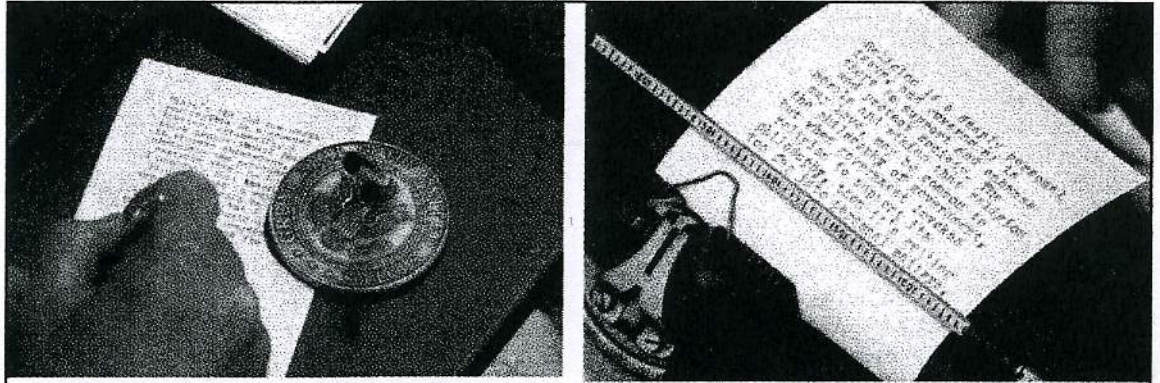


Do you have something to say?

By DAMASO REYES

Special to the AmNews

What role does religion play in our society? What limits should be placed on protestors? Should editors censor images of violence during wartime? These are just some of the provocative questions artist Sheryl Oring has been asking this summer at the South Street Seaport as part of her ongoing project entitled "I Wish To Say." Eight times this summer Oring has set up her portable office complete with antique manual typewriter and



Artist Sheryl Oring asks visitors to dictate postcards in response to questions about the First Amendment.

(Damaso Reyes photos)

48 star flag where she has asked people to dictate postcards in response to questions about the First Amendment. Sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Culture Council as part of their Swing Space residency program, Oring

will be at Pier 17 on October 8th and 9th where the nearly 100 postcards she has typed over the summer, including dozens from a recent trip to Memphis where she spoke to Americans displaced by Hurricane Katrina, will be on display. The artist will also be taking dictation and visitors have the opportunity to write postcards to the president about whatever topic they choose.

Begun in 2004, the idea of traveling across the country to type postcards to the president came out of a feeling that "the mainstream media wasn't doing a great job at talking to enough regular people about what they thought during a presidential election year," Oring said in an interview at her workspace on the second floor of Pier 17. The

artist traveled across the United States and was in New York and Boston during the Republican and Democratic national conventions asking people, "If I were the president, what would you wish to say to me?" Dressed like a 1950's secretary in vintage era clothing, Oring patiently typed more than a thousand postcards over the course of a year, talking to anyone who would take the five minutes to dictate a card. In Los Angeles she spoke to the homeless on Skid Row, in New York she set up her table near Ground Zero and Harlem where the reactions surprised even her.

"People often had a very emotional response, it's been quite fascinating, some people have compared it to therapy," Oring

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Say

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said.

While politicians and self-styled experts seem to be continuously quoted in the mainstream press, Oring sought to break through the stereotypes and find out what people really thought.

"You really can't know what people think until you sit down and have a conversation with them. Someone might walk up to you and you think based on how they look that they might have a certain view, but it has really proven not to be true. New York is not as liberal a city as people

might think," Oring noted.

This summer, instead of asking people to write postcards to the president, Oring asked patrons to respond to questions about the First Amendment and the five freedoms it encompasses: freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom to petition the government, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. In a post 9/11 world of the Patriot Act, which allows the government to know what books its citizens are taking out of the library and in a time when cultural institutions have been booted from the redevelopment of the World Trade Center because they might exhibit offensive art, the First Amendment

trouble for doing so. In a country that values free speech so much it is telling that some of its citizens are afraid to speak up.

Sheryl Oring's postcards will be on display at the Swing Space Gallery on the second floor of Pier

17 at the South Street Seaport on Saturday and Sunday, October 8th and 9th, from 12 to 6 p.m. Visitors will also be able to type postcards to the president. For more information or to view postcards visit www.iwishtosay.blogspot.com.

has become more important than ever. Perhaps a sign of the times is that since the project began Oring has encountered a small minority of people who would like to write to the president but are afraid that somehow they would get into