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Political film series too radical?

Following turmoil, World Centric seeks to find its niche in another neighborhood

by Sue Dremann

A dispute between free speech and practicality has led to an unceremonious parting of ways for two Palo Alto groups -- both of which, ironically, seek to inspire people to create a better world.

World Centric, which raises awareness of global issues, had started showing films at the Aha! Center in College Terrace in April. Aha! is a nonprofit that teaches both youth and adults to find unconventional solutions for local, environmental, school and business concerns, said Mark Gordon, chief executive officer. The center rents out some of its space to other organizations.

At first, the pairing between the two groups seemed compatible. But the lively political discussions occurring after some of the political movies quickly put an end to World Centric's use of the Aha! Center, leaving the film series searching for a new home and a place in the Palo Alto community.

Aseem Das, World Centric founder, showed award-winning films with titles like "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," about the attempted coup, allegedly supported by the current Bush administration, of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez. Paired with guest speakers, each film was designed to stir the affluent community out of complacency, Das said.

But during the discussion after the April showing of "Haiti, Harvest of Hope," members of the audience questioned how local people could really create change. One audience participant rose to her feet and shouted "Revolution!" and the audience clapped loudly, Das said.

That exchange reportedly prompted Gordon to ask Das to tone down the discussions.

"My take on what I was getting from them was that the films are 'too political,'" Das said. "We don't want to have anything here which can be seen as causing or creating conflict."

Gordon, a teacher at Mid-Peninsula High School who works with teens at the center, said his concern was more about presenting problems without offering solutions. Inciting emotions without providing tools for change can discourage people, he said, and that's not what the Aha! Center is about.

"Aseem is a wonderful young man. We're into his ecological and sustainable issues, but he offered no solutions. We did that in the '60s -- critics are a dime a dozen," Gordon said.

He characterized previous news reports stating that Aha! had kicked out World Centric as inaccurate. The center wanted World Centric's film series to come back, but with a solution-based program, he said.

But ultimately, Das declined the center's offer to return with stipulations.

Das confirmed that discussions had taken place, but said it would be incorrect to say they wanted him back.

"For me, it felt like self-censorship ... of having to ask them or get their permission for anything we would do there. We are trying to raise awareness of a number of issues -- political, economic, social, environmental -- and show that they are interconnected, and so it is very important for us to have the independence to host events related to any of these issues," said Das, who also founded a program known as FreeCycle that allows people to offer used goods to others for free online.

World Centric's vision includes more than the film series. The organization hopes to include courses, workshops, community gatherings and other sustainability projects, where they would have a meeting space and office, Das said.

As for a new venue, the film series may return to its previous site at the Foundation for Global Community in the Downtown North neighborhood.

"A man with a mission is always an important thing," said Debbie Mytels, the Global Community's outreach director.

"We had a wonderful time with the videos," she said of the film series, which started as a foundation-sponsored project in 2003. As many as 75 people attended the films.

Das was a volunteer at the foundation and had come up with the idea for the film series. Afterward, he proposed remaining on with the organization as a funded employee, but the group didn't have money to keep him on, she said.

The foundation would welcome World Centric's film series back, but Mytels admitted it was a big commitment, and logistics regarding staffing and lighting for the event will have to be worked out before a commitment can be made. She expects to begin discussions with Das this fall. Any hindrances would not involve political issues, she said.

Both Das and Gordon stressed their parting was amicable.

"I hope any story you write wouldn't antagonize anyone," Das wrote in a follow-up e-mail. "Regardless of Aha! Center's decision, they are a very nice group of people, and are part of the community and I would want to keep good relations with them. ...We just happen to have different visions of how to create change and a better world." Sue Dremann can be reached at sdremann@paweb.com.

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