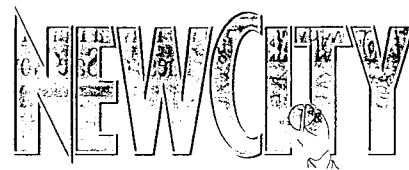


# More public television

WTTW makes room for point-of-view TV.

Liz Stevens reports.



**W**E DO THE Work" is no-frills television. No fancy sets, no computer graphics, no staged car crashes, and almost no actors. It's a half-hour magazine-format program about everyday people—drywallers, leather tanners, labor leaders—striving to make their lives and workplaces better. Alfre Woodard, Ed Asner and Ned Beatty are a few celebs who've hosted the monthly program, produced by a nonprofit production group in San Francisco and distributed since 1990 to PBS stations nationwide. Show topics vary, from labor strikes to job-related illness to profiles of little-seen people and industries. But unless you've been watching TV outside of Chicago, you've never had the opportunity to see "We Do the Work." Until now.

Channel 11-WTTW has decided to air a special one-hour "We Do the Work" segment September 6, and at least a few people find the station's timing interesting. On July 28, senior vice president for programming Richard Bowman and senior vice president for corporate marketing and communications Bruce Marcus met with a group that calls itself the Coalition for Democracy in Public Television (CDPTV). Thirteen coalition members, including representatives from Operation PUSH, Access Living, Women in Film and Illinois Peace Action, had come to talk about what they thought was missing from Chicago's public television station, and what ought to be done about it. The discussion moved from better access for local independent producers to the airing of "Deadly Deception" and "Panama Deception," two Academy Award-winning documentaries—the former about General Electric's involvement in the nuclear weapons industry; the latter about the United States invasion of Panama—that WTTW has opted not to show. Coalition members also requested that the station take a harder look at two other regularly produced programs airing on PBS stations in other markets,

"We Do the Work" and "America's Defense Monitor." A month later, both are on the station's programming roster for the first time ever.

Marcus says the dialogue had little to do with the station's decision to air "We Do the Work," and that WTTW had previously slotted the show (though this was not mentioned at the meeting, according to several people in attendance). "There isn't anything that's been done program-wise in direct relation to the meeting," he says. But a second move by the station, also previously unannounced, somewhat contradicts this. It's the addition of a local "P.O.V."-type series called "Viewpoint." The show will begin running weekly in October, Marcus says, and act as a catchall for anything Channel 11 deems is a "program with a distinct point of view. It gives us an outlet for programs that might not otherwise air." So far, two "America's Defense Monitor" segments are slated to run under the "Viewpoint" moniker, and coalition members can't help but think that their efforts over the past several months have convinced WTTW to re-evaluate.

"This is a very slow-moving elephant," says videographer Scott Sanders, referring to the process he initiated more than a year ago when he attempted to convince Channel 11 to air "Deadly Deception." That battle led to the formation of Chicago Media Watch, a local offshoot of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), which in turn formed CDPTV. In March, Sanders and Chicago Media Watch held an open meeting at the Center for New Television at which "a lot of different kinds of folks showed up," including local independent producers and community activists. Grievances were, if not unanimous, then very similar.

First, there's an ongoing debate between the station and its detractors (not to mention nationwide over PBS) over whether the programming on Channel 11 reflects the concerns of Chicagoans or simply caters to suburban contributors and corporate interests. "Our feeling is that WTTW, because it's public television and supported by tax

dollars, has the responsibility to make available to the viewing public a broader range of ideas than what's available on network television," says CDPTV representative Elissa Bassler, executive director for the Coalition for New Priorities, an umbrella organization representing more than 100 community groups. "WTTW doesn't offer much in the way of alternative viewpoints."

And WTTW's seeming unwillingness to open the lines of communication with its audience has angered some. "Complaints have always centered around the station's lack of an input structure," Sanders says. "The board of directors and the station—neither have structures for putting in complaints, suggestions or compliments. We've suggested they allot some time for public comment at the board meetings. That's just a natural form of communication that they have blocked off."

Besides individual phone calls and letters, the only opportunity for organized public feedback at Channel 11 comes in the form of an advisory council the station convenes once a year and whose members are chosen by the station, in the same vein as its self-perpetuating board of directors (CDPTV has urged a subscriber-elected board). The advisory council's membership is varied, including representatives from the Arab-American Community Center, Latino Institute, Chicago Children's Museum and the Chicago Commission on Human Rights, but its influence seems to be minimal. Channel 11 still won't publicly disclose any of the advisory council's past reports.

It was via phone and mail, not the advisory council, that interested viewers first began urging WTTW to air both "We Do the Work" and "America's Defense Monitor." In 1991 the president of the Chicago Federation of Labor, Robert Healey, contacted the station requesting that it air "We Do the Work." In his reply, Bowman wrote that the station had "concerns about the evenness of quality and the fairness of certain segments," but that he would "continue to keep an eye on it."

Two years later, "We Do the Work" is aired regularly on more

than 50 PBS stations including WNET in New York, KQED in San Francisco, WTVS in Detroit, WPBA in Atlanta, KCET in Los Angeles, WSIU in Carbondale, Illinois, and throughout the states of Oregon, New Jersey, Maine, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming, just to name a few. But Chicagoans have yet to see it until now. "We see so little on television of what people do for a [living]," says Don Turner, Healey's assistant. "I'm very pleased that they're going to air the show. It should be aired. It reflects people's lives."

"America's Defense Monitor" has a similar history with WTTW. Two years ago, Bob Cleland, the former co-chairman of Illinois SANE/Freeze and founder of Illinois Peace Action, began urging the station to air it. "ADM" is a weekly program produced by the Center for Defense Information, an organization made up primarily of retired U.S. military officers. Programs have covered the continuing proliferation of nuclear weapons, how the military's and society's values clash at times, and military contractor Hughes Aircraft's successful conversion to commercial industry since the end of the cold war. Cleland, who is a member of CDPTV and attended the July meeting, says he confronted Bowman and Marcus with his perception that "almost every week you can find something on TV that has to do with war, but little alternative to that...102 PBS stations are running ['ADM']" Cleland says he told them, "We don't understand why it's not suitable for a Chicago audience."

Sanford Gottlieb, the producer of "ADM," has also corresponded with Channel 11 management about airing the show. Gottlieb says that although CDI maintains editorial control over program content, the show is funded independently and "we are very scrupulous about having every relevant viewpoint. Our show is really not that far out; it's not an anti-corporate diatribe."

Marcus insists the decision to air the shows were not the direct result of the coalition's pressure, but it remains unclear why the station chose now to do so. "These people have raised a number of issues, and, as we do with many groups, we decided the best thing to do was to have a meeting. We're responding to some very legitimate questions. [But the new programming] is not in response to that meeting." Nevertheless, he adds, "It is fair to say that [the coalition] has played a role in our putting on a series like 'Viewpoint.'"

Marcus knew of only two "Viewpoint" segments slated so far, an "ADM" piece which ran August 31 called "New Civilian Tasks for the Military" and another "ADM" show titled "Nuclear Bomb in Our Future" that will air September 19. The station, he says, will consider running "Deadly Deception" in the "Viewpoint" slot if its producers edit out a pitch at the end of the film for INFACT, the organization that led the boycott against GE. (WTTW has left it up to the coalition to contact the "Deadly Deception" producers, though.) "Panama Deception," because it includes "charges totally without confirmation," Marcus says, has no chance of airing on WTTW. "I don't think we can compromise that journalistic standard." (PBS has rejected both "Deception" films for national airing.)

Cleland, who has battled to get "Panama Deception" on Channel 11, remains wary about the station's new direction. "They're throwing a couple bones to us as a way of taking the heat off the two 'Deception' films," he says. "Maybe they think we'll be happy and go away." But Marcus says the station is committed to "Viewpoint." "What we do will speak for itself," he says. "If there's enough interest in the community to have this organization [WTTW] change, it will evolve. We're not behind walls that can't be penetrated." ●

**"WE DO THE WORK": DOWN-TO-EARTH TELEVISION ABOUT REGULAR PEOPLE. PREVIOUSLY UNAVAILABLE TO CHICAGO VIEWERS.**



Dorothy Perry



**"WTTW HAS THE RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE AVAILABLE TO THE VIEWING PUBLIC A BROADER RANGE OF IDEAS THAN WHAT'S AVAILABLE ON NETWORK TELEVISION."**