

## **Baltimore Magazine**

### **“Can We Ever Play Nice Again?”**

By Danielle Sweeney

November 2004

As Baltimoreans prepare to head to the polls this month, it's hard to recall an election year that has been more rife with partisan politics and hitting below-the-belt rancor. Could a video documentary help voters and politicians see beyond their party loyalty to what unites all Americans? Three local artists thought: Perhaps, yes. Julia Kim Smith, Francesca Danieli, and David Beaudouin created *One Nice Thing*, a video installation for White Box, a gallery in New York City. The project - which received a lot of media coverage during its creation - is a collection of interviews recorded at this year's Democratic and Republican National Conventions (DNC and RNC, respectively). In the video, the artists challenged convention attendees to say one nice thing about the other political party - and genuinely mean it.

“We tried to capture the feelings of the American people at a very polarized time,” says Beaudouin, a writer, artist, and filmmaker who lives in Roland Park.

White Box had approached Smith and other artists around the country to be part of its summer series called “Make Nice,” a response to a New York City ad campaign in which former Mayor Koch told New Yorkers: “The Republicans are coming. Make Nice.”

Smith called upon her two colleagues to participate: She and Beaudouin had collaborated together before, and she and Danieli, an MFA candidate in Photography and Digital Imaging at MICA, share studio space.

Obtaining nice quotes from Democrats at the DNC proved simple enough: The artists were granted full access to the DNC events, and Danieli and Smith roamed the convention sites with digital video cameras, interviewing DNC delegates everywhere from skyboxes and parties to street corners.

At first, the Democrats were a bit hesitant to be filmed. “People were cautious,” says Smith, who lives in The Terraces in Baltimore. But once they understood what the videographers were doing, most had no trouble coming up with one nice thing to say.

“George Bush has a nice smile,” said one young, female protestor at the DNC.

“One nice thing about the Republicans is their history: They freed the slaves,” added an older gentleman.

Senator Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.) gave Republicans a back-handed compliment: “I remember the days when Republicans stood for a good tradition in American life,” said Sarbanes. “The Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt dimension of American politics.”

Mayor Martin O'Malley echoed Sarbanes's sentiments. “The traditional Republicans always prided themselves on being strong on defense and fiscally conservative,” he said. “So that is something nice I can say about Republicans I knew when I was younger.”

Things got a little touchier when it came time to let the GOP take its turn: the Republicans never even replied to the artists' request to film during the RNC. But even though “the Republicans were a tougher crowd to work,” as Smith says, she and Danieli managed to finagle access to a few events, and ended up speaking to more than 200 attendees.

“We attended Governor Ehrlich's bash at the Chelsea Pier,” says Danieli, who lives in Brooklandville. “But he wouldn't let us [interview] him.”

The first lady, however, was happy to oblige. “Kendal was very gracious,” says Smith. “She said, ‘Sure! One nice thing! I used to be a Democrat.’”

Given the current political climate, the artists were not surprised that some delegates on both sides chose not to comment. Says Danieli: “This is the most unsavory campaign in our nation's history.”

Adds Beaudouin: “We are so locked into the idea of the [expletive] Democrats or [expletive] Republicans, we forget about the third choice: finding common ground,” he says bluntly.

“There are larger pressing issues in American right now, such as terrorism,” he continues. “We need to be focused on what unites us, not what divides us.”

Copyright © 2004, Baltimore Magazine