



**E**llen Gavin founded Brava! for Women in the Arts in 1986. Since then the organization's accomplishments have stood out in a Bay Area cultural landscape marked by constant uphill struggles for creative and economic survival. A theater company that is also part artistic safe house, part training center, and part community fall-in shelter, Brava! has nurtured and inspired voices — most prominently those of women and gay teens — that otherwise might never have been heard.

But what's most awe-inspiring about Gavin's organization is not its progressive politics or its commitment to deepening societal debate. The bottom line is that come hell or high water, Brava! gets things done.

Over the years the group's annual budget has mushroomed from a few thousand dollars to a healthy six-figure sum. As the Bay Area's premier home for women artists and writers, Brava! has nurtured talents as far-flung as Cherríe Moraga, Anne Galjour, and Ellen

# ELLEN GAVIN

Sebastian. Brava! has sponsored workshops for budding writers and performers as well as programs specifically aimed at unleashing the voices of Chicana and Native American women. And Drama-DIVAS, a program for gay teenagers, has taken root and flourished too.

Taking care of business is Gavin's specialty. Brava's 42-year-old founder is intense, intelligent, socially acute, and articulate, and she has used those qualities to push her social agenda — which, loosely described, revolves around empowering the dispossessed — through social, political, and bureaucratic obstacles and into the future. Once convinced she's

right, Gavin refuses to give up.

Today an unwavering commitment to a radical political agenda faces both conservative backlash and fashionable (and convenient) cynicism, but Gavin's vision is unwavering.

"The way I learned to do things was shaped 20 years ago," she explains, talking about her experience as a student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst during the politically turbulent early 1970s. "If we wanted to do something we would just go ahead and do it, whether it was protesting the war or building a food co-op. I

learned to think in terms of not the obstacles but the goals."

That Gavin eventually was elected UMass student-body president would be unsurprising to anyone familiar with her work at Brava!, as would her attempt to unionize the student body while in office.

After graduation she founded a shelter for battered women in Springfield, Mass., and eventually moved west. In 1981 Gavin became one of the first women firefighters in San Diego — an experience that inspired her to write *The Roof's on Fire*, a play that won the *Bay Guardian's* 1991 playwriting contest and gathered critical acclaim during its 1993

world premiere at the Mission Cultural Center.

Although she has several works in progress and a great deal of talent, Gavin currently is giving her organizational work at Brava! first priority. Her plans include bidding for the now-vacant space on 24th Street that once housed the York Theatre.

"It's an incredible space," Gavin says, first detailing a laundry list of roadblocks Brava! has encountered along the way toward its purchase, then offering a compelling vision of the cultural and economic advantages the deal promises. She mentions a space for children, a row of community-enhancing businesses, and space for many of the city's venueless performance companies to use and support.

"Escrow is supposed to close at the end of August," she enthuses. "It'll take us a year to get the space ready, but there's so much that can be done with it."

It's safe to say that if it can be done, Gavin will see to it that it will be. ■

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