

COMMUNITIES

The Amateur's Guide To Community Organizing

by Eric Sasson



February 16, 2017



It's not easy being a writer these days. In the past few weeks, the administration has implied that cuts in funding to the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, organizations that provide much needed financial support to artists, are imminent. But it's not just the possible financial losses that cut to our core. As a nation, we've never witnessed such devastating attacks on truth from the executive branch—and one only needs to review Thursday morning's [bizarre press conference](#) for evidence. We've been bombarded with "[alternative facts](#)," while almost daily, Trump lambastes the press, [calling journalists](#) "among the most dishonest human beings on earth."

Yet through reporting, poems, essays, and even fictional stories, writers aim to reveal the truth by holding a mirror up to society, so that it can view itself in all its honest glory and shame. To us, the freedom of expression is a sacred right and the fight to maintain it is particularly personal. For several weeks after the election I sought to channel my emotions by writing pieces about the horrors of the incoming administration, calling on those who felt just as angry to [turn their fury into fuel](#).

But as the days went on, I felt I had to do more. It was no longer enough to write about my feelings. I needed to take action. Then I remembered: I could do something at AWP—the [Association of Writers and Writing Programs](#) conference. The annual three-day event gathers more than 10,000 fiction writers, poets and essayists for hundreds of panels, readings, and off-site events—and the 2017 conference was held this past week in Washington, D.C.

Back in November, I already knew I'd be attending the conference, along with hundreds of my friends. I couldn't imagine such a large gathering of writers staying silent in the face of what was looking more like an incoming authoritarian regime with each passing day. So on December 14, I posted a [Facebook event page](#) and invited about 400 writers to what I then called "An AWP anti-Trump rally." I had no idea what I was doing. I was shouting into the void, hoping someone would hear me. I said I didn't really know how to organize anything, beyond maybe a pretty decent Oscars party.



Luckily, people did hear me. Several people contacted me, offering to help. They too had been discussing a protest plan, and were happy to join forces. The next few weeks became a lesson in just how much collaboration and effort is necessary in order to put on a fairly large-scale event. It wasn't easy, but we pulled it off. Here's what I learned about channeling my frustration and fear into an event that made a real impact.

Outsource the details that require an expert

There will be a lot of them. Have you ever secured a permit?

I'd never before had to think about permits or marketing, so rather than attempting to wing important legal minutiae or graphic design, I reached out to folks who had more experience with this vital work. Dana Cann researched locations and did the tedious work of securing us a permit for Lafayette Park. Daniel Hoyt came up with the idea of a candlelight vigil for freedom of expression and offered to purchase all the candles. Sequoia Nagamatsu designed the postcard, 5,000 of which we distributed at the conference book fair. Simone Roberts helped secure the sound system, and Julie Carr secured both the funds and all the materials to create the signs held by many at the rally.

It was Sarah Browning, director of [Split This Rock](#), a D.C.-based poetry organization that focuses on social justice, who really put our plans into high gear. She used her considerable networking skills and influence to build momentum, first by inviting several notable speakers (including Kazim Ali, Gabrielle Bellot, Melissa Febos, Carolyn Forché, Ross Gay, and Luis J. Rodriguez), then by securing over 30 cosponsors—organizations like PEN America and Lambda Literary—for our event, each of whom agreed to spread the word as well. We put out a press release and a few publications interviewed us and promoted the event. Soon, our numbers multiplied: from a couple of hundred people to over 1,000 people saying they'd attend, with another 900 "interested." I was flabbergasted. My vague little idea was turning into something real.

Be prepared to improvise

Face it: Everything will not go according to plan.

Three days before the vigil, we found out that because our contact at the Parks department had been out sick, we wouldn't be able to get the upgraded permit we had hoped for, which would have allowed us to set up a stage. With our current permit, we wouldn't be allowed to set anything on the ground and we'd have to make do with a portable sound system, one that likely wouldn't be loud enough for the crowd we were expecting. We could bring candles, but only if there was something that prevented the wax from dripping onto the ground, so we purchased candle skirts.



There were so many unknowns: What would the weather be like? We decided to hold the event rain or shine, but a few of us were worried that people wouldn't show up if it was too cold. Lafayette Park was also a twenty minute walk from the convention center, and many attendees often balked at attending "off-site" events at AWP. What if people got lost? Would there be other protests that we would be competing with on the day of, and how would that affect us?

Pay attention to staging—and your attendees's needs

It may be a protest, but it's still an event.

In the end our fears were unfounded. The weather was in the mid '50s—balmy for a winter evening in D.C.—the sky was clear, and people turned out in droves. I'm not going to [pull a Trump](#) and say this was the largest crowd at any vigil in history, but our expectations that we'd have under a thousand attendees were exceeded. But because we'd encouraged a rather diligent crowd that included professors and editors to RSVP, we'd ensured that everyone had plenty of room and we kept the event to a strict 75 minutes so that everyone would remain comfortable. If you're planning to go longer, you will likely want to rent Porta-Pottys or otherwise ensure restroom access.

A few hundred feet behind us was the White House. Sarah informed all of the speakers that we needed to always face away from it when speaking—that was the rule. I spoke first to thank everyone and talk about not giving into despair, and about how every time we express ourselves we must view it as an act of resistance against a world which seeks to silence or marginalize us.

Invite a balanced mix of speakers suited to your cause

If you've done this right, you've already targeted a crowd focused on specific actions.



Iranian writer and filmmaker Sanaz Fotouhi almost didn't make it to AWP because of Trump's travel ban.

There's so much to fight for when it comes to Trump these days, but we asked each speaker to focus on freedom of expression, and the rest was up to them.

The 2014-2016 Los Angeles poet laureate Luis J. Rodriguez spoke about how advocating for truth under

Trump was going to be "revolutionary." "Truth will be a subversive act," he said. "I want to have truth processions. We should have poetics of truth. We should have acts of truth and beauty everywhere."

But writers tend to be very solitary folks, which is why we were glad that memoirist and essayist [Melissa Febos](#) acknowledged that she didn't initially want to attend a vigil. "I don't feel like lighting a candle unless the candle is for burning this house down," she said.

Writer that she is, she looked up the word in the dictionary. "A vigil is a period of keeping awake during

a time usually kept asleep. That sounded exactly right to me most importantly, keep it under seven minutes. After that, it was because, as awake as I have always believed myself to be, I also know that I have spent more time sleeping than I could afford now."

"I really didn't understand the groundswell of need we were tapping into."

Iranian writer and filmmaker Sanaz Fotouhi almost didn't make it to AWP because of Trump's travel ban. She considered herself lucky, as a dual citizen of Australia, because she was able to fly home to relative safety, but she asked the crowd to consider all of the people who, unlike her, could not speak English or fly back to their country. "This ban is a matter of life or death," she said.

Legendary award-winning poet and human rights advocate [Carolyn Forché](#) read from the First Amendment and said we were "gathered here in vigil, in defense of these rights, and to declare our allegiance to the party of humanity ... We will not stand down, we will not end our just resistance, we will work together with compassion and intelligence, hope, and commitment."

Let your event be bigger than you

This is a jumping off point.

When the speakers were done, spontaneous chanting broke out. People lingered for several minutes after the event was officially over, perhaps, like me, feeling energized and hopeful and ready to commit themselves to express themselves even more. Before I arrived in D.C., I really didn't understand the groundswell of need we were tapping into. Coming from New York, I have an opportunity to protest pretty much every day. Many of those who descend upon AWP hail from smaller towns, so this vigil was a way for them to feel connected to the burgeoning resistance in our country.

I can't help but think back to my original post on Facebook. I didn't have any idea then what would be possible—only that I had a desire to express something. But here's the thing: Words do have power, particularly in dark times. No matter how daunting things seem, it is up to us to remember that all major social change first seemed futile. This vigil was just one of countless protests around the country in recent weeks, and each gathering adds to the accumulation of voices exercising perhaps the most crucial right of any democracy: the right to express ourselves freely. People are staying awake when they once kept asleep, and right now, that's the only way forward.

All images courtesy the author via the [Candlelight Vigil at AWP's Facebook page](#).



"Truth will be a subversive act. We should have acts of truth and beauty everywhere."



"A vigil is a period of keeping awake during a time usually kept asleep."



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