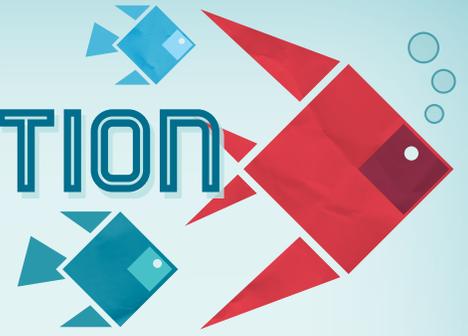


# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



## SESSION 094

### THE IMPACT OF DONOR RECOGNITION

#### WITH KAREN SINGER

**Beth:** Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky with Driving Participation. Today I am here with my guest, Karen Singer. Karen is the artistic director of Karen Singer Tileworks, and I've known Karen for a number of years and I wanted to bring her on today because she does something really interesting that we haven't yet talked about on the program. Karen's involved in donor recognition. You know, after you've gotten the money, after you thank them, after you've shown your impact, you know, what's next and she does some really, really amazing work. Karen, thank you so much for joining me today.

**Karen:** I'm happy to.

**Beth:** So, Karen, you are an artist. How on earth did you get into this kind of work for the nonprofit community?

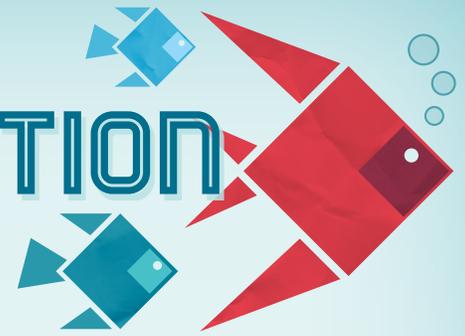
**Karen:** You know, it started about 26 years ago. This is actually my 25th year in business. Artists are always looking for different ways to make a living, and it's a constant challenge. I had a friend who did marketing, who did a short stint with me and I had done these tiles that were building facades and drawings of buildings and she thought, "You know, I bet there's a lot of historic schools in this area." I'm in Philadelphia so she and I together put together a little package with a letter, a very nicely crafted letter and a few pictures of the work and we sent it to about 11 private schools in the area and out of those 11 letters, I got two jobs.

**Beth:** That's excellent return!

**Karen:** Right. Who knew at the time? I'm thinking "Gee, only two." Now I understand the percentages a little better, but one of them was doing a tile for Germantown Friends School. They were thanking donors who had made it possible to buy a church and turn it into a performing arts center and that was really the project that got me started doing this. Then I knew a few people who worked in fundraising who talked to me about how they're constantly

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



looking for special presents that have meaning for the people who give to them. What I've learned since then is that people who are philanthropically inclined have been given lots of ...

**Beth:** Crystal decanters.

**Karen:** Yes, you know, and I frequently think that there's a closet or a drawer in everyone's house that you stand there and you smile for the picture and then they go, "Where am I going to put this?" and most of them get stashed in a drawer. If it's something that has meaning for the person and that's beautiful, there's a need for it. Well, that got me started and from doing tile facades of buildings for some schools, I now have done 60 foot-long murals for some private schools and hospitals and retirement communities and like that.

**Beth:** I love the idea. When I first went down to your studio, it's beautiful, it's so interesting and you never really think about where does tile get made, and it reminded me of when my brother lived in California 20 years ago and my parents who never had any desire to ever go see California fell in love and drove up and down the coast visiting all the missions, and each of the California missions has a tile, which is probably something they make a lot of revenue out of because they're cultural institutions so they make money selling these tiles, and it made my parents want to visit every single mission on the coast.

**Karen:** To get a whole set?

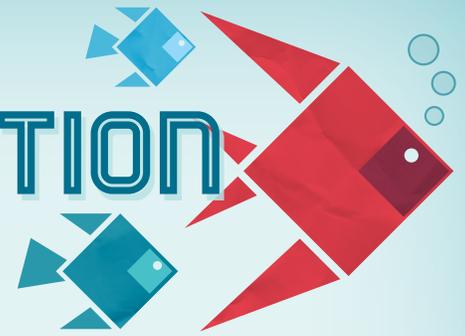
**Beth:** Exactly, and that's what they ended up doing. My father is a furniture maker now that he's retired and they took all of the tiles and put them into a wooden standing screen and my siblings and I are absolutely going to fight to the death over this thing when they go because it's such a commemorative thing of the time that my brother wasn't living at home and all of these wonderful vacations that they had so I can absolutely see how this sort of unique thing could really have a lot of meaning for people in a way that many other things don't.

**Karen:** Yeah, I fell like I'm really in the business of doing commemoration and I've spent a lot of time thinking about "What does it mean to commemorate a time or a place or a person?"

**Beth:** I talk about participation all the time. When people are really excited about giving, part of the reason they're excited about it is because they feel like they're part of creating

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



something in the world that didn't exist or wouldn't exist if they didn't do it and especially with a lot of the things that you are commemorating, it's often a physical object, a building or something tangible. There's something really cool about being able to drive by a building and say, "I helped make that happen," and I can really see that there is an aspect of participation just in that. So I would ask you, how do you see participation as a factor in the work that you do?

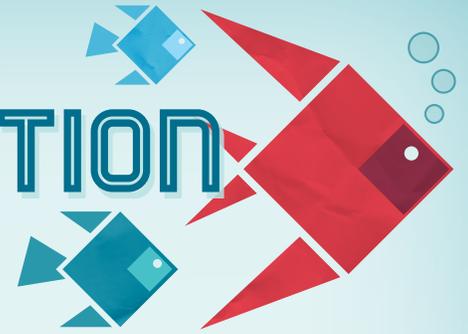
**Karen:** Well, when I start working with an organization I frequently ask them to put together a small committee that consists of people who have different view points about the organization. If it's a school for example, it might be an alum, maybe a faculty member, a current student, a teacher, administrator. It depends on the community, but I really want to see the place, the organization from the perspective of multiple different people because it's like a big diagram. I'm trying to find this elusive identity that's there that people talk about, but we don't really know how to, it's elusive. I was describing it recently when I was at a case conference with people who do fundraising for colleges and private schools and I said when you go to an alumni reunion or you just happen to meet someone somewhere who went to the same school as you, maybe 30 years before you or after you, you start talking and you find you're talking about the same place even though the buildings might be different, you're experience is different from theirs, but there's something that you can identify. I try to make that into something that's visual, that people look at and go, "Yes, you captured the spirit of this place," and so I want multiple peoples input and encouraging that kind of participation from the get go helps people buy into the campaign. Sometimes I do projects that involve members of the community making pieces of it so that's another form of driving participation.

**Beth:** Actually getting them physically involved in creating it. That must be a really exciting and challenging process.

**Karen:** Well, for example, I did something recently with Big Brothers and Big Sisters who were celebrating, the local chapter was celebrating a centennial. They brought 12 sets of bigs and littles, big brothers or big sister and little brother or little sister to my studio and each pair made a tile about what Big Brothers and Big Sisters means to them. Then we mounted those tiles in custom frames that were inscribed and these tiles became the awards at their banquet that they presented to the guys at Comcast and they had about seven awards that they gave

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



out. They were very different than those kind of standard plaques.

**Beth:** Plaques, plates, you know, things like that. It's funny because when you talk about it, it makes me really think about we talk so much about digital marketing and online stuff and people even there are talking about how do you make that personal when it's all just screen-based stuff? How do you personalize stuff? How do you deliver exactly the story that people want? How do you do more than just have somebody's name on something and when you talk about it, it really just gives you that feeling of this is really what personal means. When it's something that's created by the people that are being served in order to thank the people that are serving them, that are helping them, there's that bigger connection.

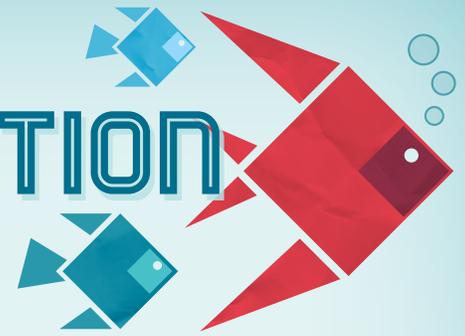
**Karen:** It's really direct.

**Beth:** Where's the place to get started thinking like this because a lot of times when I hear about donor recognition, we do hear a lot about you know plates and plaques and bowls and brass plates on walls. There's lots of different ways to recognize people, but the recognition, what you're talking about is something very different. It's about doing something literally, like if you walked into any other place, it wouldn't be the same, that the only forum for this is it's a recognition that's so perfect for the specific project and the specific people. It's a really different way of doing recognition. How does an organization begin to think that way and see where the value can be found in doing that?

**Karen:** I think it starts with thinking about finding an artist that can become part of your team. What art does, when it's good, is it transforms people's vision, and sometimes it's kind of like it gets you to recognize something that you sort of knew about, but couldn't have put into words or you know you need an artist that listens really well and someone whose style fits the character of your organization, but what I find more than anything is that people leave a lot of money on the table by thinking of recognition as something that you do at the end of the process and I think this happens for a multitude of reasons. Some of it is that it's very overwhelming to run a big campaign, particularly if you're doing a building as a component of it. It's huge and it's overwhelming and there's a million decisions to make. It's like, "We'll think about that later." The other thing is frequently that you have someone who handles the money is like, "We're not paying for this now because we don't even know how many people

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



are gonna ...”

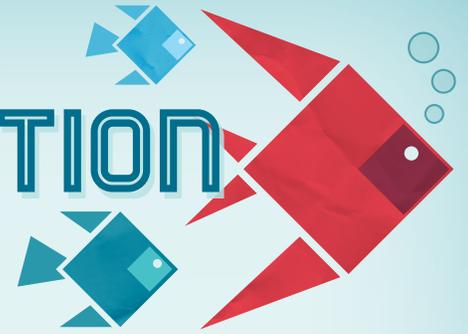
**Beth:** Right, it's two years before you have to put that out. Why are we playing with it now?

**Karen:** Right, but think about the value of creating a portrait of why people care about this place and using it as part of your case statement, as part of what you're doing outreach to people in the silent phase with and you're saying your name is gonna be part of a work of art that's being made custom for this space that will embody the sense of why it matters to you. So I mean, I keep saying to start early and it doesn't seem to really have the impact it needs. Everybody says, "Start earlier than you think," but it's really about the teamwork and starting to envision this so that you can use it as a part of marketing materials and as something that is helping you tell the story of the campaign and the organization from now into the future.

**Beth:** It sounds like what you're saying is if you think about you know recognition as "We got to make sure we leave that one wall blank so we can stick everybody's names up on it so we can check that off of the list and everybody gets their recognition and make sure that the size of the plaques are representative to how much money they gave," and I've seen there's lots of lovely different ways to do it, so it's not even about whether they're plaques or Lucite or whether it's this, it's about, you know, thinking about what will make people actually feel recognized and feel part of something and part of this project because you know only one person is gonna get their name on the building. Everybody else that then contributes, you know we always joke that nobody wants to have their name on the bathroom or the pipes or the heating system. You know the honorary heating system. There's some really important things that all go into the bucket of you helped that don't ever have this tangible, physical thing that the people to get their name on the outside get to feel by walking by and seeing it there. So to see something beautiful and unique that really has meaning for you and contributes to the overall good feeling, communicating the message and the beauty of something in the work, I can see how that could really connect to people. So you were talking a little about the financial impact of doing it this way, and not just "OK, this is a piece of art and people are happy to pay for art," you're talking about it from a perspective of this is a movement, this is what we're trying to create together and by creating something that's really special, you know whether it's defined as art or something else, but creating something that's special and unique has to be done at the conception stage.

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



**Karen:** Well, part of what I want to say is we found looking back over clients who have started early with us and have really embraced this way of approaching it, we have 6-7 clients who have exceeded their goals by millions and who credit the work as a big factor in helping get them there. It's not the whole thing. You know, you have to work with it a certain way. I can't guarantee that, but I've also had people say that it makes it so much easier to go back to people because they do feel thanked. You know, I would say that most people, particularly as they get older, wonder, "Will anybody remember that I was here? What was my life all about?" I think for many people, that's part of what philanthropy comes down to. They get to philanthropy by thinking what do I want to do while I'm here? How do I want people to remember that I was here? What do I want to get done? So people don't pick a cause to give to out of, you know, the phone book or off the internet. Gee, I need a tax deduction. Let's just go find some place to give money to.

**Beth:** Right, this letter happened to show up today.

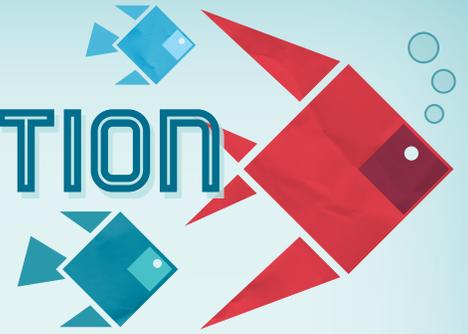
**Karen:** Yeah, no, there's a reason. There's a story. There's a connection so when you honor that connection in a way that has meaning for people, the chances are they will feel better about the gift. I think people tend to feel good once they decided to do something like this anyway, thinking about the public broadcasting you know and you do feel good when you call. It's funny, but this is something that people can touch, that is visible, that is a point of pride and that keeps going.

**Beth:** So, you said that in doing something like this you like to bring a team together really early, early on in the process. You know I just want to be a fly on the wall or something like that. I'm always curious about the nuts and bolts of how things happen and I think it's great that you bring in you know representatives from kind of all different voices in an organization. How do you bring all of that together to tell this visual story? How do you work with the different people and the different voices and the different priorities to come to this point where everyone is like, "this is what we should do"?

**Karen:** It's kind of magical and sometimes I just say to people "that's my job," but really a lot of it is trying to find imagery that's iconic. This is a term that people didn't use to use all the time. Now we all have icons on our desktops. We know what that means, but we're looking for images that have symbolic meaning that connect to how people see the hospital or whatever

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



it is.

**Beth:** And how do you bring that out in people? You 've got maybe a student, maybe it's an administrator, people that maybe aren't used to thinking that way, just sort of advice for listeners that might be out there, if they decide to pull a team together to begin to think about this, can you give them any advice on sort of how do you get non-visual people to start to think visually or be able to give you a response that leads to something visual?

**Karen:** A lot of it is brainstorming and just taking notes and just keeping going and the old there's no such thing as a bad idea because you don't know necessarily where you're going to until you kind of get there. Sometimes I say to people, "If you could put anything you want on this wall, cost is no object, what would you really want to see? What do you want it to feel like?" That's very helpful to me.

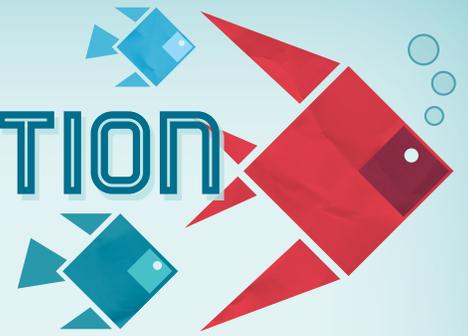
**Beth:** I love that too, just sort of giving that blue sky if anything was possible because if you don't give people the room to think about if money didn't matter, then you never sort of get to what they really want and sometimes they're surprised at what's possible. I remember being in this negotiation clinic one time and it was two women both wanted the orange. There was one orange and they were both fighting over using this orange and it wasn't until they really talked it out that they discovered that one of them wanted the juice and one of them wanted the rind and they ended up both being able to get what they wanted because they wanted different parts of the orange.

**Karen:** I love that.

**Beth:** That's one of my favorite stories and it's so easy. We're so busy and like you're saying with these capital projects, there's a million moving parts. You just want to check things off your list, but spending a little time to really find out you know what is that connection and what does it look like to you and one of the challenges I always find in my work is translating business words into art words and then translating what my artists say to what a business person can understand. There's a special sort of in-between language that you have to use to say, I have clients that will say things like, "Well, make it crisp." Well, what does that mean? But you've got to keep talking. I knew somebody once that would question people by saying

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



“and then, and then, and then” and just keeping, and it’s really annoying when you’re being questioned that way, but to keep asking until really people feel spun out. It’s so easy like to answer it once and then move on, but the digging is really sometimes where that magic happens.

**Karen:** Yeah, and usually I go through a period where it feels like I’m not getting it.

**Beth:** Oh, you, too?

**Karen:** The other thing that I do a lot is if a lot of times an organization has been around for awhile, there might be a book with like the black and white pictures in the center that somebody compiled that nobody really looks at, I go through that book.

**Beth:** On your own or with your team?

**Karen:** Well, it depends. If there’s someone who is like the institutional memory of the institution, I want them in the room. Those people are great and frequently there is somebody who has been around the longest, the employee with the most longevity or something like that or somebody that went to the school a long time ago. People feel really flattered and honored to be invited to be part of something like this.

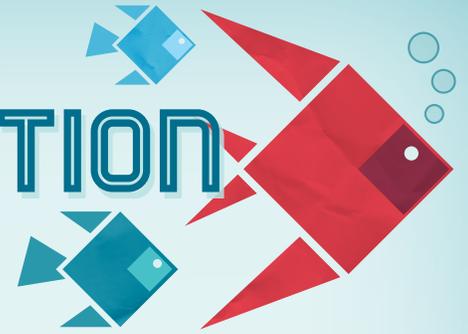
**Beth:** Oh, absolutely.

**Karen:** And there’s also a fascination for people who are not artists to be part of the beginning of making a work of art because it’s new and it’s not something they’ve done and so then they become really excited to see how it goes through its phases, which gives you a story to keep telling in the newsletter or to use in press releases. You can talk about we’re commissioning this artist to do this and we’ve worked with these people in our community and look at what’s coming out of here and now we’re going to the studio to pick colors together or whatever it is.

**Beth:** That’s really interesting. The next thing I was gonna ask you is how people that have decided to use this to kind of rally the vision, how are they actually using it throughout the

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



course of the campaign in a way of telling people that there's going to be a plaque on the wall when it's done doesn't do it. So you're saying that people sometimes come to the studio.

**Karen:** Yeah, I've had clients who have brought their big donors to the studio.

**Beth:** Wow, really?

**Karen:** I've had clients who participated in the process of choosing colors. I've had people fly in to do that occasionally. We send progress pictures through the whole thing and we have clients who post them in their newsletter.

**Beth:** These days it's through social media probably.

**Karen:** Exactly, blog, whatever. People are fascinated to see how something goes from the drawing to the physical thing and they find that really interesting.

**Beth:** I know I do. I mean I was raised in a manufacturing business so I love to see anything get made, but I've seen you make your work and it's just really cool. I went to art school so I've done that kind of work, but there's so many people that have never seen something get made like that. It's really cool to be part of seeing something that starts out in a bucket of clay and ends up being a colorful.

**Karen:** Jewel-like.

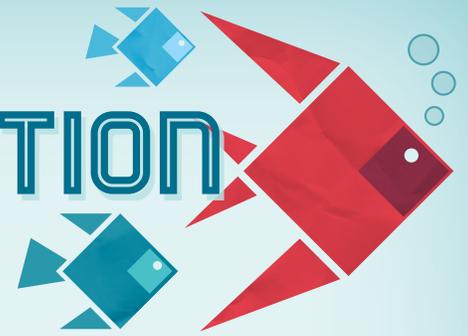
**Beth:** Just statement of vision.

**Karen:** Yeah, it is. It's exciting and I find that many people who are convinced that they're not artists secretly would like to feel like they could do this. That's sort of a whole other topic, but participating in something like this is exciting for people.

**Beth:** I mean one of the things that I'm really interested in right now is re-purposing content. I recently heard the term "modular content." You know how you can take one thing and make it into so much more, and I love that at the end it sort of seems like this static thing on the wall,

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



but by basically giving the journey and getting people involved in the process of creating it, this one little thing becomes so much more of a process and of a way to tell the story, both of what you're doing, but also why you're doing it. So talk a little bit about how people are connecting and to not just be like, "Hey, we're at the color stage," or "Hey, here's the latest tile that was created." How is it helping people connect to the reasons behind it?

**Karen:** I think that when, you know when you go to a movie and you come out and you feel like you can finally understand how somebody that you never thought about how they might see the world.

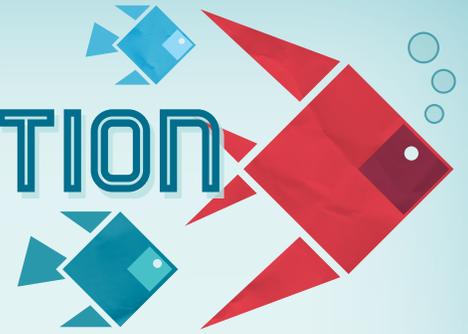
**Beth:** I get that from books, when I read a book sometimes.

**Karen:** Yeah, it's like it expands your sense of the world. So what am I trying to say here? I think that a good work of art expands people's sense. I mean, you may see one aspect of an organization. Say you're a staff person, but when you're trying to, when you're making a portrait of it, it's bigger than just that. It's bigger than your part. I'm thinking about this great story about the blind men and the elephant. Each of them is touching a different part of it and they think OK, it's flat, and whatever and they're touching the ears because none of them can picture the whole thing. This is sort of trying to make a picture of the whole thing where each person recognizes parts of it and goes, "Oh, I didn't ever think about this part," but in another metaphor I use a lot is a patchwork quilt. Particularly the kind that a lot of people would get together, you know, the quilting bees. You have all these women usually making something together, contributing pieces that have history for them. You know, this one came from my husband's jeans and this piece came from my daughter's dress when she was three and all together you're making this beautiful thing that's very colorful that's filled with all these memories and to me that's a great analogy for a great campaign. Everybody's \$100 or \$50 or \$200,000 contribution comes together to allow this organization to build a new library or make a cancer center that makes it so that people don't have to drive five hours in both directions to get chemo and people want to make this thing happen. They're each bringing what they can and it's all melding together to make something exist that didn't used to exist.

**Beth:** I think that is lovely. Karen, if people wanted to start to think this way in the

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



organization, trying to think about their capital campaign as something that the recognition of it at the end would have this kind of impact, what would you say would be your best advice for people as maybe where to get started?

**Karen:** I would a) make a budget. Put this in your budget from the get go and the consultants that I work with suggest that you plan to spend 1-4 percent of your goal on recognition. Now that might be that some of it's a dinner, some of it might be a consultant. It varies, but that's a good baseline, and it's a great number to tell the other people in your organization. Don't forget about that. A lot of people do, but also find an artist who fits your community, who knows your community or whose style will work, and it needs to be somebody who is a really good listener. You do not want the person who all they want to do is listen to their own voice in the middle of the night.

**Beth:** And I think that's a really, really good point because there's lots of wonderful artists out there. They may not be the artist for you because many artists want to execute their own vision, and there's a big difference between somebody who will execute yours.

**Karen:** Yeah, you need a team player. You need somebody that understands the commission process and listening to people and taking that in and then transforming it and bring that person onto your team early on.

**Beth:** What is like a couple of questions that somebody should ask somebody to make sure they're getting the right person? Of course I didn't prep you for that question.

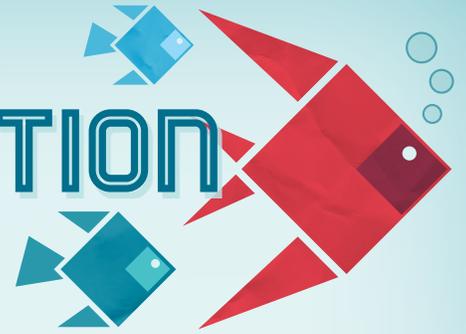
**Karen:** Let's think. In terms of like if someone is interviewing an artist and trying to figure out if they're the right person?

**Beth:** Yeah, how would somebody figure out whether that artist is somebody that will listen to them?

**Karen:** Well, have conversation and see if all they do is tell you about this project and that project or see if they listen to what you're saying, if they want to know about your school or your retirement community and if they can then tell you what you said to them.

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



**Beth:** That's good. That's really good advice.

**Karen:** It's not just about you looking at their work and saying I really like how this looks.

**Beth:** And that's why I wanted to bring that up because it's so easy, especially with visual things. We're in the visual business, too, and it's so easy for people to just look at how something looks and go, "I like this," or "I don't like this," or "I want something that looks like that," and then the process is miserable because you know the thing they saw that looked great, but you have no idea what it took to get there.

**Karen:** Yes.

**Beth:** And that's important because how long does one of your projects take?

**Karen:** The shortest ones are a few months and the longest ones are years.

**Beth:** So somebody might have to deal with you for a long time.

**Karen:** Yeah, and you want someone you can work with. You want someone that is part of your team and functions as a member of your team and guess what? You're not paying their benefits. You're paying them, but it's really important.

**Beth:** Yes, absolutely. Karen, this was fabulous. I think we got some great new ideas and insight out of it. If people have more questions for you about this idea or this process, how can they get in touch with you?

**Karen:** Probably the easiest way is to go on my website, which is [KarenSinger.com](http://KarenSinger.com), or give me a call. I love talking to people, and, you know, send an email, [KarenSinger@KarenSinger.com](mailto:KarenSinger@KarenSinger.com) or call me.

**Beth:** And we will have links so you can find Karen on the show notes page. Karen, thank you so much for sharing all of your expertise with me and the nonprofit community. I truly appreciate your time.

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



**Karen:** Thank you so much for having me, Beth. It's really been fun.