

Women Take Center Stage to Fight Harassment

— By Kristin Butler



Photo © Lance Manderville

Cynthia Cristelli and Molly Good won an Emmy for Outstanding Achievement in Current Affairs Programming.

IMAGINE YOU ARE WATCHING A PLAY. A MAN AND A WOMAN stand on a stage decorated to simulate a modern office. Although the actors are surrounded by the ordinary — computers, phone lines, desks, a coffee maker — the stage is filled with tension.

The man is standing very close to the woman, and she tries to move away, but he blocks her way, making a joke about the shortness of her skirt. She is clearly upset but says nothing.

Suddenly a woman from stage right appears and the action freezes. She turns to the audience and asks you, sitting in the third row, to tell the characters what you think of their behavior, to "talk back."

Welcome to Life Theatre Services, a reality-based theatre company that offers corporations and organizations an interactive way to educate their employees about sexual harassment and other social and business concerns.

Part entertainment and part drama therapy, this woman-owned business in San Fran-

cisco offers workshops that open dialogues and challenge people to become more aware.

"Our goal is to get people to talk to one another about an issue," says Life Theatre Services founder and Executive Director Cynthia Cristelli. "We get the discussion going and then encourage them to continue the conversation after we are gone."

Although the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 prohibits sexual harassment, it's still a problem. From 1992 to 2004, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received more than 15,000 complaints a year. That number began to drop in 2004, the same year California passed AB 1824, which requires all employers in the state to offer

(See Life Theater, page 4)

Life Theater...

(cont'd from front page)

immediate and continual sexual harassment training for more than 1.7 million California supervisors.

While many companies are opting to comply with the law by offering their employees web-based training experiences, some are choosing the more engaging method of interactive theater, giving participants a chance to "educate themselves," Cristelli says.

Performances — typically for audiences of 30 to 50 people — begin with a short skit, then action is stopped and people in the audience are invited to talk directly to the characters, ask questions, vent emotions, or give advice.

Cristelli and her business partner and co-director Molly Goode, both started their

Goode developed programs on sexual harassment and other issues such as diversity, ethics, conflict resolution, and employee empowerment. In addition, in 1999, the two friends won an Emmy Award for co-producing a television series entitled "Talking Back: Life Theatre Looks at the American Family" with ABC 7, in San Francisco.

Life Theatre Services' workshops on sexual harassment are in complete compliance with AB 1825 and include three separate dramatizations that illustrate sexual harassment, as well as two short lectures that define sexual harassment and review complaint procedures.

The workshops dramatize both the *quid pro quo* (the explicit "boss chasing the secretary around the desk") and the more subtle "hostile environment" brands of sexual

mance day. Goode dons her acting hat while Cristelli plays the role of audience facilitator.

"Sometimes people in the audience have complicated feelings about what they are seeing onstage, but they are able to express them to a character who won't take it personally," Goode says. "We find it can be very empowering for employees."

The experience is also very empowering for the actors themselves, who must be able to improvise their responses in character, she adds.

"It's really different from other kinds of acting," Goode said. Actors are given lists of the issues they may hear from employees and rehearsal includes an intensive question and answer session. For this reason, their actors — who have successful careers on stage and in film — are chosen as much for their real-world experience as gay men or aging women or people of color as for their acting ability.

"Actors are always saying how much they love to do Life Theater, which is fun and meaningful," Goode says. Although the topics they cover are serious, part of the reason for their success is their ability to inject humor into every performance.

"The workshops were interesting and engaging," says Cathy Thompson, senior physician HR consultant at Santa Theresa Medical Center in San Jose, who hired Life Theatre Services to conduct a workshop on sexual harassment prevention for chiefs and managers there last fall.

"Almost every person in the room that could catch me afterward said that it was one of the best trainings they've had in a long time," says Thompson. More important, even now when she is in meetings with the people who participated, she hears them quote lines from the Life Theatre Services' performance.

"It really stuck with them," she says. ☆

For more information, visit www.lifetheatre.com.

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careers studying theater at San Francisco State University and then moved to New York City to try their luck as professional actresses.

It was in New York that Cristelli first learned about the profession of drama therapy. She found work as an actor with companies that offered drama therapy to the corporate sector and then joined a nonprofit that provided workshops at high schools to get kids to think about issues such as drugs, alcohol, abuse, and incest. Cristelli found the work exciting and fun and felt she was making a difference in real peoples' lives, so when she moved back to San Francisco in 1992, she started her own drama therapy business.

A passionate volunteer for an AIDS hotline at the time, Cristelli and her long-time friend and new business partner decided to choose the topic of "AIDS in the Workplace" as their first corporate workshop.

Soon, corporations were asking Life Theatre Services if they ever offered workshops on other topics, so Cristelli and

harassment, Cristelli says. A hostile environment can include everything from inappropriate jokes, calling someone a nickname, leering, touching, getting into someone's personal space, or asking personal questions, she says.

"We make it clear what sexual harassment can look like and help people become more sophisticated in their interactions with each other," she said.

Although the term for their work is "drama therapy," Cristelli stresses that she and her team are not trained therapists.

"We don't profess to be the experts on any of these topics," Cristelli said. Instead, she, Goode, and their actors are experts in facilitation, human dynamics, and communication, she enthuses.

Starting with a generalized format, Cristelli and Goode conduct research and interview their clients in order to tap into the specific dynamics operating at each client company they work for. Together they write the script and prepare and direct their actors. On perfor-