

## **Not My Fault: A valentine to the arts**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
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The second week in February – a time to shower affections on what you love and, of course, to argue about what services a government should fund. This may seem like an odd pairing of topics, so let's see what I can make of it.

I am a physical scientist. I survived a PhD program in geophysics at UC Berkeley and once upon a time was fairly comfortable with 2nd order partial differential equations. I have been moderately successful at publishing papers in peer-reviewed journals and in securing grants and contracts in my field. But nothing has brought me more insights than when I have stepped outside the defined boundaries of my discipline and worked with professionals in other disciplines, especially the arts and social sciences.

I didn't start out in that direction. In high school I had two passions – horseback riding and theater. I took drama classes and was involved with all the school plays. I excelled in public speaking but stunk on the stage and the drama teacher quickly diverted my efforts to behind the scenes coordinating props or making costumes. In college, it was clear my talents lay in other directions and left my theater aspirations to being a good audience member.

I began my career in the geology department at HSU teaching geophysics classes and studying regional earthquake hazards. Because we have a lot of earthquakes on the North Coast and there are no major research universities or USGS earthquake offices here, my colleagues and I have always had community outreach/education responsibilities. I have been involved with a great variety of outreach efforts, but none as memorable as a project more than twenty years ago that mixed drama, earthquakes and school kids.

Fast-forward into the 1990s and I'm stuck in a fog delay at the Arcata Airport. The only good thing about fog delays is the interesting people you are often stranded with. This time it was the Dell' Arte Players group attempting to leave for a performance tour. I was a big fan of Scar Tissue, Big Foot and other Dell' Arte characters since I first came to Humboldt and it was easy to strike up a

conversation. As the delay stretched longer and longer, Donald Forrest and I got onto the subject of earthquakes and drama. He ran Dell' Arte's Education Through Arts Project at the time, a program to build student confidence in local schools through drama projects. Donald was always looking for locally-relevant themes to for drama projects and had a fascination for earthquakes. By the time our plane finally departed, we had sketched out the framework for what ended up being a three-year collaboration between the Humboldt Earthquake Education Center and Dell' Arte.

During the first year, we worked with 8th graders at Blue Lake Elementary School to develop public service announcements on earthquakes and tsunamis. We divided the class into three groups and hashed out ideas and script. We spent 45 hours in the classroom developing story boards, revising the text and rehearsing. Philip Wright of KIEM TV filmed and edited the three final PSAs that aired on KIEM for several years.

The following year, we jumped into a much bigger project at Peninsula School in Samoa. Working with every class from Kindergarten through 8th grade plus two special day classes, we produced the Samoa Peninsula Seismic Tsunami Vaudeville Extravaganza. The play featured bored 8th graders led by Kindergarten 'Quakies' into Myth Time where they learned the importance of working together to protect their community. It had lots of Dell' Arte touches - Ms Frizzle riding the magic school bus to the center of the earth packed with the entire third grade class, exquisite student masks for their Yurok myth world, the vaudeville routines of the 1st & 2nd graders and the volcano spewing 5th/6th grade rendition of the Cascadia subduction zone.

For three months the school and the community lived and breathed the project. Students in all classes took preparedness materials home and were encouraged to talk about preparedness. The entire Samoa community showed up for the performance. Our collaborative effort was recognized by the Western States Seismic Policy Council in 1998 with the top award for school outreach.

My three years working with Donald \ allowed me the chance to work shoulder-to-shoulder with a world-class theater professional and fulfill my childhood dream to be part of the theater. And it was a great outreach success that made a lasting impression on the participants. Several months ago a young woman introduced herself to me, and told me she had been a Quakie back in 1996. It was an experience she had never forgotten. It was only possible because of 1) Humboldt fog and 2) bits of funding

from state and federal sources, including the National Endowment for the Arts.

Right now the NEA is under attack. It is slated for elimination under the proposed federal budget. The NEA offers competitive grants – some large, providing support to major arts organizations and many small, like the school's program I was involved with so many years ago. This is my verbal valentine thanking Donald and the rest of our group and programs like NEA that support the broadest participation in the arts. And asking you to chime in to your representatives that the Arts benefit all of us.

“The arts are essential to any complete national life. The State owes it to itself to sustain and encourage them....Ill fares the race which fails to salute the arts with the reverence and delight which are their due,” Winston Churchill 1938.

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