want; we do exactly what you want. We don't cover it; we give you too much. We jump when you don't expect us to; we don't jump when you expect us to. You sit down and you think of something that is going to be great and you can't get a nibble out of it.

CAROL: Is there such a thing as "off the record," and how honest should one be with the media?

REPORTER: "Off the record" is a noble idea. "Off the record" is as off the record as the reporter is on target with his honesty and character. It is very difficult for any human being to know information that is a great story on or off the record. Ben Bradlee is a prime example. He knows stories that he's never told. The important thing is to know the person you're dealing with. I can tell you to be very careful about that. I have worked with reporters who have said this is off the record to get the information, but then have used it. Or given it to somebody else to use, and then have claimed that they knew nothing about it. I have worked with reporters who say "off the record" and it is off the record. So I think it's really a matter of knowing the person you are dealing with. It is also

important to point out that you should never say something is off the record when what you really want to do is get it reported. That's very dangerous. This is a very important point. If you mean it to be off the record, then make sure you mean it to be off the record. Don't tease with off the record, when you really want it to come out. If what you're saying is that you don't want it attributed to you, that's different. You've got to watch out, "Take care of me, but here's some information." That's different than saying, "Look, this is purely off the record. This is for background to make you understand." Finally, the third point is, if it is off the record, make sure it is off the record. Make sure it means something. Don't use off the record when what your giving is crap! Trying to endear yourself to the reporter by telling him, "Let me tell you something off the record," when you know it's bullshit or it's already out there, or you know he can find it out elsewhere. The reporter is sitting there saying you've got to be kidding. Why the hell is that off the record? What's the game here? You're trying to make me feel that we're big buddies? Come on, I can see through that. I'm going to burn you every time you do that. If it's off the record, make sure it is.

CAROL: The next question has to do with framing the story. How do you get a reporter to ask the right questions?

REPORTER: You don't. You give the reporter the right answers. What I mean by that is, you turn questions. How do you turn questions? What you want to get out to me is the facts. For instance, if I say to you, "The shelter is out of money, so you must not be providing services." Your response is, that is not the way it really is. As a matter of fact, we have fed "x" number of people and our plan for the future is to do so and so. We've got this grant that's just come in. Turning my question. If you get angry, I've got a great story. If you respond instead, "How dare you say that. That's not true, who said that?" That doesn't get the point across. Give them a direct answer to the question. If it's not true, say it's not true. If you're not sure or don't have an answer, say so. Say, "What do you mean? Explain your question," giving you a chance to think about the answer that you want to give. But you can only do that once, you can't do it every time. Or you can say, "We're doing the very best that we can. How would you suggest that we do it?" Now, I'm not going to answer, and you've got to be careful with this. The most important thing is to understand the questions that you get. There are only so many different types of questions. Turn those questions. You're never going to get the reporter to ask the questions that you want asked. But you can give the reporter the answer that you want to give. As an example. Why are you fighting with the Mayor when the Mayor is doing everything she can? What you want to talk about is the fact that there are no buses picking up your people. You'd say, "I'm sure that the Mayor is doing all that she can do or that she thinks she is, and we applaud that, but there are some little things. Let me give you an example of a small thing that we think the Mayor could be effective with, that our people need." Now this has nothing to do with my question. I don't even know your people want to talk about buses. And you drop the gem! Getting a reporter to ask the right questions is the easiest part of your job. Getting them to where you can talk to them is the hard part. I watch people who say, "God we had this whole press corps there, but they didn't ask us the right questions." We were all there! But you didn't give the right answers!

CAROL: What is the best way to deal with a question you don't want to answer?

REPORTER: Have a direction. It's called verbal fencing -- if I really want an answer from you on something and you don't want to answer. It's a very thin line between whether you are evading the question or the reporter is badgering you. But you can turn it and say, "You know, that's a very personal thing and I guess Haven't really come to grips with it. But when I do, I'll be glad to give you an answer to that." Now you've disarmed me. Now if I come back and ask you again, my conscience is saying, "Hey asshole, she told you!" You see, you are putting me on the defensive in a nice way because I can't come back to that issue. That's one-way to do it. You may answer a question within a question by not answering. You're giving an answer that you want the audience to know. If the reporter persists, you look at him, "I don't think you are really hearing what I'm saying." But you've got to be careful. You have to be sure that your response is such that you don't give the reporter the advantage. You are not going to keep up with them. They know ways of asking you things that you haven't thought of. You must keep that in mind. Remember that they are professional questioners. That's what they do. Don't compete with them, don't fence with them. Get your point across, turn the question. When they say that you're not answering the question, say, "I am, I'm answering the question, I'm just not giving you the answer that you probably want. But I am answering your question."

CAROL: How do you deal with a hostile reporter?

REPORTER: You remember the bottom line here. That if you wrestle with a pig, you will get dirty. Don't wrestle with pigs. If a person has an intent on getting you dirty, the only way you're going to stay away is to stay away. Don't wrestle with a hostile reporter. You may speak of the hostility. You may say, "I'm sorry, I don't understand your anger and frustrations here. I'm trying to respond." But you don't wrestle with a pig.

CAROL: One of the things you have talked about is remaining cool. Don't go off and look like a maniac.

REPORTER: Because that's going to be the story. And that's what I mean here. Ask yourself these questions: "Why is this reporter upset? Is it because they've been forced to cover a story they don't want to cover? Is it because they had a bad day at home? Or is it because they're out to try to see if they can't provide a little spark on the air here?" You may know the reporter and there is some history that would explain, or justify at least, or give you some idea why the person is feeling what he's feeling. If a person is just a hostile reporter, he's probably looking to try to agitate you, to get you to say something, to be animated, to go off. I love it when I get in and ask a question and someone goes off into one of those routines. You can be sure that it is going to be a lead story in the newscast. Look at this idiot go off. You don't want to do that, unless there's a reason.

CAROL: What kind of advice can you give for creating a good camera presence?

REPORTER: That's a very important element to always be considered. Everybody is not

camera pretty. I mean male and female. I'm not just talking about looks. I'm talking about approaches. If someone stutters, don't make them your spokesperson. If you've got someone who obviously has winks and blinks, don't make them a spokesperson. You put your best foot forward. People know they have other strengths that may not be in front of the camera. Everyone likes to bring themselves up to the point of being that spokesperson

REPORTER: That's a very important element to always be considered. Everybody is not camera pretty. I mean male and female. I'm not just talking about looks. I'm talking about approaches. If someone stutters, don't make them your spokesperson. If you've got someone who obviously has winks and blinks, don't make them a spokesperson. You put your best foot forward. People know they have other strengths that may not be in front of the camera. Everyone likes to bring themselves up to the point of being that spokesperson -- "I can do it!" "No you can't do it!" You determine who really ought to be up front, who ought to be the spokesperson. The reporters are going to ask for that person. People ought to understand that and be happy with it. If the spokesperson can't do it, it's important they talk to the reporter. "I can't do it but I'm going to have so and so." Then he doesn't feel like he's being shuffled off. The reporter may think "She's too good to talk to me? Okay, I'll show them." Then you've got a negative story even though it could be positive because the reporter feels like she's being shuffled all over the place. They won't deal with you. Those people that are selected should be selected on the basis of their compassion and knowledge of the given subject. Certainly to be considered is their camera presence. Their look -- the image they portray and whether they are the best person to be doing the job. Simple as that. If all those things don't work, then the person that is the most identified ought to be in the role. You're going to have to appear to be a real camera hog. That's okay, that's just the way it is.

CAROL: What do you look for in a sound bite?

REPORTER: Thirty seconds. Tight, right and on the money. What I'm looking at is something that gets the message across with some feeling, some compassion, not dramatics. I'm looking for a piece that my audience is going to say, "whoa!" I'm looking for that piece that says in 30 seconds, "We are still fighting the same kind of frustration and discrimination that we have fought for years. People don't have houses. People are sleeping on the streets. People are cold. People are going to die out here unless something is done. Whoa, jeez, damn." You talked about discrimination, and you talked about what the problem is. If you're going to make that point in three minutes, you're not going to get it on the air. If you make your point in 25 or 30 seconds, you're going to see that tape.

CAROL: If you had one piece of advice for people dealing with the media, what would it be?

REPORTER: Be honest. You get caught in a lie every time. Again, you're dealing with a professional questioner, a journalist. Chances are, when he comes there he already has the answer to what he's asking you. He just wants to see what your answer is. And always remember that there are all kinds of sides to every story. The only side to be on is the

right side. That is, to say what is factual. That way you can't get caught. If there are 200 people that need beds, don't say 500. You get caught. The story will be CCNV, in an effort to try to blackmail money out of the city has inflated the numbers of people. No matter what else you say, you first have to deal with your inaccuracy. Be honest with the media. Understand and realize that you're dealing with people, just like you. They probably know less about what you are doing than you think. They have a job to do. The product I produce is on the air. I need a story as badly as you need it covered. Now, when I come there I come there with an idea on doing a story. I'm not coming over there to do a nice little tapioca piece on you. Put your best face on it. The other thing is to listen carefully to the story. So often because it's not exactly the story that you want told, the way you want it, with all the plus's in it, you'll say, "Hey, that son of a bitch!" But wait a minute, what did the audience hear? How did they perceive it? Was it a win? If it was half good, mark it up as a win.

CAROL: It's very hard to be objective about your story on the air.

REPORTER: You know all of this backwards. Here you're talking about a lifetime, a week, or a month, an activity, or whatever. I'm giving you a minute-thirty. Damn right! How the hell can I tell everything you are working on and all you have been doing in a minute-thirty.

CAROL: And many people don't understand that. Unless it was exactly the spin we want, and exactly the words we want, we are disappointed. I learned a longtime ago that out of every 30-minute news show, only 17 minutes are actually news.

REPORTER: No, no not even that! No it's not news it's weather, it's sports, it's entertainment. It's more like eight minutes.

CAROL: Getting a piece of that is difficult, especially in this city, with all that is happening.

REPORTER: Competition, you are competing for time. You are competing, so a minute and a half if a hell of a lot of time. Today we're going to tell you everything you need to know about Maryland layoffs in a two-minute package. Two minutes is what we have, to talk about the biggest story of the day. We gave the D.C. layoff's a minute-forty. So how much time am I going to give the CCNV today? If the major story of the day is a minute-forty, what is CCNV going to get? These are things people just have to understand. Understanding this makes professionalism on your part even more critical.