

## We Got Issues! Profile

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*Our approach to the work sits inside an attempt to understand the intersection of art and civic engagement and explores how art can be a powerful vehicle for mobilizing constituencies and communities that might not normally be engaged.*

—Rha Goddess, We Got Issues!

We Got Issues! (WGI!) is a women-led movement and performance project dedicated to unleashing young women's leadership through the transformative power of creative expression. Founded in 2003 by performance artist and activist Rha Goddess, WGI! is rooted in the belief that the voices of young women—their visions, poetry, song, battle-cries, and movements—have the power to transform the challenges facing them, their families, their communities, and the world. As a women's initiative, WGI! is committed to creating a safe and supportive space for all women across race, class, gender, and socio-political lines, and to amplifying their diverse voices, ideas, beliefs, and experiences.

WGI! began with a series of candid conversations among a group of New York-based young women activists and artists about their experiences with politics and power. These women shared a growing sense of alienation from the political process in the lead-up to the 2004 presidential election and were outraged by the lack of representation they found among those who claimed to be their political leaders. Suspecting that they were not alone, they decided to hit the road and talk with other young women about voting, the issues that mattered to them most, and their political beliefs.

Drawing on their extensive personal and organizational networks, WGI! spent several months traveling around the country organizing Rantfests! in local communities, colleges, beauty salons, cafés, and living rooms. Young women gathered to explore often-challenging and provocative questions: What are you most angry about for yourself, your community, your family, the world? What terrifies you the most? What are you most passionate about? What radical changes would you like to see young women make?

The Rantfests! offered young women a critical space to speak their minds and be heard. Using a variety of strategies, including group activities, writing exercises, and surveys, facilitators worked with participants to get to the heart of what matters to them most. These gatherings culminated in a town hall open microphone, where women were given the floor to “rant” in their own authentic voices about the issues that they had identified—sex, racism, motherhood, violence, and spirituality, among others.

Eager to hear the voices of as many young women as possible, WGI! organized the Hottest Rant! Contest, in which thousands of young women were encouraged to submit rants online. WGI! also took to the streets at the March on Women's Lives in Washington, D.C., and the Republican National Convention in New York, organizing Rantfests! and collecting video rants from young women demonstrators. One of the most poignant experiences during the rant collection process was the Rantfest! organized at the women's jail at Rikers Island. There, prisoner-participants were denied access to pencils as a security measure. As a result, facilitators sat with 35 incarcerated women, transcribing their rants word for word.

While Goddess believes that young women are attracted to this project because they crave the opportunity to take center stage and speak to the concerns that trouble them most, she was "blown away by what it took for women to open up." Rantfest! facilitators found that young women—even the most outspoken among them—struggled to speak their minds authentically. As a result, Goddess concludes that in spite of the advances made by women's movements in recent history, young women in this country still expect to be ignored. To counter this deeply embedded silence, facilitators had to "develop mastery in listening and creating as safe a space as we possibly could," says Goddess.

From the beginning, WGI! has been committed to reflecting back what it heard from young women during this process. Consequently, while the rant collection team traveled across the country, a team of six writers worked to transform the rants into a performance piece consisting of 30 monologues woven together to take audiences on a journey tracing young women's empowerment. Following a six-week rehearsal period, the project culminated in the September 2004 premiere of *We Got Issues! The Performance*, executive produced by Eve Ensler and Jane Fonda, to sold-out audiences at the Apollo Theater in New York. The multicultural, multilingual cast was a mixture of performing artists, theatrical actors, organizers, and everyday young women who had never performed before. Voices that had traditionally fallen through the cracks in the rush of "left" and "right" political mobilization were finally given a real platform from which to speak their truth.

From this first year of activity, three critical lessons emerged as guideposts for WGI!'s next phase: (1) Young women want and need encouragement to raise their voices in an authentic way, especially when it comes to politics; (2) young women crave a sense of tribe, and their empowerment is directly proportional to their ability to create a healthy community; and (3) many young women, particularly women of color, are afraid of acknowledging that they need and want power, yet they hold great aspirations for themselves, their communities, and the world. These findings pointed to the need for a space that could support young women's leadership development. As a result, WGI! decided to create a leadership institute for young women that integrates art and activism.

In August 2005, WGI! launched the Leadership Institute of Arts and Activism, which brought together eight young women. Some identified themselves primarily as artists and others as activists. All shared a deep interest in learning how to integrate art and activism. The Institute was structured around three intensive weekend retreats that took place over the course of 18 months. These retreats enabled participants to step away from their day-to-day lives and reflect on what they wanted for themselves and their communities. They focused on developing

skills in artistic craft and creative expression, social and political analysis, and personal and civic transformation.

With the guidance and support of the WGI! staff, the participants organized a ten-city national tour of *We Got Issues! The Performance*. For the tour, they spent two to four weeks in each community before the performances, working with local partners to organize community-based programming that would engage young women around the issues the project raised. These programs included Rantfests!, as well as community dialogues and “red tents.” The Rantfests! encouraged young women to speak to the issues that mattered to them. The community dialogues offered them the space to engage in facilitated conversations about specific issues areas, including women and power; race, class, sexual orientation, and difference; and art and activism. And the red tents turned their attention inward and focused on self-care, building sacred sisterhood, and healing through storytelling.

In addition, WGI! worked with local partners to develop programming specifically tailored to the needs of young women in their communities. In Albuquerque, for example, a group of young women activists collaborated with WGI! to produce a “day of healing” for over 40 young women artists and organizers. The day included yoga and other healing arts, a vegetarian cooking lesson, and a Rantfest! focused on the theme of wellness among young women activists. In Santa Fe, 25 young women who attended an alternative high school participated in a Rantfest! co-sponsored by the Santa Fe Art Institute and led by WGI! community organizers. They also coordinated a monthly Rantfest! support group to allow them to continue the deep and authentic dialogue they had shared in this “safe space.” And in the Bay area, WGI! convened a day-long retreat for 10 young women leaders from local partner organizations. These women gathered four days before the 2006 congressional elections to reflect on their work and explore building an ongoing support network to collaboratively solve problems around leadership challenges.

Committed to building on these experiences, WGI! has identified three pillars to guide its work over the next several years: training and development, outreach and education, and recognition and advocacy. The first pillar reflects its aspiration to provide the most powerful and transformative training available to young women leaders, so that they can fully express themselves and be empowered in their contributions to social justice and social change movements. Currently, the primary vehicle for this work is the Leadership Institute. The second pillar is dedicated to sharing the knowledge and information WGI! gains over the course of its work through writing projects, speaking engagements, and resource development. JLove Calderon, WGI!’s Director of Programming and a long-time activist and educator dedicated to racial justice and young women’s empowerment, spearheads the programming for this initiative and co-leads the Leadership Institute. In service of knowledge-sharing, Goddess and Calderon have co-edited a book that examines the lessons learned from their work thus far which features the voices of over 80 young women throughout the nation and highlights ten bold, courageous and empowered leaders who are creating change on a local, national and global level. The third pillar focuses on recognizing the work that young women are doing to advance progressive movements and leverage resources to invest in young women’s leadership within these movements.

Disheartened with the current model so prevalent among progressive nonprofits, which renders them dependent on foundations, Goddess is looking toward new ideas, such as social entrepreneurship and social innovation, to develop fresh approaches for supporting WGI!'s work. For Goddess, this begins with a new way of thinking: "We need to shift the mindset of scarcity, the mindset of poverty, the mindset of competition that has come to be synonymous with many grassroots nonprofits." She believes that creating healthy and sustainable work environments should be a priority of the progressive movement. "The mindset of so many [progressive] organizations that we work with is program, program, program, but they can't pay the rent [and] their staff are working hours that they can't be paid for." Goddess believes that there is a great deal of expertise within the progressive movement that often gets lost because progressive organizations are so focused on day-to-day survival that they forget or are simply unable to communicate with one another. "We need to talk to each other, come together and share learning, the challenges and successes, in order to build on our collective wisdom," says Goddess. In addition to creating healthy and sustainable work environments and contexts to share learning, developing more holistic and innovative approaches to grantmaking is a key component of this new path, according to Goddess. She believes that progressive organizations and foundations need to work together to identify the gaps and disconnects between the needs on the ground and current funding, and develop strategies for how to bridge these gaps. She suggests that it will call for another level of trust, transparency and authenticity on both sides to foster this new level of partnership.

As WGI! moves into its next phase of work, Goddess is thinking about what it will take to help facilitate the world WGI! envisions for young women over the long-term: "The vision may not be fully realized in my lifetime, but I've got believe that what we do today will matter, when it's all said and done."

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