



to



the Tenth!

BY MARGARET BATTISTELLI

In 10 years, V-Day has raised more than \$50 million and made advocates, donors and 'warriors' of thousands of women in its effort to combat violence against women around the world.

“Say it! Say the word!”

In a church basement in Philadelphia, a Women's Ministry group is meeting to discuss an upcoming fundraiser. After a few minutes of conversation, the group's leader points her finger at one of the attendees and yells, “Come on, say it!”



Writer/activist Eve Ensler and actress Jane Fonda fire up the crowd at a V-Day benefit production of 'The Vagina Monologues' in New York City's Madison Square Garden in February 2001. Photo courtesy of V-Day.

V-Day

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About V-Day (from www.vday.org):

V-Day is a global movement to stop violence against women and girls. V-Day is a catalyst that promotes creative events to increase awareness, raise money and revitalize the spirit of existing anti-violence organizations. V-Day generates broader attention for the fight to stop violence against women and girls, including rape, battery, incest, female genital mutilation and sexual slavery.

V-Day's mission:

- V-Day is an organized response against violence toward women.
- V-Day is a vision: We see a world where women live safely and freely.
- V-Day is a demand: Rape, incest, battery, genital mutilation and sex slavery must end now.
- V-Day is a spirit: We believe women should spend their lives creating and thriving rather than surviving or recovering from terrible atrocities.
- V-Day is a catalyst: By raising money and consciousness, it will unify and strengthen existing anti-violence efforts. Triggering far-reaching awareness, it will lay the groundwork for new educational, protective and legislative endeavors throughout the world.
- V-Day is a process: We will work as long as it takes. We will not stop until the violence stops.
- V-Day is a day. We proclaim Valentine's Day as V-Day, to celebrate women and end the violence.
- V-Day is a fierce, wild, and unstoppable movement and community.

"Say what?" the suddenly shy woman asks with a smirk.

"Say the word!"

"OK, fine ... " she finally concedes. "V ... a ... g ... i ... n ... a!"

With that, the other women raise a prolonged note like a heavenly choir that trails off into a fit of laughter. And the church's male pastor, who really had just stopped by for the cookies and coffee, leaves the room.

That's fine with the women, however, since they already had engaged him in a discussion about violence against women, about how his congregation could reach out to women in need, and about how this Women's Ministry could produce a performance of "The Vagina Monologues" to help empower local women to make a difference in their community.

Empowerment is what lies at the heart of V-Day and its efforts to eradicate violence against women around the world. The 10-year-old effort — spearheaded by writer, activist and powerhouse Eve Ensler — has raised more than \$50 million with an unusual fundraising model that eschews direct mail, telefundraising, street canvassing, Web-based solicitation and other traditional venues.

In addition to performances, V-Day stages large-scale benefits and produces innovative gatherings, films and campaigns to educate and change social attitudes about violence against women, including:

- the documentary *Until the Violence Stops*;
- community briefings on the missing and murdered women of Juárez, Mexico;
- V-Day delegation trips to Israel, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan;
- the Afghan Women's Summit;
- a two-week festival of theater, spoken word, performance and community events called *Until the Violence Stops*: NYC, which invited thousands of New Yorkers to make New York City the safest place on earth

for women and girls.

In Africa, the Middle East and Asia, V-Day commits ongoing support to build movements and anti-violence networks. Among its work:

- funding the first shelters for women in Egypt and Iraq;
- sponsoring annual workshops and three national campaigns in Afghanistan;
- convening the Confronting Violence conference of South Asian women leaders;
- donating satellite phones to Afghan women to keep lines of communication open and action plans moving forward.

Ensler started V-Day in 1998 with proceeds from her ever-evolving and wildly successful play, "The Vagina Monologues." Once a year, in February and March, Ensler allows groups around the world to produce a performance of the play and use the proceeds for individual programs that work to end violence against women and girls (often shelters and rape crisis centers). Just about any group can sign on to do its own performance, but there's an application process where the group leader is required to outline the mission of the group and its plans for using any money it raises.

Once approved, the group receives a specially written script, along with resources and guidelines for ensuring a smooth and lucrative production. After channeling 10 percent of its net proceeds back to V-Day to benefit groups in its Spotlight Campaign, the group then is free to use the rest for its approved projects.

More than 2,000 V-Day benefits took place in 950 communities and on college campuses around the world in 2007. Ensler calls it self-empowered philanthropy.

"V-Day is not a foundation; I think of it as a movement," she says. "A foundation implies a fixed hierarchy and a fixed place, and V-Day doesn't exist in a fixed place. ►



'We've had incredible victories.

The play is in 119 countries, people are telling their stories in places I never dreamed women would tell their stories. We've changed laws; we've had presidents stand up and declare themselves

vagina friendly; we've had members of parliament stand up with us; we've opened safe houses all around the world. It's been amazing.'

— EVE ENSLER, ACTIVIST/PLAYWRIGHT, "THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES"

Eve Ensler, center, pictured here with Shiva Rose, left, and Rosario Dawson at the V-Day LA 2003 benefit screening of V-Day's documentary, "Until the Violence Stops." Photo courtesy of V-Day.

We're virtual; we don't really have an office.

"Really what we are is a self-empowered movement," she adds. "We've been able in the last 10 years to raise \$50 million. But that has come from grassroots groups around the world — individual grassroots groups, thousands and thousands of them — doing the play, raising the money and keeping the money. And that also comes from being able to give direct support to self-empowered groups around the world who know what they're doing and ... all they need is more resources to do it."

But why vaginas?

It's not a word that typically is banned about in polite company. That, Ensler says, is precisely the point. She equates society's apparent discomfort with saying something as basic as the name of an essential female body part with its more disturbing discomfort with recognizing the problem of global violence against women. Breaking down the taboo of the word is Step 1 in breaking down the barriers to communication and understanding that keep violence toward

women — in all its insidious forms — generally out of the public eye.

"Saying the word 'vagina' and breaking through that taboo is equivalent to breaking through the complacency and the normalization of violence toward women — getting people to understand that, for example, rape is actually a problem and that beating women is actually a problem and that the desecration of women's bodies is actually not normal and it's extraordinary," the effervescent playwright explains.

"It's been a great challenge to get people to say the word 'vagina,' and it's actually been a strange asset because, you know, when we started this 10 years ago, there weren't many people coming our way," she adds. "People were really scared. If you had told me 10 years ago that I would, like I did this week, be addressing the [U.N.] Security Council, I would have laughed. The major foundations and organizations didn't want vaginas to be a part of what they did. People were terrified, yet drawn to it too. It's that thing of 'I don't want that, I don't want that ... bring it here.'"

And though she's fiercely serious about her play and what she's almost single-handedly trying to accomplish, the humor in the way she's trying to accomplish it is anything but lost on Ensler and her merry band of Vagina Warriors.

During the play's long original run, performances were presented by a slew of high-profile celebs including Jane Fonda, Susan Sarandon, Brooke Shields, Isabella Rossellini, Rita Moreno, Whoopi Goldberg and myriad others who gave voice to Ensler's powerfully penned vignettes ... some funny, some tragic, most shocking and all, without fail, poignant on a level you don't know exists until these performances dig it out of you.

V-Day initially was funded with \$5 million in proceeds from professional performances of "The Vagina Monologues." Now, in addition to monies being raised by groups performing the play, it takes in money from individual major donors, carefully selected corporate sponsors and, just recently, foundations.

V-Day stays away from direct mail mainly because Ensler wants to ▶



'If people just feel like you want their money, you're actually not asking for all of them; you're not asking for the part of them they need activated and the part of them which is dying to be useful. So you may get some money, but I think you get more money when you engage people wholly, and I think what we've seen is that when people feel like their money is action, they give it.'

avoid competing for individual donor dollars with organizations that are trying to raise money for their own anti-violence programs. And, she says, "It feels like what everybody does. It's like, 'Oh my God, here's another one of those.' I know what I do when I see them. I don't want to become junk mail."

The organization just last year started accepting money from foundations and channeling it to smaller, local groups because Ensler realized just how much clout the V-Day name carries and how much easier it is for something of its size, scope and high profile to get foundation money.

Ensler doesn't consider herself a fundraiser, per se, but there's no denying the numbers. Somebody is doing something right. Not many organizations are as rooted in personal empowerment and involvement with the mission as V-Day. Then again, not many organizations use a word that can make grown men blush as their rallying cry either.

Therein lie some of the lessons that this unusual project and its unconventional fundraising model can offer other organizations, no matter what their mission. In Ensler's own words:

On empowerment

"Doing the play itself is a completely empowering experience. If you perform in it, you have to speak the word and you have to get out there on stage and say it. If you direct it, you have to put yourself out there to organize it. If you produce it, you have to really put yourself on the line in the world. So I would say all the people who are involved in the production usually have big, life-changing experiences.

"Then we talk about people who come to see it, which is a whole other huge group of people. Then there are the people who wish it wasn't happening, which is a whole other huge group of people. To sit in the dark in a community of strangers and listen to

all the things you're not supposed to be saying or thinking about ... we've seen this has an enormous impact."

On priorities

"First of all, your focus can't be money. Your focus has to be your mission and your intention, and I think a lot of times people get so caught up in raising money that they forget why they're doing it. People are attracted to actions that transform and change; if they feel they can be part of that, they give their time and they give their money.

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On power to the people

"We just launched this Congo campaign in *Glamour* in August. The magazine ran an article that I wrote about the Democratic Republic of Congo and the atrocities being committed against women there, which is without a doubt the worst situation I've seen in the world. In a month we raised close to half a million dollars, and that had just come from individuals and foundations that read the article.

"Because there was a way for people to get involved — they could [help fund] the building of a house in the community that would protect raped women — it was very concrete. But also, people were very disturbed and upset; their hearts were opened by what was happening there. So part of it is like, 'How do we connect people with what we're doing and with the struggle of what we're doing and let people know that they have power to change it?'"



What the “V” stands for: Victory, Valentine and Vagina

Aside from hosting a V-Day event (a production of “The Vagina Monologues,” readings of the organization’s compilation book “A Memory, a Monologue, a Rant, and a Prayer” or screenings of the documentary “Until the Violence Stops”), potential Vagina Warriors can sign on to do other, non-performance fundraising events; shop online at the V-Day store (www.store-vday.org); or subscribe to V-Mail, the V-Day newsletter.

The V-Day Web site is a pink-and-red treasure trove of news, history, event listings, press coverage, donation opportunities and other information presented in a way that draws the visitor not just into a URL but rather into the powerful embrace of the Vagina Warrior experience.

V-Day will mark its 10th anniversary this year with a convocation of Vagina Warriors in New Orleans in April that will feature V-Day activists from around the world and performances of “The Vagina Monologues”

by the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Sally Field, Marisa Tomei and Ellen Degeneres. And as it embarks on this milestone year, Ensler predicts a subtle shift in priorities for the organization. Or perhaps a more defined double-pronged effort. Righting individual wrongs on a personal level has always been a priority, but 10 years in it’s time to launch a more aggressive attack on underlying causes, what she sees as the “cultural, structural, patriarchal mindset that violence against women is acceptable.”

“Our next 10 years, the theme is changing the story of women, looking at all the pieces that go into changing the story of women, and making women

safe and empowered. It has to do with honoring the Earth, and it has to do with [eradicating] racism, and it has to do with economic empowerment, and it has to do with bringing boys up to be tender and vulnerable and able to express their sensitivity,” she explains. “And I think if we can really, really get underneath what allows this dynamic of violence to continue, we can really shift it. I have enormous faith seeing that the last 10 years have been so successful.

“My dream for the next 10 years is that we raise this issue to such importance that billions of dollars are going toward ending violence against women. If that were happening, I could literally die and be happy,” she adds. “Because I know it would change. If we see how much happens, how many huge things happen, from the [relatively small amount of money V-Day is] able to give away — if we had billions, do you know what we could do?” **FS**