

**Written Testimony in Support of FY08 Appropriations for the
National Endowment for the Arts**

Submitted by Chris Klein

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment & Related Agencies

“Role of the Arts in Creativity and Innovation”

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Chris Klein. I am an actor and have appeared in films such as *Election*, opposite Reese Witherspoon and Matthew Broderick, and in *This is Our Youth* in London's West End. I am also an advocate on behalf of Americans for the Arts. I join my fellow witnesses today in requesting an appropriation of \$176 million for the National Endowment for the Arts.

I have been extraordinarily fortunate in many ways. I was lucky enough to grow up in Brookfield, Illinois for the earliest part of my life and then in Omaha, Nebraska for my teen years. I had loving parents, caring teachers, high quality arts education opportunities in the public schools, and inspiring performing arts organizations in the community.

My parents gave me every opportunity and encouragement to participate in the arts from a young age. What you need to know is that my mother has a Masters Degree in early childhood education and has been a public school teacher for 30 years. In fact, she still teaches kindergarten today at Eastwood Elementary School in Westminster, California. She knows that all children need the arts and she certainly got me involved at a young age. And it's my father that got me interested in politics and policy; by provoking thought and discussion about the news each day. It is because of my parents, Terry and Fred Klein, that I am an artist and an advocate today.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of engaging kids early in the arts, but I can illustrate it from my own personal experience. When I was in the fourth grade there, my mother volunteered my sister and me for our church children's choir. We sang twice a week: a rehearsal on Wednesday followed by 9 o'clock Mass on Sunday. I fell in love with music and singing. It was inspiration. It was magic. It had the power to bring people together and create a real sense of community.

Soon afterwards I was selected to be the soloist in a performance of *This Little Light of Mine* at the Sheraton Convention Center in Chicago. It was a huge place for a little kid and a full house that night with standing room only and stadium seating. I was part of the kids choir and we were on risers in the back of the stage. At a certain point, I had to walk around to the center of the stage for my solo. All I remember is that when the spotlight shined, and the crowd grew quiet, all eyes fell on me – and I realized that a performance could be inspiring, and even stirring. That's when I really first learned the meaning of art, from the inside out. And that's when my dream of being a performing artist began.

When I was thirteen years old, we moved to Omaha following my father's job transfer. The quality and availability of arts programs both in the school and in the community were

bountiful. Whether with my parents or my friends, I think I saw every production that the Omaha Community Playhouse offered. I should mention that it is perhaps the largest community theater in the country. In addition to being an avid theater-goer, I was given the opportunity to audition and participate in several productions there.

During junior and senior high school, I was involved in practically every arts activity that was available – and there were a lot of them. We had band, choir, and art class. We had extra-curricular activities, including a swing chorus and drama club. There was both jazz and dance. When I was in the eleventh grade, the Omaha school district built a new high school with state of the art performance facilities. It has a beautiful proscenium theater, a black box theater, and rehearsal space. Student interest was so strong that these facilities were operating at full capacity within a year of being opened. It is a point of pride for me that my parents made a fairly large gift to the school and the proscenium theater was later renamed the “Jerry Bergen Theater” after my late grandfather.

I have another reason why this high school means so much to me. It was at this school that Alexander Payne, the Academy-Award winning director of *Sideways* “discovered” me while he was scouting for locations for the film *Election*. When I was a high school senior, I had decided to pursue an acting career. My school’s principal – Dr. Rick Kolowski – knew of my dream, and he believed in my talent and skills. And so when Alexander Payne scouted Millard West High School as a possible location, Dr. Kolowski made sure that he introduced me to him as a kid with an acting future. Through an audition, I won the role of Paul Metzler in the film *Election*, which in fact launched my career. I owe a debt of gratitude to Principal Kolowski because he cared about his students. He cared enough about his students to make sure they had the best opportunities to learn in the arts and he cared enough about his students to help them pursue their careers. If Dr. Kolowski hadn’t gone out of his way to get personally involved, I wouldn’t be here today.

As you can see, my parents, my schools, and my community provided a diverse range of opportunities for kids to participate in the arts because they realized that creativity is the root of inspiration and success. We all have a responsibility to nurture creativity and imagination in young minds. It is these creative skills that will give children the tools with which they can solve any problem and seize any opportunity in school or in work or in life. We need to help them move forward and learn and grow.

I learned from my mother that if we focus on children, we can change the world, because we can instill values and attitudes as well as skills and knowledge. Creativity in children goes across the board. Any American who has children, works with children, or cares about children knows this. It’s not a white collar or blue collar issue. It is not a Republican or Democratic issue. Children who get involved in the arts have better outcomes in a host of areas. It is mind-boggling to me that so many children do not get the chance to realize their potential.

Personally, I am committed to this issue, both financially and emotionally, and as I said, it is tremendously gratifying to be in a position where I may be able to make a difference. My involvement comes in several forms.

According to Dr. James Catterall of UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, research demonstrates that involvement in the arts is linked to higher academic performance, increased standardized test scores, more community service and lower dropout rates. Students reap these cognitive and developmental benefits regardless of their socioeconomic status.

I am personally involved with a phenomenal Los Angeles arts organization called P.S. ARTS, which is a nonprofit organization dedicated to restoring arts education in public schools by providing comprehensive, skills based, sequential classes in dance, music, theater and visual arts. It serves thousands of children in some of the most underserved neighborhoods in California. It offers arts-related workshops for classroom teachers, integrating creative expression and the arts into the core curriculum. P.S. ARTS now serves as a national model, advocating arts for all students. In short, it gives children from all socioeconomic backgrounds the opportunity to change their lives.

Another wonderful organization that I help is Voices in Harmony, which is a youth arts organization committed to empowering the voices and visions of at-risk teens in Los Angeles. It has a classroom-based program called "Voices of the Classroom," which works with sophomores to help them develop critical thinking and leadership skills, and to identify the unique impact they want to make in the community. In one of its programs, students work with mentors to write original screenplays, make short films, and screen them at a festival. These films are personal. They explore the students' own life experiences, often with difficult issues such as teen pregnancy, gang involvement, drug abuse, and violence. Rather than letting their feelings out in vengeance or self-destruction, they have a constructive way to come to terms with them. As a result of this process, they are able to impact others with their stories and share their vision of what is possible in our community.

The federal government can send a signal that the arts do matter to children and to communities. It can strengthen arts organizations that provide children with inspiration, instruction, and opportunity. I know that to be true, because it has touched organizations that have inspired me. In fact, the Omaha Community Playhouse has received federal money from the Nebraska Arts Council through the NEA's Challenge America Program. P.S. ARTS got an NEA grant just last year to support weekly theater and visual arts classes for every elementary and middle school student at Camino Nuevo Charter Academy in the McArthur Park community of Los Angeles. I want to thank the members of this Subcommittee for providing the appropriation that make these arts programs possible. They make an incalculable difference in the lives of the children they touch.

Therefore, I join my colleagues today and respectfully urge you to appropriate \$176 million for the National Endowment for the Arts in Fiscal Year 2008.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before your Subcommittee today.