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Kind, Generous And Eager To Boast About It

By ERIC GIBSON

On a hot night a couple of summers ago, I staggered into Lincoln Center so parched that, curtain be damned, all I could think of was slaking my thirst. The usher directed me to a nearby water fountain and, lifting my head after taking several reviving gulps, I noticed a plaque on the wall above gratefully acknowledging the donors whose gift had made the fountain, and my drink, possible.

I thanked them, too, silently, but not without a smile. Such “naming opportunities” have been a staple of the giving industry for decades. Donors’ names are emblazoned on staircase steps, chairs, wings and whole buildings. Indeed, as Lincoln Center’s watery oasis could attest, no corner of a nonprofit is too inconsequential for “naming” if doing so can leverage a check.

In a perfect world, people would give freely and ask nothing in return. The reality is that ego is the handmaiden of philanthropy. Development officers know that they have a better chance of hooking gifts if they can reward the donors by displaying their names. The downside of this practice is that, no matter how much we try to pretend otherwise, the aura of a commercial transaction hangs over such gifts, diminishing the institution by suggesting that a public trust has been turned into a private fiefdom.

Which is why recent news from the National Archives in Washington is so troubling. It was announced last week that, in December, this grand federal institution — the repository of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, among much else — plans to open the Lawrence F. O’ Brien Gallery. Mr. O’ Brien was a prominent figure in the Democratic Party during the 1960s and 1970s. (He died in 1990.)

It is not the first such naming opportunity embraced by the archives (there is a William G. McGowan Theater), and the space in question is not, to be sure, the “Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom,” the archives’ primary exhibition space. The room is a gallery off to one side for temporary exhibitions. Nonetheless, it’s still part of the archives and is understood to be so. And it is being dedicated to Mr. O’ Brien “in recognition of a generous gift made in his memory by the O’ Brien family.”

The National Archives is a touchstone. Everything about it speaks to our collective identity as a nation and our shared experience as a people. It is on the National Mall, our symbolic front yard. Yet a part of it will now honor someone — a partisan political operative, no less — because his family wrote a big check.

“In the fund-raising business you can’t say, ‘We want your contribution but we don’t want to recognize you,’ ” observes John W. Carlin, the official archivist of the U.S. and the National Archives head. “We had to come up with some narrow way to include naming,” he notes, “or it was going to be next to impossible to succeed” with the archives’ \$22.5 million capital campaign. So the decision was made to allow the “naming” of programmatic spaces and not the rotunda, which, he insists, will never be “named.” “We feel comfortable that we thought it through well,” he adds.

But there are other ways. Tourists don’t bone up on the 16th president in the “Johnny Wellheeled Orientation Center” inside the Lincoln Memorial, after all. The National Park Service, which runs it and other monuments, has to raise money too but has a policy against such acknowledgments. “We consider these places and spaces to be a sacred part of American history, and we are working hard to keep them commercial free,” says David Barna, the Park Service chief of public affairs.

In the late 1990s, for example, Target Corporation contributed \$7 million of the \$11 million cost of restoring the Washington Monument. But, says Mr. Barna, they weren’t allowed to slap their bull’s-eye logo on the obelisk. In fact, their public-relations return on that donation was so below-the-radar that, at the time, more people knew the name of the architect responsible for the restoration and the shimmering

protective sheathing that so captured the public' s imagination — Michael Graves — than the identity of the corporate sponsor.

Similarly, the National Gallery of Art “does not name real estate,” says Deborah Ziska, the museum' s chief of public information. “Founder Andrew Mellon set the example when he urged that the new museum not bear his name, since the institution belonged to the nation.” The late Carter Brown, director for more than 20 years, used to tell potential donors that they would be giving “to the nation” rather than to a museum.

And what do you know? The National Gallery has had no shortage of benefactors.

KCRG-TV ²

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Cedar Rapids Group Selling Toilet Naming Rights

By Diana Nollen, Reporter

CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa — The new elevator tower entrance will be the star attraction when CSPS reopens its door Friday night (8/26/2011). The number two attraction will be the new toilets.

CSPS, 1103 Third St. SE, has six shiny new pissoirs (urinals) and 15 sparkling new commodes (toilets). But these heads have no names.

Do you know a John, Lou, Lew or Loo? Heres your chance to jump in feet-first and buy the naming rights to one of the thrones for \$1,000. You can connect yourself to this conspicuous improvement in a tangible way, while helping Legion Arts raise some everyday operating dollars.

(The idea was borrowed from the HERE project in New York City, which has a similar mission of supporting, developing and presenting cutting-edge arts projects.)

Executive Director F. John Herbert is keenly aware that past patrons may feel a nostalgic tug at the loss of some of the buildings charm — even in the restroom realm.

“Because people have a high degree of affection for the building the way it was, it may take time for them to get accustomed to the new,” he said. “We think of the old bathrooms as being so inadequate, but people developed an affection for them. Theres something ritualistic about standing in line so long.

“As somebody whos worked in the building a couple of decades, I understand the affection for something that feels very grassroots and homemade, and I understand the limitations. If people want to stand in line, well let them stand in line,” he said with a laugh.

“(The renovations) have done a great job in retaining much of the character and charm of the building, while making it much more accessible, much more comfortable and much safer for audiences and artists alike,” Herbert said.

So heres your chance to honor a loved one, a colleague, a favorite artist or yourself with the toilet naming rights. The Legion Arts folks encourage you to use your imagination. You could join with your neighbors to salute a beloved legislator or council representative. Express your respect for a teacher or mentor. Or go in together with a couple of co-workers to surprise your boss. The possibilities are endless, Herbert and his colleagues say.

Every donation (which is tax-deductible) will be recognized with an engraved name plate. Committed donors will be taken, by appointment, on a private tour of all facilities and invited to choose from among the available fixtures. Call (319) 364-1580 and schedule your tour today, before the best fixtures are claimed.

The Chronicle of Philanthropy ³

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Naming Rights Sink to a New Level

By Raymund Flandez

An arts center in Iowa has found a novel way to flush out donors.

Legion Arts, in Cedar Rapids, was so enamored of the new toilets and urinals in its just-renovated building that the nonprofit decided to let people make a gift to get their names on them.



Donors can buy naming rights to six urinals or 15 toilets for \$1,000 each. In a news release, the group described the buildings restroom features as “shiny new pissoirs (urinals)” and “sparkling new commodes (toilets).”

So far, four people have expressed interest in seeing their names engraved in the bathroom, says F. John Herbert, executive director of the group.

After the 120-year-old building it rented for two decades was ruined by a flood in 2008, the scrappy grass-roots group raised \$7-million to buy and redo it. Its grand re-opening is today.

“Our participants love the programs, love the building, but they were frustrated by some of the shortcomings,” Mr. Herbert says. “Foremost among those were inadequate toilet facilities. We now have nice new toilets.”

So “we created an opportunity to increase their enthusiasm,” he adds. “We could sell naming rights to the fixtures.”

How did the Legion Arts board react?

“I would say there were some varying degrees of discomfort among our board members and people who help us do fund raising,” Mr. Herbert says.

“Its a slightly untraditional idea. Well see how it works.”

Mr. Herbert borrowed the idea from Here arts center, a New York group that named a toilet after a donor.

The organization suggests why and how donors could contribute: “Heres your chance to honor a loved one, a colleague, a favorite artist or yourself. . . . Or go in together with a couple of co-workers to surprise your boss.”

Legion Arts offers to take committed donors on a private tour of the facilities, by appointment, so that they can choose among the fixtures. Mr. Herbert believes they will all be bearing donors names in the next six months.

And when that is done, he figures, “well start selling the sinks.”



Notes

¹<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB109780304245046302.html>

²<http://www.kcrg.com/news/local/Cedar-Rapids-Group-Selling-Toilet-Naming-Rights-128240683.html>

³<http://philanthropy.com/blogs/prospecting/naming-rights-sink-to-a-new-level/31134>