

**Written Testimony in Support of FY09 Appropriations for the
National Endowment for the Arts**

Submitted by Kerry Washington

Actor & Activist

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies

“Role of the Arts in Creativity and Innovation”

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Good morning Chairman Dicks, Ranking Member Tiahrt and members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to once again address this distinguished panel. My name is Kerry Washington; actor, social activist and a member of the Americans for the Arts Artists' Committee.

I would like to thank the committee for their invitation to testify on behalf of an issue that has had a profound impact on me personally, and I am proud and delighted to testify before you and to participate in my democracy this way. The issue before us today is the importance of federal arts spending, particularly funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Since this is my second year in a row before the subcommittee, it makes me smile to think I did my part last year as the NEA received a \$20 million boost over the previous year's funding, so thank you for putting us all on the right path. It is good to see you again.

Some of my fellow witnesses will lay out the economic argument for increased funding of arts and culture, and I certainly echo their message. The numbers do not lie: Arts and culture funding exponentially return the favor back in dollars for local, state, and federal treasuries. Nonprofit organizations and institutions play a unique role in the financial and cultural well being of communities. The relatively modest support given these organizations translates into civic development, greater culture access to underserved communities, and arts programs for children that are sorely missing from many of today's schools. The business world is telling anyone who will listen – government, schools and parents – we need creative people who will be at the forefront of innovation in the new global economy. I know where we must begin that quest. It's plain and simple; foster the arts and give all of our nation's young people the opportunity to excel in their chosen fields.

You have been provided with evidence from the arts community and business leaders as to how restoring the NEA's appropriation to the early 1990's \$176 million level aids a wide range of activities and communities. I am the living, breathing proof positive of how the data you've heard and the statistics you've read, have the power to transform and transport a little girl in The Bronx to Hollywood.

Thoughts of Hollywood were certainly not my reason for being drawn to the arts. In my testimony last year, you might recall how a young child with working parents was the beneficiary of a third parent: community arts programs. There is an expression that is used somewhat sarcastically these days in referring to any activity, “well, at least it keeps the kids off the streets.” Growing up in The Bronx, like other big-city kids, the arts literally *did* keep me off the streets. Through the school week you could tell what day it was by what art discipline I was engaged in. It wasn't just that nonprofit Children's Theater, ballet, or art class kept me busy, it

was that the doors of my mind allowed to open up to a world without limitations that was somewhere outside the borough – and I do not mean just over to Manhattan.

Great nonprofit programs were not my only outlet. While the programs were introducing me to the range of artistic expression, the NEA was crucial in helping me see what this expression could lead to: great works of art. Taking full advantage of the NEA's discount program, I soon would see the end product of what I once viewed as an activity was actually the ingredients to an experience like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Suddenly, I was introduced to a world full of possibilities that did not exist until I heard those sounds, felt those words, and filled my eyes up that scenery. That is the real world effect of federal dollars funneling down to community theater, dance troupes and museums. The fact that I had access to different cultures, languages, and could behold visual masterpieces by simply jumping on the "A" Train and wandering through New York's wealth of museums, is a testament to government, corporate, and individual contributions and the return on that commitment.

This commitment to nonprofit arts institutions is needed now more than ever, especially in education. Without getting too specific about what the root causes are, art has gone absent from the classroom for far too many students. As the employers scream from the mountaintops for creative thinkers, we have unfortunately decided to cut the cornerstone subjects that draw out creativity. Art classes and teachers are not only in the business of training the next wave of artists and art teachers. The skills acquired in arts training *may* lead to productive careers in art, but are really a piece of the academic development jigsaw puzzle. I know that my arts training prepared me for not only the subject at hand, but instructed me in accountability, responsibility, promptness, group dynamics, leadership, communication, commitment, integrity, and perseverance. All these values and disciplines helped raise my performance in other classes. These experiences kept fortifying those life skills through the years and on into high school.

At the onset of the HIV epidemic in the late 1980s, I was fortunate to be part of high school peer education theater company called The Night Star Program that was funded through local grants to arts in education. Our productions entertained high school students and encouraged them through theater and theater games like role-playing, to make informed decisions for themselves about safer sex, abstinence, self esteem, drug abuse, peer pressure and other issues challenging teenagers then and now. We provided creative and engaging models of behavior and communication strategies. We gave them these tools during a time of hysteria when the myths and fear about HIV/AIDS prevented the kind of open dialogue developing minds need. So while I was learning to be an artist, a professional and social activist, I was also *teaching* my peers through the language of performance. Through the prism of this theater experience, I was able to enrich my professional life, artistic skills, and my own educational journey while discovering a passion for social change and activism that has left an indelible imprint on the kind of roles I seek today in my current "day job." Can we agree that federal funding for nonprofits arts programs extrapolates in ways that are far-reaching and reverberate far past their initial modest investment?

Today, before you is a magna cum laude graduate of The George Washington University who has been fortunate enough to make a living doing what I love to do. I get to be a modern-day storyteller working on sets and on stage as a carrier of our new oral traditions of film and

television. Not bad for a latchkey kid from The Bronx. But my story is not the one I am worried about. If there are going to be more narratives like mine brought before this committee in the future, all of us must do our part to ensure that nonprofit institutions maintain healthy bottom lines. I like coming here and speaking to you, but I hope to be joined by a chorus of similar successes from different industries. It is not just about programs that send budding talents on a trajectory for fame and fortune, it is about the day-to-day enrichment and possibilities provided to those looking for an outlet for their creativity. Whether that is in Tacoma or Wichita, or The Bronx, there is a community theater, ballet, or local arts education program that is vital to the economic well-being, educational development, and civic discourse of that locality.

Again, I applaud you for your historic increase in last year's Fiscal Year 09 budget; I know that there are many needs to be addressed in these economically volatile times. Let us keep up the momentum and allow arts and humanities institutions to tap our citizenry's creativity; spurn economic prosperity; and educate our children.

I urge you to return funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities to the levels of the early 1990s.

Thank you again for the honor of testifying this morning. I would be happy to answer any questions.