ARTFUL NEGOTIATIONS

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Follow Spot: Growing the Ranks

BY KRISTEN ANDRESEN

WOCA, which convened at APAP|NYC 2011, has more than 100 members.
Several years ago, Kaisha Johnson was doing what arts administrators do: attending regional conferences, engaging in dialogue with colleagues, taking in new work. But she noticed something was missing: People like her.

"I was surveying the field, and I was seeing a lack of diversity among administrators," recalls Johnson, director of touring artists at the Center for Traditional Music and Dance. "On our stages, certainly there's a diversity of work, but what was being presented onstage was not reflecting what was going on behind the scenes. I wanted to reach out to women who felt like they were working alone and formalize a network where we could support one another's work."

She turned to Alison McNeil, who was working with Arts Presenters at the time, and together they formed Women of Color in the Arts. The group has grown to include more than 100 members who represent all segments of the field—presenters, managers, agents, arts educators, fundraisers and development professionals—and it now includes representation from The Netherlands, Colombia, Brazil and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"These women are feeling isolated in their work, too," McNeil says.

Because of WOCA, they aren't alone. Its members are engaged in everything from casual networking and idea-sharing to more formalized mentorship and professional development programs. Johnson and McNeil are in the process of establishing a pilot program to introduce young women in the Washington, D.C., area—ranging from junior high school to college—to the idea of arts administration as a career. It is their hope that this will "help diversify the pipeline."

They've also created a brown-bag lunch series, led by members who are experts in areas of importance to WOCA, such as building strategic partnerships. It has been so popular in the Washington area that they're planning a similar series in New York.

"We've had some 'aha moments,'" McNeil says. "Being able to come together to meet and network and being able to hear lessons learned from the host and the featured speakers allows us to go back to our organizations and approach things a little differently than we would've before."

A website that serves as an online forum for members to discuss issues and help one another with career networking is in the works, and WOCA's first meeting at APAP/NYC 2011 was a resounding success.

Though WOCA has well-defined core objectives (see sidebar), McNeil and Johnson predict that the group and its programming will continually evolve as members' needs change and the ranks grow.

"This is all about enhancing contributions to the performing arts field that could ultimately make it more diverse in a lot of ways," Johnson says. ¶