



**THE BLOG** 01/18/2010 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# Thank You, Norman Lear



By Marty Kaplan

It's just about perfect that the week that LA Gang Tours launches is also the tenth anniversary of the start of the Norman Lear Center.

At \$65 a head, lunch included, the LA Gang Tours bus trip through South Central is cheaper than Disneyland, and the prospect of seeing real Crips and Bloods out the window is surely less lame than dodging Terminator blanks on the Universal Studios tour.

Ghettotainment, as this kind of dark tourism has been called, was made in heaven for the Lear Center, which tracks how entertainment has been steadily conquering news, politics, policy, commerce, justice, religion and pretty much the rest of reality.

But the point isn't to lament that we're amusing ourselves to death (though there's enough trivialization, vulgarization, sensationalism, celebrity worship and ADD-inducing distractions around to make you fear for the future of civilization). It's also that the power to grab and hold attention — the Lear Center's big-tent definition of entertainment — can be harnessed to do good.

Consider Alfred Lomas, the guy behind LA Gang Tours. He isn't Arthur Frommer's evil twin; he's an ex-member of the Florencia13 gang who'll be putting ticket revenues into "saving lives, creating jobs, rebuilding communities" in some of the worst parts of the city. His bus, he says, has been given safe passage through a gunfire-free safety zone that he negotiated among three gangs, and he intends to build on that ceasefire. He is leveraging our voyeurism and our appetite for thrill rides in order to rescue some broken souls.

Entertainment matters. When Edith Bunker, on Norman Lear's *All in the Family*, was nearly raped, and when Bea Arthur's character, on Norman's show *Maude*, had an abortion, Americans across the country felt enabled by fictional characters to grapple with taboo topics, in their own ways, at their own kitchen tables. In the weeks after cool, bad boy Fonzie, on Garry Marshall's series *Happy Days*, got a library card, the number of Americans getting library cards increased by 500 percent.

Today, the makers of some movies and television shows deny that entertainment can function as the country's agenda-setter and unofficial curriculum; they see no connection between what they put on screen and plagues like smoking, body dysmorphic disorder, addiction and gun violence. They don't buy the notion that audiences significantly absorb values and attitudes from entertainment, or that people believe that the "facts" depicted in fiction are actually facts. But other writers and producers do step up to the responsibilities that come with their storytelling power. Many of them have taken advantage of a free Lear Center resource — a program called Hollywood, Health & Society — to learn what's accurate from some of the country's top medical experts, and they've been using that knowledge to make their stories realistic without compromising entertainment value.

Plenty of local television station managers insist that substantive coverage of local issues is ratings poison. Since most Americans say they depend on local TV for news about their communities, the dogma of "if it bleeds, it leads" can corrode civic life. But some stations marshal the storytelling skills of their correspondents and producers in order to make important news interesting, even entertaining, and the Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence in Television Political Reporting that the Lear Center gives them can make a difference in their struggle for resources and airtime.

Some teachers despair that their students are addicted to entertainment, that lesson plans can't compete with stars and iPods. But when Norman Lear bought what he calls "America's birth certificate," a copy of the Declaration of Independence that was printed on July 4, 1776, a Lear Center idea led to a reading of the Declaration in Philadelphia's Independence Hall by Morgan Freeman, Kathy Bates, Mel Gibson, Michael Douglas, Whoopi Goldberg, Kevin Spacey and other boldfaced names that was filmed and distributed for free — on videotape, in the pre-YouTube era — to schools across the country, along with a special Scholastic publication that mobilized those performers' star power in service of a history lesson. The Declaration was subsequently the star of *Declare Yourself*, a multimedia campaign through which 2.2 million young Americans registered to vote.

The Lear Center, which I've had the privilege to found and direct, hasn't only been scouting the counterintuitive upside of entertainment. We do a fair amount of mythbusting, too. One project, *The Tyranny of 18-to-49*, challenged the conventional wisdom of television programmers and advertising executives about where in the viewing audience the discretionary dollars actually are. Another project, *Ready-to-Share*, contrasted the entertainment industry's Domsday scenarios about "fair use" of intellectual property with the fashion industry, to which the law gives trademark protection, but not copyright; which treats most of its creative output as a commons; which lives on appropriation, derivation, recombination, sampling and reuse; and which nevertheless manages to flourish as a global business.

In the wake of 9/11, Karl Rove came to Los Angeles to ask the studios to enlist in the war on terror. It made a good photo op, but behind the scenes there was anxiety about artistic freedom, and about Hollywood being annexed by a Washington propaganda effort. The Lear Center — going a bit against the grain — produced a museum exhibit and book about a time when Hollywood fought fascism but got in trouble for it: the years when *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and other Warner Bros. movies got Hollywood into hot water with a pre-Pearl Harbor Congress and Roosevelt Administration determined to stay neutral. We also

produced an unsentimental panel for the Writers Guild about the global hearts and minds we were trying to win, “We Hate You (But Please Give Us More *Baywatch*),” whose transcript became part of the public diplomacy curriculum for training U.S. foreign service officers.

All these examples are only a sampling; you can find a lot more — like our account of social media like Facebook and Twitter as entertainment, and our report on the future of television and advertising in the digital age — at [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org).

The Norman Lear Center gets its name from a man whose belief in the power of entertainment to degrade and to do good, to demagogue and to uplift, to be both gloriously silly and urgently relevant, made him an industry pioneer. It was launched ten years ago when he made an extraordinary gift to the USC Annenberg School to support a unique center of research and innovation. Its mission is to study and shape the impact of media and entertainment on society, and - immodestly - to illuminate and repair the world. In case you’ve ever wondered what the place I work actually does, that’s the answer. Thank you, Mr. Lear, not only for making it possible, but also for having the vision to know that it was necessary.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.*

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