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ABOUT NEW YORK

A Salute to Free Speech, and the Freedom Not to Listen

By DAN BARRY

THEIR words struggled for posterity above the cacophony of Foley Square, the swooshes of cars, the gargles of a fountain, the faint but constant breaths of a city alive. But Sheryl Oring, sitting posture-perfect at her moveable office, nailed each word down with the tiny hammers of her Erika typewriter.

Sitting yesterday in the open-air bazaar of court and commerce, her vintage suit buttoned to the top, her portable desk festooned with carbon paper and rubber stamps, she all but shouted for passers-by to barge in and say, "Miss Oring, take a letter." The only catch was, and each of those letters essentially bore the same salutation: Dear Mr. President.

One after another, the voices of New York sat on a small stool across from her, cleared their throats and thoughts, and dictated. And on postcard after postcard, Ms. Oring typed their words, click-click-click, clickety-click-click, her fingers tap dancing joyously across glinting keys, her face a mask of stenographic neutrality.

"Dear Mr. President, Stop the war. It's unnecessary. Sincerely," And: "Dear Mr. President, Hurrah for you! Sincerely - Make that - Enthusiastically,"

At our democracy's core is the belief that we can express ourselves without fear. We can write to the president any time we want and address that letter any way we want - from Oh High Exalted Mystic Ruler to Hey Mac. We also have the right to fantasize that he reads them.

But that belief is tested now and then, with the emphasis on now. As the Republican National Convention draws near, the city is engaged in unpleasant negotiations with an amorphous mass of protesters who want to rally in Central Park, grass be damned, while the F.B.I. is aggressively questioning political demonstrators about their coming Manhattan adventure ("Got tickets to 'Beauty and the Beast'? Yes or no.").

Yesterday, at least, the city provided momentary salve to any fretting about free speech. For example, on the steps of City Hall - shoved under a cone of silence years ago by a mayor averse to noises other than his own - a cha-cha line of people took turns raising their voices for this or that. Among them was Abraham Hirschfeld, an aging, alienating example of our inalienable rights.

He is a wealthy developer, meddler, and ex-convict - he once tried to hire someone to kill his business partner - whose unquenchable political ambition has him now focused on running for the Senate. To that end, Mr. Hirschfeld, 84, tottered toward the City Hall steps in his Velcro-strapped brown shoes to announce his candidacy.

He rambled for a while, at one point gesturing to his crotch to make a point about better education - or was it better child-rearing? - before urging the few listening to join him in a version of "God Bless America" that just sort of trailed off. More than a little unsettling - but in full embrace of free speech.

Meanwhile, in nearby Foley Square, public-art advocates opened the Freedom of Expression National Monument: a massive, elevated megaphone that faced what was once the World Trade Center. Now it faces Centre Street, so that people who accept an invitation to speak up can express themselves to the sculptures of Law, Truth and Equity that adorn the New York County Courthouse.

AS people made their way to the megaphone above, the businesslike secretary typed below, click-click-click, clickety-click-click.

Ms. Oring, 38, is a performance artist and self-described recovering journalist - she briefly worked as a Times copy editor - who now lives in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Earlier this year she began working her way across the country with her show, typing out messages of the people to their president. She makes a carbon copy, has people sign their messages, and even provides them with a 23-cent stamp.

"It's almost like therapy," she said.

As she typed, the people of New York called the president a "frat boy"; complimented him for doing a "fine job"; told him to "Get outta town"; shared with him thoughts of a friend, Armando, in Iraq; and advised him on energy conservation.

Moments before she was to finish for the day, a man named Peisung Tsai wandered over. He said that he worked for a downtown bank and, well, sure, he'd like to send a message. Ms. Oring typed Dear Mr. President on another index card.

"Bring the troops back from Iraq," Mr. Tsai said after some thought. "The war is not justified."

Another man, Brian McCaffrey, invoked the thing that will never go away. "I was in 2 World Trade on Sept. 11," he said. "I lost a secretary and several good friends. Thank you for the good work so that hopefully my sons will never have to go through what I did."

A few minutes later, Ms. Oring packed up her typewriter, her rubber stamps, her carbon paper. The city had spoken. Time, perhaps, for a Rob Roy.