

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ken Brecher: Time to Talk

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, November 21st, 2018

He began and ended with an apology; within those brackets he spoke of plans for the future, and actions in the past.

“I regret that I didn’t talk to you sooner. I would have liked to have done a better job of rolling this out, and I think it may have been reassuring to some people if they had heard from me directly,” Library Foundation President Ken Brecher said in our discussion yesterday. We met in the Library Foundation offices at the downtown Central Library. Rebecca Shehee, Vice President of Development and External Affairs, and Communications Director Leah Price also sat at the large wooden table.

“More than anything else, I think your readers may want to know what happened,” said Brecher. “Four and a half years ago, I had a realization we needed to evolve as a foundation. The library was doing fine work. We needed to support them, and help create the definition of a 21st century library. I could think of no better way than with public programs.”

“I began by learning about Los Angeles and going to the branches; I discovered that we had 470 square miles of branches. Every place I learned something, and I kept a very careful record. I would speak to the librarians, I would speak to people in line checking out books, I’d speak to kids who were there doing their homework,” Brecher continued.

Consultants

Brecher said that he felt the public programs were not reaching a broad enough audience. “We had a summit of the ALOUD team, we brought in fantastic consultants, but the consultants told us things that we were not expecting to hear, and I must say really threw me,” he said.

Based on my reporting, there were two studies done by consultants. One was an assessment of data from ALOUD’s audience survey cards. The other was a more formal report done by New York-based consultant Pat Dandonoli. Based on my review of the Dandonoli report, it lays out big, broad ideas and goals, not just for ALOUD, but for the Foundation itself, and it indicates more needs and communities than are attainable with the Foundation’s \$7 million budget. It’s more of an idea study, and not truly plan.

Diversity is a significant issue, both cultural and of physical location. In the summer of 2018, ALOUD had no white males among its main guests. For at least 10 years, ALOUD has also done programs “off-site” — i.e., at locations other than the downtown Central Library — and in recent

years at the Wallis, the Writers Guild Theatre, the Orpheum, the Aratani, and the Broad Stage. Brecher said that events at these geographically spread-out, larger venues were at his instigation: “I said let’s try these, let’s do these, let’s work with these organizations.”

Audience Attendance

We focused on most of the ALOUD events, which occur at the Central Library’s Mark Taper Auditorium. Brecher, who attended almost all ALOUD programs, became aware of what he described as a “very, very serious problem. Here was this incredibly vibrant program which seemed to be bringing in great people, but people weren’t coming.”

According to Brecher and Shehee, 127 people were getting 25% of all ALOUD tickets, and there were an average of 50 empty seats per event, in a venue that seats 227. I raised a question about these numbers; according to the Foundation’s own newsletters, ALOUD events were running at or very close to capacity. For example, in Spring, 2015, the Foundation newsletter said that 13,596 people attended 58 events (average: 234 per event); Spring, 2016, 10,962 people attended 51 events (average: 215 per event); Spring, 2017, 11,165 attended 47 events (average: 237 per event). In addition, again according to the Foundation newsletter, the ALOUD Vimeo channel had 174,719 views as of Spring, 2016. When I raised the seating capacity question, Shehee told me that the newsletter figures were not correct, or must include some other activities, as she was certain that 50 seats were unfilled on average.

To dive into this a bit deeper, 50 unfilled seats — which is close to 80% capacity — is, in my experience, pretty good for weeknight cultural programming, especially when the event is free. Free tickets mean that an audience member has no “investment” in showing up.

Losing Money and Donor Fatigue

However, according to Brecher, the attendance figures were only part of the problem. “We were not breaking even,” he said. “Over a period of time we actually lost over six hundred thousand dollars.”

How can a foundation presenting free programs lose money? Brecher said that donor support was falling off: “I would meet with heads of foundations, and they would say, ‘Well, it’s the same thing that’s been going on for a very long time.’ I said, ‘Well, its valuable.’ And they said, ‘Well, of course it’s valuable but it’s the same thing you’ve been doing for so many years.’”

Brecher and Shehee also said that book sales, an additional source of revenue for ALOUD events, were soft. At a typical ALOUD event, 47 books would be sold. In contrast, when ALOUD presented James Comey at the 880-seat Aratani Theatre, they sold 665 books.

I’ll note that all live events are always a compromise between intimacy and scale. Larger venues are better for larger-drawing names.

Reorganization

Brecher said he presented the attendance and “not breaking even” problem to Louise Steinman, director of the ALOUD series, and Maureen Moore, ALOUD’s associate director. “I said, ‘Let’s take this on. I have great confidence that you can do it.’ Diversity may have been in the authors, but it certainly was not in the audience. I said we can’t just be doing programs on weeknights, who

can get downtown? If we don't make changes, expand the vision, there will be no ALOUD in five years time because there is no need for it."

And Steinman and Moore pushed back on that? "We just weren't aligned, that's the nicest way that I can say it," said Brecher. "I came to the conclusion that I had to reorganize the whole structure of public programming."

Optics of the Firing

Let's roll back to what started this entire controversy, I said. On August 27, Steinman and Moore were fired. It feels like there was a lack of understanding of the ALOUD community. Maybe 127 people got 25% of the tickets, but they were a passionate, white-hot center of a literary community. In the way you let Steinman and Moore go you created a situation where the optics pretty much asked for protest.

Brecher responded: "Four and a half years. Four and a half years of trying to get to this place and very intensely saying to them, and as I said to the whole staff, this is an opportunity. We had a charge — our board said to us, 'We have a purpose statement: To change Los Angeles and the world through the power of libraries.'"

I pushed further on the firing process. That was a pretty corporatist way to do it, I remarked. Rarely one says, "We're walking you out the door." Usually you say, "This is not going to work, here's your severance package. We're going to put out a press release saying you've resigned, we're going to throw you a party and say thank you." Even when people are fired, that's often the way it's done. Why not do it that way and create better optics?

Brecher responded: "I'm not going to comment on this, I can't comment on this. I have tremendous respect for them; they're going to say what they want to say."

Following our meeting, I emailed for a clarification on that statement: "It has been my understanding that in fact Louise and Maureen have been instructed not to comment as a condition of their severance package (which is the reason I have avoided reaching out to them)," I wrote. "Is that in fact incorrect? In other words, are they free to say what they want to say, without imperiling their severance?"

Communications Director Leah Price answered: "Their attorneys may have instructed them not to comment while we are still negotiating with both parties."

Jessica Strand

On October 18 the Library Foundation [announced](#) the appointment of Jessica Strand to the new position of Director, Public Programs.

Brecher told me that Strand first came to his attention in 2014, through an exchange program called the Innovation Leadership Project, during which Strand spent time with the Los Angeles Library and also the Library Foundation. According to Brecher she will roll out her programs in the new year. Cultural Weekly has requested an interview with her.

At present, Strand is meeting with the heads of other programs, such as The Hammer and CAP-UCLA, and with other members of the community.

According to the group of writers who organized to protest Steinman and Moore's firing, the self-described Ad Hoc Committee, Strand has not yet scheduled a meeting with any of them.

Foundation-Library Relationship

Throughout the controversy, it has been difficult for some members of the public to differentiate between the Library Foundation and the LA City Library. The Foundation is a stand-alone 501(c)3 non-profit; the City Library is an arm of city government, supported by our tax dollars. This is a crucial distinction, which is easy to miss because the City Library gives the Foundation office and program space in the Central Library, and the Foundation's ALOUD program takes place at the Central Library as well as other branches and off-site locations.

This intertwined relationship has surfaced some elements of tension. Among librarians, according to members of their union, the Librarians' Guild, there is friction over the Foundation's use of space and how its programming money is spent. Most recently, such matters were discussed at a meeting of the Board of Library Commissioners.

I asked Brecher if he was aware of any tension. He shook his head and said: "We could not have a better city librarian in John Szabo. I feel honored to work with him; we work in partnership. We're a non-for-profit that supports the library in our way, and we are the main support for its programs."

How Money is Spent

How involved is City Librarian Szabo in how programming is determined, and how money is spent on it? "We are inspired by the work that the library does," said Brecher. "They don't program the ALOUD series, it's just done by the staff of the Library Foundation, but John and I meet with several times a week and we work together very closely together."

There is no requirement that the City Library know how the Foundation spends its money, but I was curious how much transparency there is. The Foundation provides its 990 tax forms and audited financial statements on its website, but it's hard to understand exactly how much money is being spent on each program. The ALOUD program, for example, is rolled up into a single line-item called "Engaging the Imagination." I wondered if Szabo, as an ex-officio member of the Foundation board, had access to the Foundation's general ledger, the accounting document that details how much money is spent on each item.

I was a little surprised when Shehee told me, "Nobody has the general ledger budget, including us. The CFO has it." Perhaps, even at the senior staff level, spending specifics are not entirely clear.

"This is What I'm Committed To"

Brecher, aware that he has to make clear statements on his intentions, and seeking to address the rupture of the past three months, sought to communicate a vision for the future.

"I wrote something," Brecher said, pushing a piece of paper toward me. "I want to sit with you at this table a year from today and you tell me if we haven't done this. This is what I'm committed to doing and I have a staff that's just waiting to do it."

On the paper, 47 words were printed:

We are going to make ALOUD **available and appealing to all of Los Angeles**

Will **diversify its programming, audiences and locations.**

Will be **partnering with other organizations** to do this.

But **we aren't abandoning** local authors and devoted supporters. **Much of ALOUD's core programming will remain intact.**

Image: Ken Brecher, at right, with author Adam Leipzig

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