ON JAN. 30, 2015, AFTER A LONG DAY IN
rehearsals, Chicago actor Lori Myers posted the follow-
ing on her Facebook page: “It is very discouraging to me to
continuously hear stories of sexual exploitation concerning
young women in our theatre community. These women were
sometimes underage, manipulated, and traumatized. If your
friend, sister, daughter, or coworker was working under a sex-
al predator—what would you do about it?”

The post received 178 comments, and within days,
Myers was swamped with telephone calls and messages. By
mid-February, she had created an advocacy organization for
victims of sexual harassment in the theatre industry, Not in
Our House (NIOH). The first meeting, a panel discussion
on sexual harassment, was packed and lively. A support group
for survivors was established, and by the next meeting, NIOH
launched a pilot initiative to write a Code of Conduct for the
theatre community.

Myers, who performed in the Obie Award-winning pro-
duction of Our Town and won a 2015 Jeff Award as lead actress
in the Griffin Theatre’s Men Should Weep, heard rumors about
a certain theatre director when she first started out in the
mid-1990s. The rumors never went away, but the problem
remained abstract. Myers said that as she has gotten older, she
has been cast as a mother working alongside a cast of younger
women. “In the last three productions, this particular the-
atre kept popping up,” she said, adding that it “finally hit me
in the face: Why isn’t anyone doing something about this?”

During the first NIOH meetings, other incidents
came to light, mostly minor or isolated events. It’s common
knowledge that non-Equity actors operate without a safety
net, and NIOH decided to find a way to build one. “Noth-
ing has happened to me, and I can’t take direct action,” said
Myers of the director in question. “But I felt that there were
other things that could be put in place to help the next gen-
eration of actors.”

Sexual harassment in the theatre field is not unique to
Chicago, but the way that NIOH has galvanized its theatre
community is unprecedented. Just a few weeks before Myers
posted her social media comment, New York City–based
playwright Julia Jordan presented a Statement of Principle
to confront sexual harassment in the theatre at an industry-
wide meeting held at New Dramatists in New York City. The
statement, written with the help of attorney Norman Siegel,
called in part for a clearer complaint process and for unions
and guilds to adopt mediation.

One of the paragraphs of the statement reads: “The the-
atreal unions’ and guilds’ existing processes for addressing
this kind of unacceptable behavior are inadequate. There is
a sense that the response from unions and theatres has been
non-existent or insufficient. In addition, the unions and guilds
take the position that if an act of violence or harassment hap-
pens outside of the theatre or after work they have no juris-
diction. However, the two people involved will most likely
have to work together the next day or in another production.”

Jordan said that when she got involved with the issue,
she was amazed at how many people, not just women, wanted
to talk. “I got numerous calls from men insisting that they
be included,” said Jordan, adding that she was particularly
shocked by the stories she heard from those who told her how
little was done when they did complain.
“I think it’s so much more widespread than people know,” Jordan said. She hopes the formal statement will help change a climate in which the problem, beyond “a wink and a nod,” is barely addressed.

Jordan was still waiting for a decision from Actors’ Equity Association and other guilds during our conversation in November. “They have been sitting on it for a while,” Jordan said. “Initially, the response was ‘we don’t think we need it,’ and it is not just Actors’ Equity.”

Actors’ Equity responded to a request for comment on the statement by underlining their support for a safe workplace for their members. “Equity understands that sometimes situations occur that are outside our scope of jurisdiction, or sometimes members don’t want to file a grievance with the employer or with the union,” said Mary McColl, Equity’s executive director. “Equity has been working with a small group of industry advocates seeking to create a third-party neutral mediation service so industry professionals would have another resource. When that service is ready to go, Equity will help to spread the word to our membership and the theatre industry at large.”

LAURA T. FISHER, A CHICAGO-BASED actor, was performing at Milwaukee Repertory Theater when she heard about Myers’s post and reached out. Fisher heads the code-of-conduct project, and she began the process by researching work issues and sought advice from an employment litigation attorney.

In organizing the project, Fisher put together a group of 10 companies to help research and write the code. “There is strength in numbers,” said Fisher. “There are a lot of ‘right ways’ to do this.” The pilot group has been meeting once a week and is closing in on completing a first draft by early 2016.

“I think the star piece, which not even union theatres that I work in, is a clear complaint path,” Fisher said. There isn’t a template for what to do when something goes wrong, particularly in cases that have gray areas, unlike with an assault, where the action steps are clearer. And non-union actors have little legal protection. “There should be a way to step through that process to protect the risk and freedoms that we have in this craft, and that we have to bring to the table, in order to do our work,” adds Fisher.

One topic of conversation that comes up a lot in meetings is the subject of tension and sexual friction, and how actors draw on that tension in positive ways to tell their stories and practice their craft. “We don’t want that to go away, but the more people feel safe, the more they can talk about the problem and not ruin the magic,” said Fisher.

NIOH is also seen as a community mentoring project for young artists, and the code aims to help create a safe environment, particularly for newcomers. “If you are 19 or 20 coming out of school, and you enter this business or community with no training at all, you may or may not have a very diverse level of knowledge and experience or know the dos and don’ts of getting into this field,” said Fisher. For example, a 20-year-old actress may be asked to be naked for an audition and doesn’t know she can refuse, said Fisher. While the cases overwhelmingly involve women, harassment happens to men, as well. “One of the more egregious examples came from a woman toward a man,” added Fisher.

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"We sort of raise the bar culturally for all of us, so our artists, our administrators, our staff members, all get a little smarter, a bit more facile, and have the language behind them to respond," Fisher said.

When it comes to Equity, NIOH would like to see some changes to the language around sexual harassment and discrimination in the Chicago Area Theatres (CAT) rule book, and has approached the regional office of Actors' Equity, but is still waiting for a final decision.

Chicago actor Molly Brennan manages the NIOH support group and contributed language to the code of conduct based on her experience with high-risk physical theatre. "I'm a boots-on-the-ground activist," said Brennan. "There is a culture of leadership saying, 'Well, if you don't want to do this, there are 10 people behind you who will.' And I say, 'Hey, let's not be one of those 10 people.' Don't do anything that feels like a violation.

"In non-Equity theatre, it's a little like the Wild West," continued Brennan, adding that when she was starting out, it was not unusual to work in a space with no bathroom, let alone a Band-Aid. "You did it because you wanted to put in your dues," said Brennan. "Now it is getting into the consciousness of producers to cover themselves." Of course, with Equity there is a level of protection and documentation on what to do if there is a problem—for example, the first stop in filing a complaint is usually the stage manager, but small companies are often understaffed.

When asked about theatres with good practices, Brennan pointed out Actors Theatre of Louisville, which implemented mandatory training on sexual harassment in 2012. Managing director Jennifer Bielstein said that while a sole complaint prompted the action, the training is seen as an opportunity to continue to grow and learn as an organization. "We wanted to ensure that we were giving our staff all of the tools they needed to recognize concerns and to address them, and more importantly to ensure that issues do not arise," said Bielstein via e-mail. "We worked with a board member with expertise in this area and implemented the annual training."

IN DECEMBER 2012, ALABAMA-BASED writer and filmmaker Laura Axelrod wrote about the issue of sexual harassment for the online magazine The Clyde Fitch Report. Axelrod explained that the impetus for writing the piece came from a story she read about sexual harassment in the Bay Area theatre community, and it made her think about an experience she had as an actor when she was first starting out in New York.

"I don't think I ever talked about what happened; it was a long time ago for me," she said. Her story, like the ones coming out of Bay Area, are all anecdotal: "But that's all we have. Have there been any studies about sexual harassment in theatre?"

Axelrod said that whenever women who work in the theatre get together and talk freely, the conversation turns to this topic. "I would love to go back in time to comfort myself and confront the stage manager who walked away when I told her what happened," she said. What about the guy? "I don't think one violent act begets another, but I would like to confront the stage manager, who was a woman and who didn't do her job."

This summer, a number of posts appeared on the website Reddit about the harassment of female comics in Los Angeles.

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As in Chicago, there seemed to be one main culprit, but the discussion thread became a forum for discussion on the overall problem.

Charna Halpern, cofounder of the iO Theater in Chicago and the iO West Theater in Los Angeles, sent an e-mail in September to its performers with a copy of the iO sexual harassment policy. Halpern said the problems that were occurring over the summer revolved around one "idiot creep" who was being verbally abusive. "A big mistake the girls made is that they did not tell us," said Halpern. "They were afraid they would be ostracized. I would never let that happen." In response, iO offered counseling and has identified a staff member to handle any further complaints. Not only is sexual harassment illegal, Halpern said, "It is not acceptable. We are taking care of it on our own."

One small theatre company that has had an informal sexual harassment policy for years is the Neo-Futurists, a Chicago-based ensemble theatre that began in 1988. The company is devoted to the idea of ensemble, and not just artistically—it is run by consensus, explained the company’s artistic director, Bilal Dardai. "Part of why I love being in Chicago as a theatre artist is because the ensemble is writ large here," he said. Dardai, an ensemble member since 2004, has been charged with representing his company in NIOH.

"When I hear that certain actors’ experience with a specific theatre sours them on the experience of working in the theatre, it feels wrong, because it is harming them personally but also because it is removing talent from a very large talent pool," said Dardai. "When people say, 'I can’t work in Chicago,' I feel like I have been robbed."

Being involved in NIOH is also important for the company, despite the fact that the Neo-Futurists have fostered a healthy culture for 27 years. "What is useful about a code of conduct is it helps maintain that culture even after those that have established the culture have moved on," said Dardai. "It helps everyone to get on the same page when it comes to defining productive behavior. "We won’t have to reinvent the wheel... and have a three-hour discussion about why something is wrong."

In the 11 months that NIOH has been in operation, Myers has noted positive change. "We are starting to see a sort of shift where we can say, out in the open, that you don’t have to do something for your career that will put you in emotional or physical danger," she explained.

Myers also noted some challenges going forward. They are still figuring out a way for the code of conduct to be uniformly implemented. "How does the code of conduct in non-Equity theatres govern itself?" asked Myers. "Frankly, it feels like some of the challenges we are hitting up against is the old school mentality, like, ‘I don’t want this to put a tourniquet on creativity’... We are still a slut-shaming culture.”

There has also been a small backlash about a concern that NIOH would engage in a witch hunt, something Myers said the organization had no intention of pursuing. “Those conversations are shocking and a challenge,” she said. “But they are welcome.”

Ruth Lopez is an arts journalist based in Chicago.