3-22-1989

Reauthorization: Hearings and Reports (1990): Speech 03

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Testimony
of
CHERYL DICKSON
Executive Director
Minnesota Humanities Commission

on behalf of the
FEDERATION OF STATE HUMANITIES COUNCILS

regarding
FY 1990 APPROPRIATIONS
to the
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
before the
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR
of the
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

March 22, 1989
Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, my name is Cheryl Dickson. I am Executive Director of the Minnesota Humanities Commission, one of the fifty-three state humanities councils which are all members of the Federation of State Humanities Councils. I am currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Federation and serve as the organization's treasurer. On behalf of the thousands of Minnesotans who depend on the Minnesota Humanities Commission to deliver support for the humanities in our state, thank you for giving me the time to talk with you today.

In an ideal situation, I would not be here today; you would be in Minnesota with me. We would be in a bus, traveling around the state and seeing the humanities at work. Rather than hear me tell you what we have done and hope to do regarding the health and well-being of the humanities in Minnesota, you would hear from a small town librarian, a senior citizen, a county historical society staff person, a museum educator, and teachers -- lots of teachers. First, I am sure that they would thank you for the support you have given the Minnesota Humanities Commission for the past eighteen years and although they would be shy about it, as Minnesotans tend to be, they would tell you that they need more funds for the humanities.

I know you would prefer that bus trip to this room as well, but since you cannot go there, and they cannot come here, I will try to be their voice and speak for them, because it is their stories you need to hear, not mine.

Mary Alice Harvey of Grand Marais (pop. 1,301), nearly on the Canadian border, is a librarian who would tell you that the beauty of the humanities is that they are portable. A speaker, a film, or an exhibit can travel to her community and serve many people well for a small investment. The nearly 300 mile trip to the Twin Cities, where more than half of the state's population lives and where the educational and cultural resources are concentrated is, at best, a once-a-year trip for many of Mary Alice's patrons. Unfortunately, because of the limited amount of funds available to the Minnesota Humanities Commission, Commission sponsored programs are normally also only a once a year event in Grand Marais.

Carol Haney, an 82 year old retired teacher (who, by the way, calls herself chronologically gifted), would tell you that the scholar/speaker they get once a year for their Senior Federation meeting in Eveleth (pop. 4,721) is a yearly high point for her and for the other 500 senior citizens in attendance. One program a month might be sufficient for Eveleth seniors; one a year is hardly enough.

Meredith Hart, whose agency serves the residents of nursing homes throughout the state, would tell you of the pride and sadness she felt when her organization got a Commission grant to provide humanities programs in nursing homes for residents who are mentally alert but physically fragile. Her pride was in the fact that the grant enabled her to place programs in some 18 nursing homes, her sadness that limited funding meant that over 50 homes that requested programs had to be turned down. A second, larger grant the following year again brought pride and sadness; 30 programs, all booked in one day, 74 nursing homes turned down because of limited funds.
At this point, I am sure you are beginning to imagine the frustration felt by the Commission's Board of Directors. In providing funds for programs that meet the needs of one part of its constituency the Commission is forcibly reminded of the needs of other constituents that go unmet because of limited funds.

The already stiff competition for Commission funds has intensified recently in light of new demands from groups involved in K-12 education. The need for state council support of K-12 humanities education came to the Commission's attention forcefully at a series of public meetings held throughout the state. In especially outspoken testimony offered at these meetings, humanities teachers explained that the humanities -- social studies, language arts, and foreign languages -- are being neglected in our public schools. I think it is important for you to hear their stories, as well.

Chris French, who teaches French in Marshall (pop. 9,886), told us of teachers who have few opportunities to practice speaking the language they are teaching. They live in small towns, miles from other communities and sometimes teach the language in two or three different schools. He told us of a French teacher in west central Minnesota who only heard the language spoken by native speakers once, in 1965 when she went to France on a college trip, and who has one resource to use in her classes, a French film made in 1945. Chris asked us to try to imagine what kind of pronunciation she could teach after hearing only flat midwestern voices for more than twenty years. This woman needs language workshops and resources and none are currently available to her.

Sandy Wells, who teaches social studies in Rochester (pop. 59,337), told us that she had no access to resources through her school for teaching the US Constitution during the Bicentennial observance. Had the Commission not raised private funds to conduct a seminar on the Constitution for teachers she would have had nothing.

Tom Kalar, a teacher from International Falls (6,439), was not able to attend the seminar; he lives 300 miles from the Twin Cities. Tom talked of the resources he needs for bringing to life the courses he teaches in World History and American History. Resources would be especially valuable to Tom, who like many dedicated teachers is being forced by declining enrollments and teacher layoffs to take on teaching responsibilities outside of his area of expertise.

The Commission Board and staff found the testimony of teachers especially disturbing. We had all read "A Nation At Risk" and Lynne Cheney's "American Memory," but we had, all of us, silently denied that those indictments could be leveled against our schools. They must have been talking about other schools, in other states. After all, we had thought, the humanities are basic education.

The challenge to the Commission and to other state humanities councils is clear, however. In addition to serving the adult out-of-school population we have not yet served adequately, we must now somehow find the resources to help the schools as well. "No one is helping us", they told us -- the social studies, language arts, and foreign language teachers. "The arts teachers have many advocacy groups; the math and science teachers have business and technology support, but we have no one but you."
I trust that by now my refrain has become predictable. Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, the state councils need more money. State councils are the most direct connection between federal funds appropriated for the humanities and the public which those funds are meant to serve. State councils translate federal funds into public programs for teachers, students, senior citizens, inner city areas, and rural communities.

I am here today to ask you to increase the appropriation to the state humanities councils from $25,000,000 to $30,000,000. Such an increase would not only make more programs available in the states, it would also be an important step in helping the National Endowment for the Humanities achieve funding parity with the National Endowment for the Arts. The Federation of State Humanities Council considers parity essential.

This is not because we are guilty of sibling rivalry or of envy. In creating and then funding the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, the Congress sent an important signal to the people of this country which has resulted in the donation of millions of dollars for the arts and humanities from foundations, corporations, and individuals. The Arts and Humanities Endowments were equal in the beginning and at this time, with the current crisis in education, it seems especially important for Congress to once again send a signal to foundations, corporations, and individuals that you believe the humanities are as important to human aspirations and development as the arts.

I know you face serious choices this session; I know you face a budget deficit and many competing claims. As a tax-paying citizen, I assure you that I share those concerns.

I want you to invest tax monies where they will be effective. And I know that funds for the state humanities councils are as good an investment you can make -- because of the careful way in which funds will be spent, because of the matching funds that will be generated, and because of the products that will result.

Every year, the project support we give is more than matched by cash contributions and nearly quadrupled by audited in-kind support. This is not true just in Minnesota but across the country. Our state government, like most state governments, is experiencing budget difficulties yet their support of our program will increase for the next biennium. More than half the state councils are now receiving support from their states, even in this time of financial crisis. State councils have also been working hard to raise private funds to further supplement their federal grants. Increased support from the Congress will help state councils with their fund raising efforts and, more importantly, it will help the councils address the overwhelming need for access to the humanities for the public and in our schools.

Educational reform must start somewhere, why not nation-wide, at the grass roots? If we were to wipe the slate clean and begin to design our education system all over again, we would begin with the humanities. We would begin by seeing that all Americans had opportunities to study the past, to learn to read and write well, to learn languages to understand the ideas and cultures of other countries, to distinguish the true from the false, to acquire the wisdom from the best that has been
thought and said and the ability to look beyond themselves to other times, other places, and other beliefs. All those things, and more, constitute the humanities.

The stories I have told you today are not unique to Minnesota. They are the same stories you would hear in Illinois, in Ohio, in West Virginia, and in Mississippi. We have a real problem delivering quality education to youngsters and adults in this country.

The state humanities councils cannot promise to be the solution to all the problems in education, but we can serve as the champions of basic education by promoting the understanding and appreciation of the humanities. We can help teachers by providing good content-based workshops and necessary resources such as films, exhibitions, and maps. We can serve adults, wherever they are -- in nursing homes, in isolated rural communities, in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. We can make a difference, and we can do it in a cost-effective way. If we have your support.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the subcommittee, for your time and attention.