

Celebrities sign up for Lisa Cherniak: Artist Against Racism took off ...

EGLE PROCUTA The Globe and Mail

The Globe and Mail (1936-Current); Aug 17, 2000; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail

pg. R1

EGLE PROCUTA
The Globe and Mail, Toronto

On the lookout for an Ibanez guitar autographed by Joe Satriani? Can't live without a pair of Sarah McLachlan's embroidered jeans?

Does Lisa Cherniak have a deal for you.

And while you're at it, you can support a Toronto-based group that has attracted attention — and celebrities — from around the world: Artists Against Racism.

Indeed, the profile of its more than 120 celebrity members — including Celine Dion, Lenny Kravitz, Matchbox 20, Ralph Fiennes, Dan Aykroyd and Norman Jewison — has helped take AAR from Cherniak's tiny midtown Toronto apartment, where she founded the group seven years ago, to the halls of the White House this summer.

Why use members of the entertainment elite as spokespeople in a fight that may seem far removed from their privileged lives?

Celebrities sign up for Lisa Cherniak

Artist Against Racism took off in a Toronto apartment and landed at the White House

The key, Cherniak explains, is to stop children from developing racist attitudes. "Kids learn from who they relate to. They gravitate toward the stars. So we go after the people kids adore."

Adds actress and activist Shirley Douglas, a member of AAR's advisory board: "Racism is an enormous problem in every country of the world. Why do we want to humiliate each other? We should settle down to building, rather than destroying and isolating."

She says artists are key in the fight against racism because they can explain its stupidity in a mainstream way that will make people listen, citing the popularity of Jewi-

son's 1967 film *In the Heat of the Night*.

Cherniak relentlessly pursues stars to convince them to participate in AAR projects, not just by allowing their voices and images to be used on a gamut of educational material — ranging from magazine ads and billboards to TV and Internet radio spots — but also by contributing money and using the drawing card of celebrity to convince corporations to do the same.

She is the driving force behind AAR, and her apartment doubles as the organization's headquarters.

The 36-year-old Cherniak — whose voice and appearance make her seem almost two decades youn-

ger — gives the impression of being engulfed by newspaper and magazine clippings pinned up on walls and the tools of the activist's trade laid out all over the floor: press kits, videos, posters.

There are also some of the 80 pieces of memorabilia donated by stars — including Satriani's guitar and McLachlan's jeans — that will be sold in on-line fundraising auctions on Yahoo beginning on Aug. 21 and eBay on Aug. 28.

The money raised will go toward AAR's annual budget of about \$100,000 (which doesn't include more than \$250,000 worth of donated services a year, such as free time for TV ads).

The publicity is paying off. Artists Against Racism is getting noticed in high places. Like the White House.

Ben Johnson, director of the President's Initiative for One America — Bill Clinton's antiracism project — invited AAR to meet with him at the White House. On June 16, Cherniak and seven other AAR representatives presented proposals for a massive public-education campaign in the United States this fall. Cherniak is now looking for corporate sponsors for the project.

The invitation to the White House came about partly because of the American photographer Trace Poulson, one of AAR's core of 10 volunteers. He learned about the

organization from a brief mention in *People* magazine in 1999. When the Ku Klux Klan organized a rally in Marion, Ind., Poulson used AAR's educational material, such as posters and radio ads, to promote a peace concert that won an Indiana Civil Rights Award.

The timing of AAR's rising star is good.

White supremacists in Canada were back in the spotlight this summer. A "white power" concert organized by the neo-Nazi Heritage Front had been scheduled for Kingston on the Canada Day weekend, but organizers cancelled it before it could take place.

That's exactly what AAR wants to see — racists in retreat.

Sandy Yep of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation agrees that it's essential to have antiracist messages aimed specifically at youth. "Some of the hate groups are a lot more polished now.

Please see RACISM on page R2

'Managers and agents are sometimes roadblocks'

RACISM from page R1

They reach out through music like racist rock. . . . That's why the fight against racism needs to include people youth can identify with."

The kind of wide-ranging, high-profile activity that AAR is now involved with is quite a jump from its first project in 1995 — an anti-racism poster based on a painting by local artist and AAR founding member Mendelson Joe. About 80,000 copies were distributed to schools, YMCAs and libraries across the country.

The group's educational tools have grown exponentially, including television and radio ads, teacher's guides and a Web site (www.ArtistsAgainstRacism.org), and a growing number of musicians add AAR logos to their Web sites and CD covers.

One of the biggest challenges for Artists Against Racism remains actually reaching artists to get them involved.

At first, Cherniak used phones and mail to approach stars around the continent, but the costs were astronomical. Now she concentrates on artists passing through Toronto, relying on concert and movie-production schedules to

keep abreast of who's in town.

"Managers and agents are sometimes roadblocks," Cherniak admits, but when she gets to the artists in person, she often wins them over quickly.

That's how she nabbed Ralph Fiennes in 1999 during the Interna-

tional Film Festival. She noticed him at the bar of the Four Seasons Hotel, a popular celebrity hangout. Cherniak approached him with her business card, but kept her comments short. She didn't want to give the impression of being a star-struck fan. Several days later, she

got an e-mail from Fiennes saying he wanted to sign on.

Douglas, founder of the Toronto Health Coalition, spokeswoman for the Canadian Health Coalition and civil-rights activist in the United States in the 1960s, is convinced that speaking out against racism through AAR can make a difference.

"The only thing that changes anything is education — any kind of enlightenment," she says. And she is adamant that more artists need to get involved. "If artists believe it, they need to come out and say it."

Cherniak, who is single, admits that life as an activist can be exhausting, leaving her with little time for family or friends.

She volunteers up to 12 hours a day for the charity, supporting herself financially by managing some real estate on the side for her parents' company.

"I'm endlessly having ideas. It goes on forever. Sometimes it feels like I'm on a treadmill," she says. But she won't contemplate moving on until she's sure Artists Against Racism develops the wings to survive on its own. In the meantime, she's not complaining. "Few people have such a chance to reach out to others about a cause they really care about."

AAR'S WHO'S WHO

Actors: Kiefer Sutherland, Dan Aykroyd, Mike Myers, Martin Short, Graham Greene, Eugene Levy, Ricki Lake, Brent Carver, Fiona Reid, Jackie Burroughs, Sarah Polley, Shirley Douglas, Michael Burgess, Tantoo Cardinal, Angela Dohrmann.

Authors: Margaret Atwood, Jane Urquhart, Alice Munro, Pierre Berton, Joy Kogawa, Michel Tremblay, Michael Ondaatje, Timothy Findley, Susan Swan, M. G. Vassanji, Marie-Claire Blais, Julie Johnston.

Comedians: Frank Shuster, Martin Short.

Conductor: John Kim Bell.

Dancers: Karen Kain, Veronica Tennant.

Directors: Norman Jewison, Atom Egoyan.

Musicians: Chumbawamba, Rush, Aerosmith, Matthew Sweet, B. B. King, Neil Young, Celine Dion, k. d. lang, Bush, Sarah McLachlan, Midnight Oil, Robbie Robertson, Paul Shaffer, Meredith Brooks, **Joni Mitchell**, Indigo Girls, Carlos Morgan, Peter Gabriel, Great Big Sea, Phil Collins, Oscar Peterson, Leonard Cohen, Ani DiFranco, Michelle Wright, The Tragically Hip, Our Lady Peace, MOIST, Bare-naked Ladies, Amy Sky, Susan Aglukark, The Jeff Healey Band, The Rankin Family, Spek, Dream Warriors, Wide Mouth Mason, Glueleg, Rusty, Blue Rodeo, Dal-Dil-Vog, Colin James, Spirit of the West, The Watchmen, Marc Jordan, Prairie Oyster, Roberta Pili, Ian Thomas, Dan Hill, Kashtin, Rawlins Cross, Moxxy Fruvous, Raffi, 54-40, Jon Kimura Parker, The Waltons, Holly Cole, The Rascalz, Reg Schwager, Kiki Misumi, The Skydiggers, Sue Medley, Corey Hart, Salome Bey.

Visual arts: Mary Pratt, Ken Danby, Kurt Swinghammer, Leland Bell, Roy Henry Vickers, Mendelson Joe.

Source: www.ArtistsAgainstRacism.org