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THE ARTHROPOLOGIST

X-Men (and women) for the Arts: Volunteers use biz superpowers to help small arts groups thrive

By [Nancy Wozny](#)

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BVA super star Terri Golas on the job at Classical Theatre Company, December 2012. Photo © Ling Wang.

The dreamy sounds of Sting's "Message in a Bottle" wafted through the air as bassist [Sandor Ostlund](#) serenaded the packed house at [Gremillion & Co.](#) recently as part of [River Oaks Chamber Orchestra's](#) (ROCO) Chamber Series. Dutifully, ROCO's general manager, [Terri Golas](#), snapped photos in the back. She visited with everyone she could during intermission and afterward.

This week, she's dealing with their upcoming show, [The ROCO Brass Quintet](#) at the [Houston Yacht Club](#) on Sunday. Then, it's off to [The Houston Zoo](#), for *Peter and the Wolf*, a collaboration with [InterActive Theater](#), on Jan 20.

Golas is one busy lady, and clearly a huge factor in keeping ROCO at the top of their game. She has a way of juggling many arts balls in the air with an ease that is rare in the arts world.

Here's what's amazing. This is not all she does in the arts.

Golas is part of a special army of arts superheroes known as [Business Volunteers for the Arts](#) (BVA), a national [American for the Arts](#) program managed locally by [Houston Arts Alliance](#) (HAA). Think *X-Men*, but for the arts.

One of her many superpowers is building websites, which is why [Classical Theatre Company](#) has a smashing new one. Golas has also worked with InterActive Theater, [SWAMP](#), and is now bringing her smarts to [Express Children's Theatre](#).

Last month, an enthusiastic crowd gathered at [Sorrel Urban Bistro](#) to honor Golas for her consistent and dedicated work as a BVA. She's earned her cape, so to speak. In the audience were many of the people she has helped, especially from Classical Theatre Company, her most recent BVA assignment.

"As I get to know these groups I work with, I become invested in seeing them thrive and grow," Golas says. "The Classical Theatre people have great energy and vision, and I wanted to give them a website that would communicate those things. I loved working with them, and am now a fan."

As Classical Theatre gained roots in Houston, it needed a new site to reflect its growth. The clean look of the new site ties more accurately to the mission of

the organization. Classical Theatre's artistic director Johnston was impressed with Golas' eye for detail and willingness to get it just right. "This is a great program," says Johnston.

The upstart theater troupe was new to Golas. That was then. She was a proud member of the audience for a recent production of *Miss Julie*, and plans to attend their next show, [Ubu Roi](#), running Jan. 16- Feb. 3.

The Help Factor

As a program geek, I live to make arts infrastructure sexy. Why? Because it's damn hard being in charge of a non-profit. Trust me, I've tried it.

With this ever-changing economy, we need mentorship more than ever. Perhaps you have a board member who doesn't return your phone calls, your gala lost money or you need to upgrade your marketing plan. With BVA, you have a bevy of professionals available from the very fields of expertise you need.

From 1978-1985, Tenneco ran the BVA program in Houston. [The Ensemble Theatre](#) was one of the first theater groups to work with them on several projects. Golas was involved back then too, lending her talents to Chrysalis Dance Company.

After Tenneco disappeared, so did BVA, until HAA cranked up the BVA engine again 2009. HAA's CEO Jonathan Glus describes BVA as win-win.

"Resuscitating the BVA program was a priority of the founding board of the HAA because many of those founders are in leadership positions at major corporations," says Glus. "BVA volunteer work is not only social, but volunteers have the opportunity to create lasting relationships with the organizations as well as other BVAs. Often, volunteer positions evolve into board and committee relationships with the organizations."

When Nyala Wright came on board as manager in 2011, the program got a dose of rocket fuel. Wright's job is to match the arts organization with the right volunteer.

"I'm like a yenta," quips Wright, with her contagious grin.

Currently, BVA has a roster of about 30 consultants, with 13 active projects involving 19 arts organizations. "Depending on the types of requests we receive from our arts clients, we always hope to be able to match them with a consultant very quickly," says Wright. "Having a robust roster of consultants ensures that, although sometimes our volunteers wait for the right match for their skill set."

It takes some training before HAA lets loose a BVA on an arts organization. They used to come for an onsite training but found that was too difficult, so they developed an online training, which is now used all over the nation.

The BVA process

Here's how it works: The arts organization fills out an [application](#). Wright brings you in, listens to your problems, hopes and desires. Sometimes, she needs to sort through the situation.

"They might come in and think they need a new website or marketing materials, but that's the cherry on the pie, and I have to get them to take a step back and get that pie backing," she explains.

The idea is to bring in the BVA once Wright determines what would best move your organization forward. It's this extensive investigative process that makes the program run smoothly once the BVA comes on board. Transparency, clarity and precise boundaries are built into the process.

Then it's time for her matchmaking skills to kick in to come up with an ideal volunteer to work with your staff to achieve a specific goal. Wright puts the

principals of the art organization and the volunteer in one room for a chat, steps back and looks for the chemistry.

"It's just a social visit," quips Wright. "No work talk at all."

Golas appreciated the concrete project structure of BVA. "You are not a staff person, or even an extra set of hands," she adds. Projects have an ending, making it a very doable volunteer activity.

If you are reading this and think, "Wow, I've got some chops to give to the arts," consider [applying to be a BVA](#).

For Golas, it's about updating her skills and expanding her world, all of which contribute to her work with ROCO. That she gets to know other cool folks in the arts that she might not have otherwise is a terrific perk to the process. When I think about Golas and all the BVAs, I'm reminded that arts citizenship is alive and well in Houston.

"Being involved with BVA and working with these organizations is my way of giving back and having my own impact on the arts in Houston," she says.