



Grantmakers in the Arts
2004 Conference

DANCING WITH DIFFERENT PARTNERS

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KEYNOTE: VAN JONES

HIP HOP: A NEW TOOL FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Van Jones is founder and executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (EBC), a national organization that challenges the criminalization, incarceration, and abuse of low-income people, the young, and people of color.

EBC has pioneered methods of promoting the human rights agenda by serving as incubator for Freedom Fighter Music, a label that harnesses urban music and youth culture to tackle human rights issues, and partnering with urban media companies.

As founding board president of We Interrupt this Message, Jones worked toward fairer mainstream media coverage for low-income people and people of color. His efforts to connect business leaders and human rights activists led him to join the Social Venture Network, where he serves on the board. Jones is a Reebok International Human Rights Award recipient and has been designated by The World Economic Forum as a Global Leader of Tomorrow.

He has worked as a professional journalist, independent publisher, and cartoonist, and has appeared on CNN, BET, and NPR among others. Born in rural Tennessee in 1968, Jones holds degrees from University of Tennessee at Martin and Yale Law School. He is also a proud new father.

October 20, 2004

BROWN: My name is Claudine Brown and it is my honor to introduce you to our afternoon speaker, Van Jones. Van is the founder and executive director of the Ella Baker Center, which is located in the Bay Area. The work that they do should be important to us because he has a very particular gift for working with young people, the Generation X-ers and Generation Y-ers who we would want to be engaged with the arts.

He is a great leader who is known for his fluidity and flexibility in working with this cohort. He has been able to help them act on their passions, through their work with music and spoken word art.

I'm not going to say a whole lot about Van because there is a lot written about him in your program, and I think that he can speak to his own program. So, Van Jones.

VAN JONES: First of all, I want to thank Claudine. Claudine was the first person to invest in this nutty idea we had about something we called hip-hop activism. Now it's something that has become more and more a fixture of urban politics and we're just getting started, so I want to thank Claudine.

I also want to thank everyone here. You are holding the lifeline for art and civilized discourse and community engagement and creativity in a time when there has been a big retreat from governmental commitment to that. I know many of you here are on the private side, some are on the public side, and I want to thank all of you for holding the light and holding the supply lines open so that people in our communities can find their voice and can express themselves. We aren't just left to the tender mercies of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, which is what I think we would have without the funding that you are doing.

My topic for today is, the word that society rejected has become the head cornerstone. Those of you who know anything about the Bible or reggae know there is a recurring theme about the stone that the builder rejected becoming the head cornerstone. The people who were thrown away, the people who have been pushed to the margins, according to Biblical prophecy and reggae and Bob Marley, are destined to become the center of society and become the redeemers of society.

I want to suggest that the spoken word, hip-hop in particular, which started out so despised and pushed to the margins, is becoming – shockingly enough – the central galvanizing, cohesive framework by which progressive urban politics are being revitalized and new progressive coalitions are being formed. That's my basic premise.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the context that this sort of hip-hop activist renaissance is occurring in. I'm going to use a little excerpt from a film to help me with that.

I'm going to talk about three successes that we've already had, two at the local and one at the national level, with hip-hop activism. I'm going to close with some predictions and some proddings about the future of hip-hop activism.

I want to set the context, because if I don't, most of the successes won't make a lot of sense. Most of you here are quite familiar with these statistics, but I want to share them with you and remind us all about the situation we face in the country.

The United States had become the number one incarcerator in the world. We lock up more people in absolute numbers and in per capita numbers than China, than Russia. One out of four people locked up anywhere in the world is incarcerated in the United States. Five percent of the world's population, now 25 percent of the world's prisoners.

When Bill Clinton came into office in 1992, there were one million prisoners in the United States. When he left, there were two million. There was a doubling of the prison population in the 1990s. Most of that doubling was for nonviolent offenses. Most of those nonviolent offenses were drug-related.

What that has meant for urban America, and what that has meant for young people of color, has been a disaster! The incredible cost of building this huge incarceration industry has come directly out of budgets that would have gone to schools. That would have gone to arts programs. That would have gone to after-school programs.

In fact, in California, which we always think about as a big liberal state, the progressive bastion, every fiscal year for the last ten years we have spent more money on prisons than on four-year colleges and universities.

I'm going to say that again. Even in California, which at this point you could call "Calabama," we're locking up more people, we're spending more money locking up kids than lifting them up in colleges and universities. Those numbers sound very abstract. I live in Oakland, to me they're very, very real and immediate.

For instance, just to give a sense of this, a kid today, 15-years old, goes to school, 7:30 in the morning. The police cars are already there. There hasn't been a fight. There's no incident. The police



cars are always there. The police are stationed on the campuses.

A kid gets to school in Oakland, say Castlemont High School, 30 kids in a classroom – high school, one teacher, six books, no chalk. Thirty kids in a classroom, six books, one teacher, no chalk.

Somebody gets in a push-and-shove in the hallway, they don't go to the principal's office, they go to the precinct in handcuffs. That's called a strike. When they get in the police car, there are better computers in the police car than in the classroom they just left.

When they get to the detention center for juveniles, there are better paid adults to look out for them there than in the schoolhouse they just left. In fact, the average salary for a prison guard in California, where you only need a high school diploma, starting salary is \$65,000 a year. Starting salary for teachers in California, where you have to have a college degree, is somewhere between \$32,000 and \$40,000 a year.

So you see that the scale is tipped for these young people. It's easier for them to get into prison than into a university. When they get to, say, the California Youth Authority, California spends \$80,000 per year per kid! You could send two kids to Yale for the cost of sending one kid to jail, right? The per pupil cost for young people when they're in school, is something like \$3,200 per year.

So you have this tremendous imbalance tipping young people over into what we call the prison industrial complex, the punishment industry, the incarceration industry. Why do we call it that? Because – and this is a dirty little secret of American politics – we have in this country now, for-profit private prisons. So there's actually a financial incentive on the part of big corporations to push for tougher laws, because we have these for-profit prisons.

Companies that you and I know and often respect, Microsoft, Victoria's Secret, use prison labor in the United States! So you have a situation where corporations that won't give our young people jobs in the neighborhood, won't recruit in the neighborhood, but once a kid gets in trouble and has got handcuffs on, that kid will then work for pennies to the dollar inside prison, for say, Microsoft. But when that kid is released, he is no longer eligible to work for Microsoft, because he's a felon!

So this is the situation. You have to have that as a backdrop because otherwise the push back against this doesn't make sense, and the beauty of it, and the promise of it doesn't make sense.

I want to go to this film clip. We got Dead Prez, which is one of the big progressive hip-hop groups, to give us the right to use their music. We worked with the Cummings Foundation to produce this film called Books, Not Bars. I want to show a little piece of this film that gives some insight into what these people are experiencing. So when you hear now what they're doing, you'll be able to appreciate the full beauty of it. Thank you.

FILM CLIP: Let me tell you what kind of people go to prisons. Poor people go to prisons. People of color go to prisons, especially Black and Latino. And more and more, right now the fastest growing sector is women. Women. More women, and I'm talking about mothers.

...

Most children dream of genies and princesses, but I dream of you. Every night I go to bed hoping for something new, awaiting your arrival while I dream of you. Remembering back when you were here, I dream of you. Thinking of the bedtime stories while I dream of you.

When darkness overcrowds my mind, when I think of your new home behind metal bars and walls of stone, where nice people go crazy and bad people get worse, why do I have to suffer? I think it's a curse. I'm told I'm innocent, but am I really? Because when they punished you, they began to kill me.

I am too young to bleed, yet I'm already bruised. I hate the way people look at me when they hear the bad news. Some pity me. Others think I'm like you, but I'm not what it seems. And when I wake up from this nightmare, I see it is real and it happened in a dream.

...

Why should you, like go through, like a Mission Impossible in order to see your parents? It shouldn't be like that. It's like, as far as I...like, my opinion, I think your parents should be like, within the reach of a phone call or a hand, but not as far as they put them. That's what I think.

...

Young people are constantly being criminalized. They are constantly being told that they're, you know, they're wrong, they're criminal. Every day they go out into the community, they're stopped simply because they're young, simply because of the color of their skin, simply because they're poor. And, you know, stopped, harassed,



humiliated by police officers, put through a system that cares nothing about their futures.

...

Over the last decade there has been a 68 percent decline in youth homicides, but 62 percent of the public think youth homicides are going up. Kids account for about 15 percent of all violent crimes, but 60 percent of the public think kids account for most violent crime nowadays.

So what that means is that you have a public that's not just sort of slightly misinformed about what's going on with its young people, but it's profoundly, exponentially misinformed, because this consistent mis-impression is foisted upon most of the public by the media, and the public has very little context in which to judge, other than watching the evening news.

...

This is a society that does not like teenagers and likes to keep them at arms length. And then when you add a kid of color, when you add that colored-ness to it, the Latino, the saggy pants, or however you view whatever it is, that plays into an atmosphere of fear!

...

Black youth are 48 times as likely to be incarcerated when they're arrested for a drug offense and they have never done time before, than white kids. Latino kids are 13 times as likely to get locked-up than white kids on drug offenses. What we are saying to Black families is, and Latino families is, your kids matter less than white kids. And if we ever want to solve our racial problems in America, we've got to get past that.

...

We've been taking testimony from young people from throughout the state of New Jersey, who have spent time in youth detention facilities. I know that I was unprepared for some of the reactions that I received from the youngsters as I would talk to them, asking them their questions.

Several broke down in tears. Several were so afraid that they asked me not to use their names because they were afraid of retaliation from guards or from authorities at the juvenile detention facilities. They described being held in isolation; they described being beaten; they described being hungry; they described being used sexually; seeing others used sexually. They described smells and sounds that no adult, let alone any child, should have to endure.

Young people are enduring four-point restraints, five-point restraints. They are enduring extended isolation. They are enduring the use of devices of torture such as stun belts, stun guns, restraint chairs, all sorts of treatment that's highly inappropriate to anyone, let alone children, all in the name of law enforcement.

As they spoke, it sounded to me like it was adults around them who were the ones breaking all sorts of laws, including the most basic human rights laws.

...

My name is Bianca. I'm 18, but the first time I got locked up I was 12.

...

My name is Tyrone. I'm 18 years old. When I got locked up I was 16.

...

My name's Jose. At the age of 14 I got arrested. I was in there for about 29 days, basically, you know, hell!

...

They took me in this room and they told me that I had to take off all my clothes. I mean, they made me strip down and everything. I had to squat and cough. It was crazy! It felt really uncomfortable. I felt like...I just felt bad. I felt...I felt like they violated me. I felt so bad.

...

Basically, you know, I was like the smallest one in there, just the smallest one. You know, if you're the small one, everybody wants to pick on you, everybody wants to mess with you, you know, try to take your food, try to beat you up, get you jumped, you know, or get more charges put on you, or even taking that shower you've got to watch what you do. Somebody might come in, you know, try to beat you up right there. You know, basically, you've got to fight.

...

There's a lot of anger that builds up in there, you know? And it's like, I don't like to fight, but I will. I ain't saying I'm no coward, but... why every day?

...

Things that I saw, man, waking up in the middle of the night, hearing somebody getting beat up, you know, just hearing somebody scream. I saw



a couple of kids got raped also. Just talking to the guards made everything even worse. It made everything even worse.

...

Then when you complain about the guards, they don't... they take the guard's word over yours. So it's like, they're not believing you, they don't believe anything you say. There was a lot of stuff that was going on in there that they didn't think that nobody was going to talk about, nobody was going to say anything.!

...

I'll tell you the truth, I can't even speak about it really. I can only tell you certain things. Most of the things I, you know, experiences I had in there, I can't even bring them up right now. It's just, you know, painful to even think about them.

...

I learned how to survive, basically.

...

Do something stupid, you get locked up. Come back out, you're going to get locked up again. They told us that I was a menace to society.

...

Society is like... he's not going to make it. That black boy is not going to make it because he, you know, he doesn't think like us. They're animals. They're treating me like an animal. And I'm not.

JONES: Pretty brave kids, huh? *[Applause]*

I haven't seen this for a while, so it's hard for me to look at it sometimes.

Honestly, this is the new Jim Crow. This punishment industry. Every century has its moral struggle, as far as I'm concerned, around racial justice. In the 1800s it was about slavery and the enslavement of African people and the disenfranchisement of the native people's lands. The last century was about Jim Crow and U.S. apartheid.

The barrier between these kids and the lives that they want to live is this punishment industry. That's the new Jim Crow. You don't have to call somebody a nigger if you can call them a felon.

We have this whole generation that does stuff, the kids in suburbs do too. But when they do it in the suburbs they get help, they get driven up to their Mom's house and dropped off and Mom gets

lectured, and that's supposed to be a nightmare in the suburbs!

Now in the urban environment it would be a wet dream for the police officer to actually bring the kid to the house and treat you like a parent, as opposed to like a criminal too!

I went to Yale for law school, and I saw more drug abuse on the campus of Yale Law School, than I had seen anywhere in my life! But all the drug war was being fought three blocks away in the housing projects. You never saw the police kicking in dorm doors or going into the Skull and Bones, where the real drugs are.

I saw this kind of stuff going on and I decided I wanted to get involved. But I'm a fairly nerdy guy, went to college on a scholarship, went to law school. I wasn't from this exact situation, and I had a very difficult time trying to figure out how to engage and how to do something about what was going on.

There was a situation in San Francisco where this really awful police officer named Mark Andaya who had killed two unarmed black men, had five lawsuits against him, 42 complaints against him; and was still on the force. The parents of the last kid that this officer had killed were working with me to try to get this officer off the force.

I wish I could say that we thought to go to the young people first, that we thought to go to the people who were being impacted first. But we didn't. We went to the preachers, we went to legislators, we went to elected officials, and were told, you're not going to get anywhere with this case, just drop it.

Out of desperation, frankly, there were some hearings coming up and we wanted to have anybody come out for the hearings, so we started going to the high schools.

We had been doing some outreach around Know Your Rights trainings. We stumbled upon, lo and behold, a methodology – we didn't know it at the time, it turned out that it was a methodology for youth mobilizing.

What happened was, we would go into the schools and do the Know Your Rights training. You think, how can you get access to young people? How can you get access to youth? They're so far away.

No they're not! They're right there being in relationship with adults all the time, either at a community center or in school. Those adults are



desperate for anybody to come in there and help them do their job of reaching these kids.

So we went to the teachers and said, listen, can we come to civics classes, can we come to your history classes? Can we talk to your students about their rights? They'd say, yes, please! Come to my class and do anything, because we are having such a difficult time keeping their attention.

So we would go into these classrooms and say, hey the police stop you in the park and tell you, you have to give them your I.D., do you have to do it or not? Yeah you do! No you don't! Yeah, you do! And we pulled people into this conversation based on their own experience about their rights.

So we had these Know Your Rights workshops. Then we were taking the kids who were most interested in participating in the workshops and turning them into workshop leaders.

We took a bunch of the workshop leaders and we said, listen, there's this awful case, this police officer's terrible. Yeah, we know that police officer. We're trying to get him fired. You ain't going to get him fired. Okay, yeah, that's fine, but can you come down to the Department of Justice with us and support the family?

No, I'm not going down there. Why? The cops are down there, ain't nothing going to happen, blah, blah, blah.

So we said, well hold on a second. We've been doing these workshops together, we had done this party maybe four weeks prior, where we had gotten them together and the theme was Schools Not Jails.

It was a fundraiser and all these young people got on the microphone and started doing these incredible raps, and all this incredible poetry about how torn up the schools were and how this new juvenile detention center was all fly and fancy.

We said it's interesting that you guys are willing to talk all your tough talk here where there ain't nobody looking. But then when it's time to go down to City Hall, nobody wants to come. They said, that's right, we don't want to come. So that didn't work.

One of my coworkers, Tony Coleman, who had spent some time in the pen, said, Well you know what's down in City Hall? Police! So I said yeah, Well yeah, that's true. You know what else? What? TV cameras. And microphones. And public comment. Yeah!

We went down there and sure enough, we get there and the kids start coming, one, two, three. Pretty soon the whole hearing room is filled up with these kids! Which is itself a miracle as you guys know. They asked for public comment. I went up there and I did my thing -- the law, and unfairness.

Then it's time for other people to come up and talk and nobody wants to do it. Everybody's just sitting there, they've been there for a while now and it's intimidating to them.

This young girl named Jasmine gets up. All the dudes who had been talking so much stuff are in the back. She walks up to the mic and she [pounding on it] "Is this on? Okay." Turns her back to the commissioners and tells everybody sitting down "Community Rise! Rise!" You start hearing people standing up and she says "Mark Andaya, Mark Andaya... he dirty! And he killed Aaron Williams. And I want everybody here to hold hands. We're going to have a moment of silence because his Mama's right here, we're going to have a moment of silence for Aaron Williams!"

Something happened where you could just feel the power flowing from these commissioners like a river to these kids, in this moment of silence. And they're looking around. And I'm looking around. Then Jasmine turned around and she said, "Up from the pavement, out of our enslavement. But why the cops gotta act like cavemen?"

She did this incredible rap from the depth of her soul! She turned around and walked off and the place went crazy! Now the dudes are like, 'No, my turn, my turn, my turn! I got this!' TV stations go nuts, right?

So that night on local TV, none of the commissioners are anywhere to be seen, it's all about these kids!

We discovered something that has proven to be invaluable going forward. Police commissioners, city councilors, mayors, state legislators, can't rap! They can't rap! They don't do good poetry! They got no skills on the microphone!

We found that we could change the power discourse from all this legal mumbo jumbo, gibberish. All that gets blown out when you have the actual people who are actually suffering using art, using artistic expression, using creativity at the center of power!

Long story short, we collapsed the San Francisco Police Commission. Because what happened over and over and over again was, once it happened the first time and the kids got TV attention, and



they have this station that shows all the City hearings on cable. You couldn't keep the kids out of 850 Bryant! Right? Because, "Ah man, how did he get on TV? He ain't got no skills! Oh we got to go!"

Even after they stopped putting it on television, it became this whole thing where people wanted to go and flow in front of the police commission, the school board, etc. The San Francisco Police Commission got so sick of it! There were five commissioners – one quit, two weeks later another one quit.

After about two months of this, John Kecker, the Head of the Police Commission, quit, which collapsed the Police Commission, which forced Willy Brown to appoint a whole new Police Commission – you have to have at least three. We chased three out, they only had two. So for a week there was no Police Commission in the whole city; he had to appoint a new one. What's the first thing that the new Police Commission did? Fired Mark Andaya!

We realized that we were on to something. We discovered something. Again, the stone that the builder rejected, these kids that even we didn't go to, who are always seen as the problem – turned out to be the solution.

Once we realized that, and once we realized that we had this methodology of workshops that engage young people and issues they care about, leading over to shows where they can perform in a safe space and act out with creativity, leading to actions where they can go to the point of power and make a change. Workshops, shows, and actions. Workshops, shows, and actions. Workshops, shows, and actions.

We began to become a force in the city! We began to become an actually existing "you've got to take these guys seriously" force based off of young people that nobody cared about. So what did we do?

Second story. We decided that we would launch a record label, and we called it Freedom Fighter Music. We knew that Alameda County, which is where Oakland and Berkeley are, had this wonderful proposal to help young people. It's a great proposal, very enlightened. They were going to build in Oakland – again where they don't have the books in the schools – the biggest per capita juvenile hall in the country. They were going to build in little Alameda County, a youth prison bigger than the one they have in Chicago. At the cost of some hundreds of millions of dollars, I can't remember what it was.

So we went back to the same young people and we said, hey look, this is what's going on, and we want to do some work on this.

The young people said, they're going to build a super jail for youth. Well, that's messed up, we're going to stop it. Just as simple as that!

Now, this had been approved by the California State Board of Corrections, which is certainly no friend of young people. It had been approved by the Board of Supervisors in Alameda County. The money was on tap; there were federal dollars involved, there were state dollars involved. There had been a local commitment.

This was at the eleventh hour that the young people even found out it was happening. That we even found out it was happening!

First thing the kids did was rename the whole process Super Jail for Youth. Boom! Right out the door they took the terms of debate. If you go to Alameda County right now, they think that it was called the Super Jail!

These kids were so effective seizing the terms of debate, that the County Commissioners who were for the detention center, were arguing in the media about the super jail! We gave the term to the debate to the young people and they made it Super Jail.

It is very difficult to justify your proposal to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a super jail for youth. So the young people won as soon as they opened their mouths. But it took a year and a half.

What did we do? We took those same young people not just to the local situation, but to State Boards of Corrections all across the State. For the first time ever, the California State Board of Corrections called a special hearing, heard from all these young people, and then heard from all these incarcerators, people from the Board of Supervisors saying, why is this necessary? How terrible everything was. And heard these young people speaking from their hearts again in the same way.

For the first time, the California State Board of Corrections reversed itself, pulled the money, and defeated the Super Jail for Youth. That again was done purely with young people speaking and using creativity, speaking and using poetry, speaking and using rap.

We had gone from firing a road cop to creating a record label where we could get the best of all this stuff distributed, to now stopping in its



tracks one of the biggest development proposals in Alameda County. All this in the course of just four years.

At this point, we begin to understand that these young people who start off being high school students, had gone to community college, and were out of community college, and in the workforce. Some of them were finishing up four-year college situations and landing in other places.

They are now – this is the third story – a part of what is going to be one of the most stunning developments in U.S. politics over the next four years. I have absolutely no doubt of what I'm saying, because I've been in the meetings, I know it's going to happen. These young people are going to start running for office themselves.

The Bay Area gets a lot of attention for what we've been able to do because we've won some of these big battles. I don't want to be arrogant, but I thought that we were the vanguard of the whole thing. Just two months ago, we get to Newark for the hip-hop political convention and people are telling similar stories. There is this new generation that is dealing with these kinds of conditions, either fighting school board decisions, or changing zoning ordinances in Alabama.

These kinds of conditions politicize people, because it is so blatantly unfair. These kids know that the kids in the suburbs do the same stuff they do, because the kids in the suburbs come to their neighborhood and often buy drugs! So they're not fooled that they're somehow more criminal, they're somehow using more drugs than anybody else. They understand they're being targeted. And they're not being targeted for scholarships. They're not being targeted for jobs. They're not being targeted for housing. They're being targeted to go to prison. They're being targeted to be labeled for the rest of their life as felons.

In many states, though not California, they are deprived forever of the right to vote. Deprived, even in California, of being able to get a barber license! If you get a felony conviction, you can never get a barbershop license. So they are fighting back.

I want to say to those of us gathered here that we have a tremendous opportunity. What we saw in Alameda County alone, was that when you use hip-hop activism, you get the youth. When you get the youth, you get everybody else. Because the young people in Alameda County fighting the Super Jail became a magnet for a progressive coalition that nobody had been able

to build in Alameda County since the days of Ron Dellums. Why?

Because when they stepped out, the teachers stepped out with them. When they stepped out, their parents and aunts and uncles who work in the county hospitals, created a caucus inside of the Union to defend these young people and to stand up for these young people, and to say, not just are we talking about schools, not jails, but also hospital beds and not jails!

We emboldened the labor struggle! The county hospitals are being de-funded to pay for this expansion of the county jails for years! And they had never been able to effectively fight back.

They came in line behind this youthful energy. The homeowners in the area where this Super Jail was going to be sited began to organize and say, we don't even want it out here. And they fell in line.

In Alameda County, these young people became the magnet that held together a progressive coalition that is still together! That progressive coalition is going to take over the County Board in Alameda County in the next three years. Why?

Because the young people who have their backs against the wall, who have nothing to lose, who everybody assumes are stupid, they assume they don't care, they assume that they don't have any organizing skills, they assume they have no political power, are absolutely determined that at least their little brother and their sister will not go through what they went through!

When you have people standing up for their own lives like that, with art and creativity in their hands, no force can stop them! Period! No force can stop them. And that is what is beginning to happen across the country.

In conclusion, when you look at things like slambush.org, check it out! Here you have a national movement of young poets, rappers, spoken-word artists, who online, using a website, created a national competition: Who could come up with the best rap against Bush?

They would show some crazy thing – from my opinion – crazy thing that Bush said as if he were performing a performance piece! Then they would have the young person – just like in a battle contest – get up and do a performance against what Bush just said. They did this all across the country. They crowned the winner, it was a 28-year-old black woman whose name escapes me right now, who won.



But what did that do? It created a national network of young people of color, especially in the swing states, who are now organizing in the presidential election. The hip-hop political convention in Newark has seeded this idea all across the country.

As bleak as the situation is, and as awful as it is, I want to say to you that those of you who are funders, those of you who have the ears of people, this should be legitimized as a real, live, not abstract, in-the-real-world civic engagement. A youth engagement strategy to bring together a generation that's been left out and locked out, with the arts, with politics in a way, that can change the county. Thank you very much.

END

