

The Rainbow Sign can use some help

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"God gave Noah the rainbow sign,
no more water, the fire next time."

The quote comes from an ancient spiritual. Writer James Baldwin used part of it as a novel title. And in Berkeley a group of visionaries took another part as the name for Rainbow Sign, a black-oriented facility that defies one-word description.

Rainbow Sign, located at 2540 Grove St., is a cultural center, art gallery, theater, restaurant, meeting place, membership club, catering service, banquet facility and non-profit state-tax exempt corporation.

It is also in financial trouble, according to Mary Ann Pollar, who has been director of the facility in its 3½ years of existence.

"We could lose control of our building," she says. "We must raise \$75,000 by April 30 or lose our option to keep the building. Without secure control of the building, long-range planning is impossible. Without long-range planning, our program cannot exist."

Beginning this evening, Rainbow Sign will conduct a 13-day fund-raising event. From 6 to 10 p.m. today and Saturday, the facility will conduct a dance and party with varied entertainment. Programs will continue through the month.

Part of the fund-raising effort is directed at matching a \$20,000 grant offered by the City of Berkeley.

The Rainbow Sign is leased currently at \$2,500 a month. It is located on a square block which is ideally situated, according to Ms. Pollar. Around it are Longfellow, Malcolm X, East Campus, Berkeley High and Berkeley Adult schools.

"We get a lot of young traffic," the director says. "Figuratively speaking, we want those children to short-cut through Rainbow Sign."

"When we speak of the black agenda, we're talking about reaching the children." One projected program would change weekend performances to an artist-in-residence program. Local students would come in groups to the club and work with black visual and performing artists.

"Your heroes can teach you anything," says the director. "We want to put these heroes together with the children. No kid who wants to be a painter can say no to



DIRECTOR MARY ANN POLLAR IN RAINBOW SIGN'S PERFORMING HALL

music, words and pictures may stop unless \$75,000 goal is met.

math. If a kid doesn't like to read, put him together with a poet. Then he'll not only read but write and put the punctuation in the right place."

In the past 3½ years Rainbow Sign has enjoyed the presence of top black performers, writers and artists.

Samella Lewis, James Baldwin, Kenny Burrell, Nina Simone, Joyce Carol Thomas, Maya Angelou, Pharoah Sanders, Oscar Brown Jr., Josephine Baker, and Mrs. W. E. B. DuBois are among many who have given time and talent to the concept of what director Pollar describes as "the best there is of the black experience."

She indicates the list of luminaries: "These people are all giants. They stand at the top of what they do."

Many of the performers who have come to Rainbow Sign do so for little or no remuneration. The facility is not large enough to support the size audience many of the performers could command.

They come to Rainbow Sign for its ambience. They hear that there is nothing else like Rainbow Sign and they offer to appear.

And the whole purpose is basically educational, director Pollar says. "Hidden under everything we do, the best entertainment we put on, there's always a message: Look about you; think about this."

An example...

When singer Nina Simone was at mid-engagement at Rainbow Sign, one day she had finished lunch and with Ms. Pollar was leaving the building.

Two young girls, about 10 and 12, stood in the hallway, paralyzed with interest in Miss Simone.

The singer stopped to talk to them, asking: "Aren't you supposed to be in school now?"

The younger girl giggled and shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I don't have to go to school," the older said. "I'm going to be a singer like you."

"Out of the next 100 people who walk in here, perhaps 90 can sing as well as I do," Miss Simone told the girls.

"But do you really want to know how to become a singer?"

She took the girls aside and talked to them for 45 minutes about education, commitment and working hard for goals.

"In one way she probably scared those children half to death the director says. "In another, though, she gave them a priceless lesson."

"And I thought I had learned some things in my 42 years," Mary Ann Pollar adds. "And then along came Rainbow sign."

She laughs heartily.