

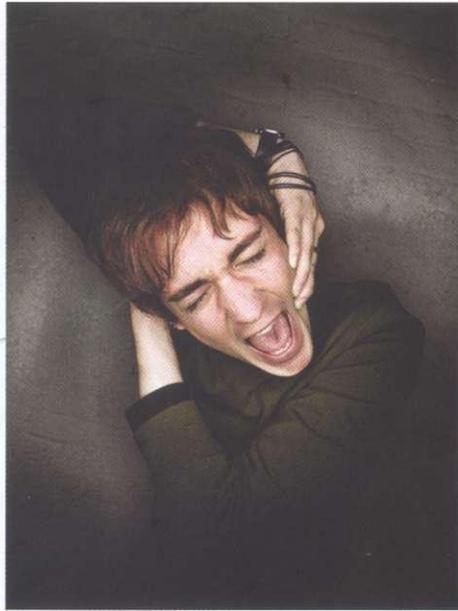
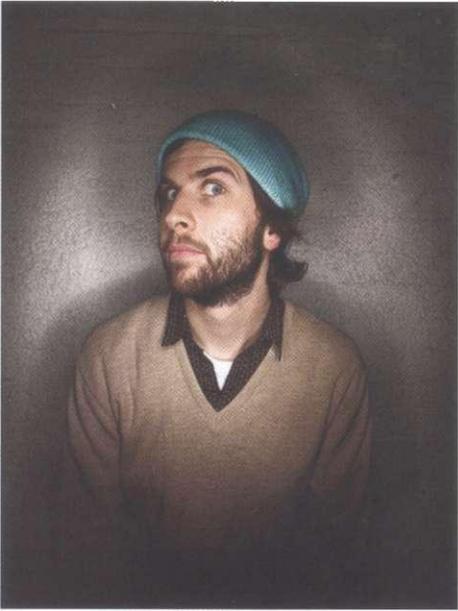


THE FAMILY MEMBERS
Clockwise, from above left: Alex Fuller, Chad Kouri, Davey Sommers, David Sieren, Rod Hunting, Sam Rosen and Scott Thomas.

FAMILY VALUES

BY LISA BAGGERMAN HAZEN

Do you dream of a creative sanctuary where you can collaborate with other designers and focus on personal projects? A group of 7 Chicago creatives have made that dream a reality. Here, they share their story and some sage advice.



THE LOGO

The triangle and type lockup existed as The Post Family's original digital logo concept. But when they found the same design in a tray of metal type they procured, they knew they were destined to use it.





At some point, pretty much every designer has fantasized about creating a Utopian environment to fuel his craft. The space would be large, bright and able to house all the necessary tools that would facilitate abundant creativity. It would be a place to gather with friends and colleagues, exchange ideas and make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Despite this common designer dream, few actually make it happen. There's a space to procure, partners to inspire and money to acquire. Not to mention the reality of balancing a 9-to-5 (or 8-to-11) job. But as daunting as this task may seem, it is doable. Just ask The Post Family, a group of seven creatives in Chicago who brought this idea to life—and even make it look kind of easy. Founded in Spring 2007, The Post Family includes a vibrant (and enviable) studio, an award-winning blog with 50,000 to 60,000 visitors per month, popular monthly gallery shows (which are also kick-ass parties) and even a few fully funded self-published books.

UNITED BY BURNOUT

The individuals who were to become The Post Family met independently in Chicago at different design gigs. "Individually, we each had separate conversations about how we wanted a space where we could get back to working with our hands," says Chad Kouri, 24, "rather than being on the computer for 10, 12 or 24 hours a day."

"Those of us who studied design in school really missed the concept of working collaboratively," says David Sieren, 29. "That's the great thing about working in a studio. It's not just working with your hands, but finding a way to bring that culture to life."

Within a month of meeting, the group of six founding members had secured a space—via Craigslist—in what is known as Chicago's Kinzie Corridor. "We wanted a centrally located space where there was no excuse not to be there," says Rod Hunting, 31. "But not necessarily in River North" (which is known as Chicago's gallery district).

"It was nice that our space was a little removed from where things were happening," Sieren says. "Since we're off the beaten path, we have to be a little more experimental with our events—make them a destination."

Two months after securing their location, they added a seventh Family member (Davey Sommers, 24). And within six months, they procured the lion's share of the studio's furnishings. This included a Chandler & Price letterpress (found at a letterpress shop in Sleepy Hollow, IL, that was going out of business), cases of metal and wood type (donated), and a hard-core screen printing setup. "What we couldn't find or have easy access to, we made with our own sweat and blood as a group—like our darkroom, work tables and shelving," Sieren says. "IKEA was a last resort for any furniture items we needed but didn't want to break the bank on. Resourcefulness was key, looking to unexpected places to find great stuff for cheap. Craigslist, eBay, word-of-mouth, the closing of the Marshall Field's department store—all great resources."

WORKSPACE VS. GALLERY

When The Post Family started, all members had full-time gigs. But now, about half have quit their day jobs in favor of being self-employed. This has generated a collaborative atmosphere, not just with those who are independent, but with the others who bring valuable input back to their full-time jobs. "If a project lends itself to letterpress or screen printing, then the studio is hands-down the place to be," Sieren says. "The space is absolutely laptop friendly. In fact, the studio has begun to serve as a destination for people outside the immediate Family as well. You're equally as likely to find Family members as you are 'extended family' hanging out on any given day."

"I find myself kind of blurring the lines between my 9-to-5 job and The Post Family," says Alex Fuller, 29, who by day is a creative director for Ogilvy. "Whatever we happen to be pitching, I try to bring in these guys

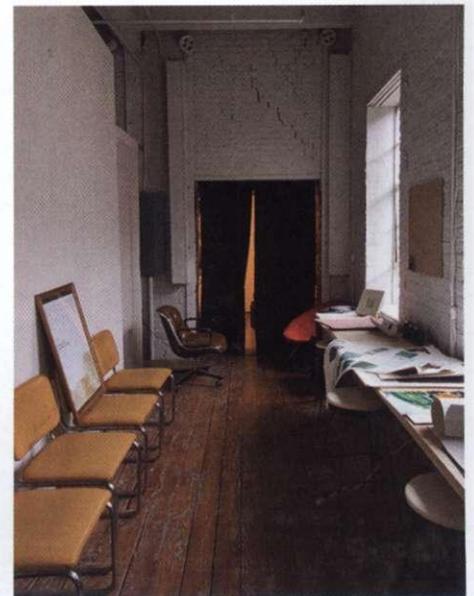
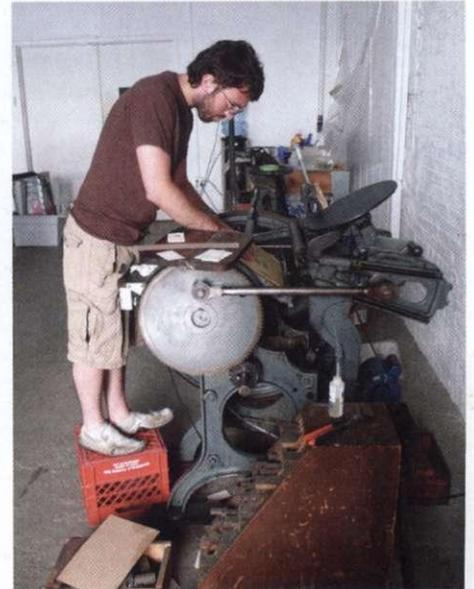
THE SPACE

Right: The group also holds parties, especially gallery openings, in its studio space. This shot was taken during the opening night of Family View, a group photo show featuring Paul Elledge, Leasha Overturf and Jo-Nell Sieren.

Below Left: Within six months, the studio had obtained almost all of its furnishings—many of which were free.

Below Right: Family member Scott Thomas works on the Chandler & Price letterpress, which was donated by a letterpress shop.

Bottom Right: A peek into the studio's back room/digital lounge. Here you'll find several laptops, and maybe some guys lounging on the chairs. Behind the curtain is the studio's darkroom.



8 DON'TS & 7 DO'S TO START A DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

BY THE POST FAMILY

DON'T...

1. Be selfish. Don't hold onto your ideas and keep them precious. Give back and be receptive to what you receive in return. After all, that's the whole idea behind a collaborative.
2. Burn bridges or make enemies. The reputation you create for yourself can come back and affect you in the most unexpected ways—either positively or negatively—and at the most unexpected times.
3. Wait. There's a daunting aspect to creating a collaborative. Prioritize what needs to be accomplished in order to get the ball rolling and dive right in.
4. Become complacent. It will take momentum to get to where you want to go. Once you reach that place, it's not time to rest! Stagnation is the first step in a collaborative's downfall.
5. Get cocky. If you're lucky and magic strikes, you could have a bit of success on your hands. Remember where you came from and what your group's original objectives were. Invest what you get back from your community into the collaborative and then watch it grow.
6. Micromanage.
7. Be dramatic.
8. Be afraid to argue and disagree (but don't let it fester). Many people are deathly afraid of this, but how can a group of passionate people get together and not butt heads at some point? This is a part of the process and can be looked at as constructive, as long as things don't get nasty or personal.

DO...

1. Begin to look for a space before you have anyone to share it with. This will give you an idea of financial responsibilities involved, what part of town you want to be in and what options are available to you.
2. Know your community and surroundings.
3. Be involved in and engaged with both of the above. When creating your work/event/gallery space, success correlates directly to what you give back to the community.
4. Figure out why you want to do it. Define your goals and objectives. Everyone should be on the same page regarding what the space will be used for in a grand sense—not a micromanaged sense.
5. Go with the flow. Magic happens when you least expect it, in places where you aren't looking. You have to work to find a fine balance between setting a plan and letting the plan unfold naturally. On top of that, be nimble. If something unexpected happens, be able to shift gears and follow a new lead.
6. Leverage all of your resources.

Creatively: One of the benefits of having a collaborative is working with a diverse talent pool. But even with seven people (in our case), you can't do it all. Bring in friends with different talents—photographers, writers, etc.

Practically: How did we get eight cases of donated metal and wood type? We knew someone who was interested in our mission and wanted to help. Reach into the far corners of your collective networks; you never know what might pop up.

7. Trust your collaborative. A design collaborative is an exercise in collaboration, trust and delegation. It's all about "divide and conquer." If you find yourself unable to trust your colleagues, maybe you're working with the wrong group of people.

to help me with my design explorations. When we all throw down and collaborate, it starts to inspire the others around us. It's part of what I love about the energy of this place."

The breadth of talent among members lends itself easily to working together. "The arrangement, flexibility and informality of the space fosters many different types of collaboration—many of which are unexpected," Sieren says. "It functions much like a college studio. You may find people glued to a laptop, printing on the letterpress, washing out a screen or doing something in-between. What makes the space great is the free-flow exchange of information. Critique, input, evaluation, expert advice, tips on technique, camaraderie and general, good conversation is readily available and just footsteps away."

The space is considered as much a gallery as it is a workspace. Yet the Family designed it to function quite differently than a typical gallery. The Post Family has brought their space to life by curating a diverse lineup of shows. While a few Post Family members have exhibited their own work during shows, they mostly bring in the work of other artists who they admire. Subjects have involved everything from a

photographic exploration of the Roma culture in Kosovo to an interactive event where attendees were encouraged to create and distribute their own collages, inspired by Kouri's work.

"One of the primary goals of a traditional gallery is to make money off of artists," Sieren says. "There is also a level of curation in selecting the art. The only curation we provide is a concept; the artists bring the talent. What they consider to be a good piece may never show in a gallery. We let them choose, and in the process provide a nontraditional model for showing their work in a professional setting."

The Post Family didn't want their studio to be a white-walled gallery where visitors do a lap and move on. In addition to the art space, there's are comfortable couches, tables, and plenty of room to linger and socialize. "During our events, we keep our entire space open," Kouri says. "So people see the show, then hang out in the rest of the space."

Music adds another dimension to the experience of the gallery shows. Some artists have performed in addition to creating art for the walls. Others have put together multimedia performances complete with live musicians. The group is even experimenting with



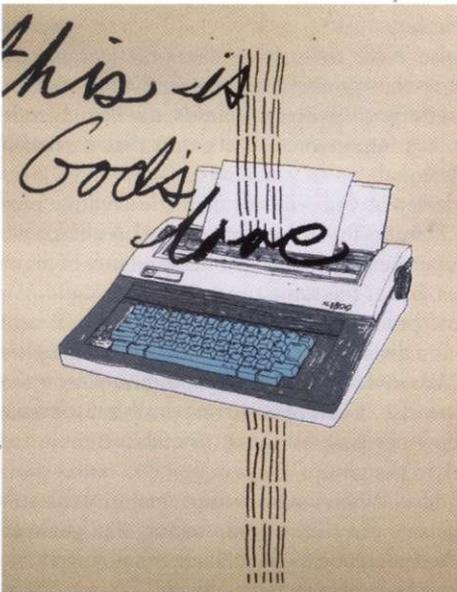
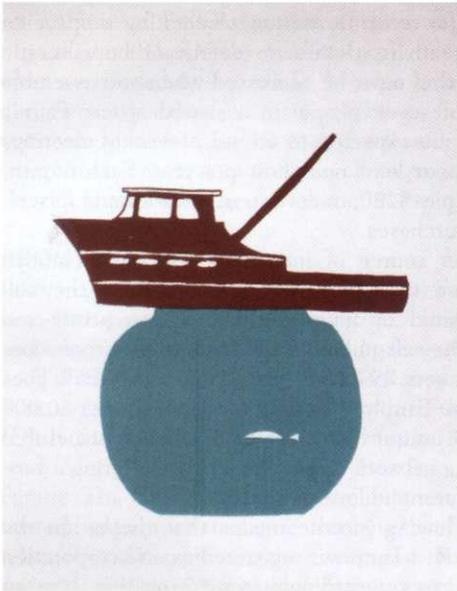
THE WORK

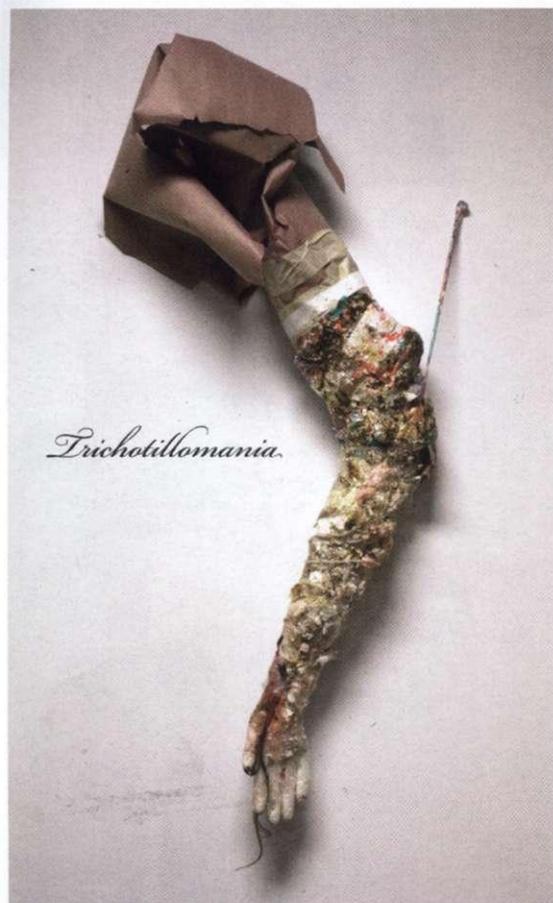
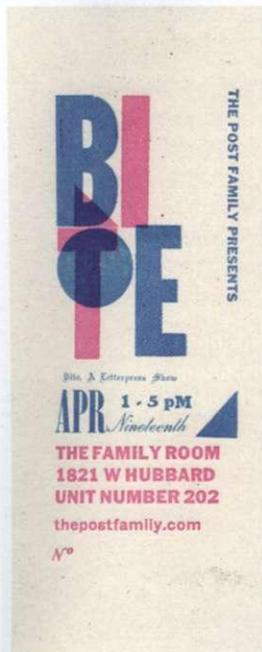
Left: This photograph was taken at a miniature museum by David and Jo-Nell Sieren, and exhibited at the first Post Family group show.

Below Left: The newest Family member, Davey Sommers, created this untitled screenprint.

Bottom Left: Items from Rod Hunting's childhood—like doodles in notebooks and writings on the backs of photos—inspired this print, titled "God's Love."

Below Right: This poster of storefront sayings was created by Chad Kouri and Jessie Brown during their Life Long Work Week Window Residency at Renegade Handmade in 2009.





THE PROMOTION

Above Left: Of course, the Family members produce all the promotions for upcoming shows. This letterpressed flyer was created for the Bite letterpress show, a collaboration between Scott Thomas and Alex Fuller.

Above Right: This group-designed poster was created to promote The Post Family's first show at the Letterform Gallery in Chicago.

Left: Rod Hunting created this postcard to promote Rachel Niffenegger's show.

establishing an unconventional music label called Family Hi-Fi. "It's hard to not acknowledge the place that music occupies within the community that we're a part of," Sieren says. "We're each incredibly passionate about music, and a few of our members are musicians themselves."

Some shows have found a life beyond the gallery. To wit, consider the Officially Unofficial show, an exhibition of prints, posters, photographs and videos from the 2008 art movement in support of Barack Obama for president. Using work from the show, the Family (led by Scott Thomas, 29) assembled a 344-page book. Wanting creative control over this project, The Post Family raised money through a microfinancing site called Kickstarter.com so they could self-publish with their own imprint, Post Press. They raised \$85,000 in 45 days, which enabled them to create a 2,500-book run with six-color printing and a fabric cover for what they called "Designing Obama."

THE DAY-TO-DAY

Despite the romantic notion of creating a space to inspire creativity, there's no dearth of bureaucratic elements that must be addressed when you assemble a group of seven people in a shared space. Family members are expected to attend bi-weekly meetings and curate at least one show per year. Each month, members pay \$280, to cover rent, utilities and miscellaneous purchases.

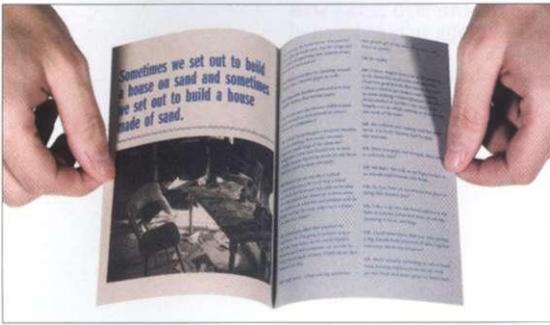
Another source of income is The Post Family's online store (shop.thepostfamily.com), where they sell items created by members, like screen prints and jewelry. They also hope to sell fonts in the store soon. The artist gets 75% of the sale price, while 25% goes back to the Family. And their blog, which gets 50,000 to 60,000 unique visits per month, has a structured advertising network called The Fridge, offering a variety of different ad levels.

Since having income means that they're on the grid, The Post Family is registered as a C corporation and files taxes accordingly (something they hire an accountant to do). They collect sales tax on all their store purchases.

They also have to manage the practical matter of wrangling the opinions, visions and personalities of seven different creatives. There's no Post Family president—it's important to the group that it remain collectively equal.

"As a designer, you want to own the creative process from start to finish," Fuller says. "I feel like we struck a super-healthy balance. There's plenty of arguing at times, but at the same time, there's dialogue. We make sure to prioritize our own projects. We make sure that there is a division of labor that focuses on people's strengths. We divide dues equally. No one pays more than anyone else. Each of us is responsible for curating one show per year. We want to make sure we are giving back to the group."

Kouri adds, "When we hit bumps, majority rules. A lot of e-mails go out to the group saying, 'I'm going to do this unless someone objects. If there's no response, it's considered permission to go ahead.'"



Predictably, there have been those bumps along the way. There's an element of risk involved when you gather seven creatives, a space and names/social security numbers on a bank account. For some time, late payments, drained funds and subsequent overdraft fees were an unfortunate reality. This made the group re-evaluate their goals and find ways to supplement their income.

"The goal was never to make money—it was to be self-sufficient," Fuller says. "For a while, we were getting killed with bank fees. We set a goal of determining what we needed to stay afloat. It helps being graphic designers rather than just artists. There's a strong business side to everything. It's pretty well understood by everyone that there are timelines, client payments, etc. Overall, there's a strong entrepreneurial spirit."

ABOUT THE NAME

Like many other things with The Post Family, the moniker was a result of collaboration, brainstorming and taking a good idea and expanding from there.

"I'm a big name guy," Kouri says. "I was participating in an art competition in Grand Rapids in the middle of July and found a Christmas card in the space that read, 'Merry Christmas and Bless Jesus from The Post Family' The family looked like the happiest people. I started playing with the name, thinking that Post could relate to post-modern, so they were past the family. I started thinking of the various definitions of post, and looked it up and found that it had been one of the longest-recorded last names. It resonated with me for a long time, so I brought it to the table."

"My favorite part of our name is the idea of 'family,'" says Sam Rosen, 24. "We view each other as a family. When people come together for a purpose—in this case, promoting sustainable art—our only goal is to be a family and support each other. We all came from different places, very different backgrounds, yet we've decided that we're brothers."

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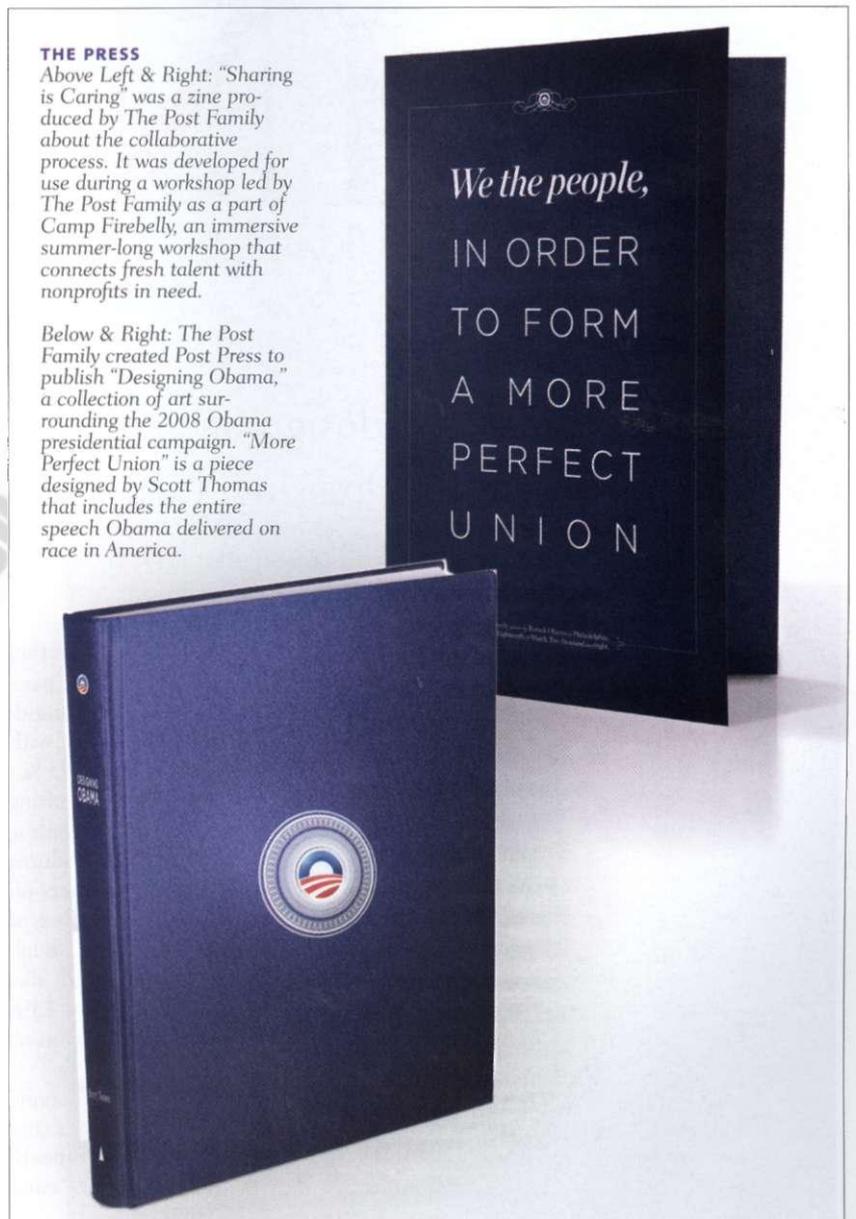
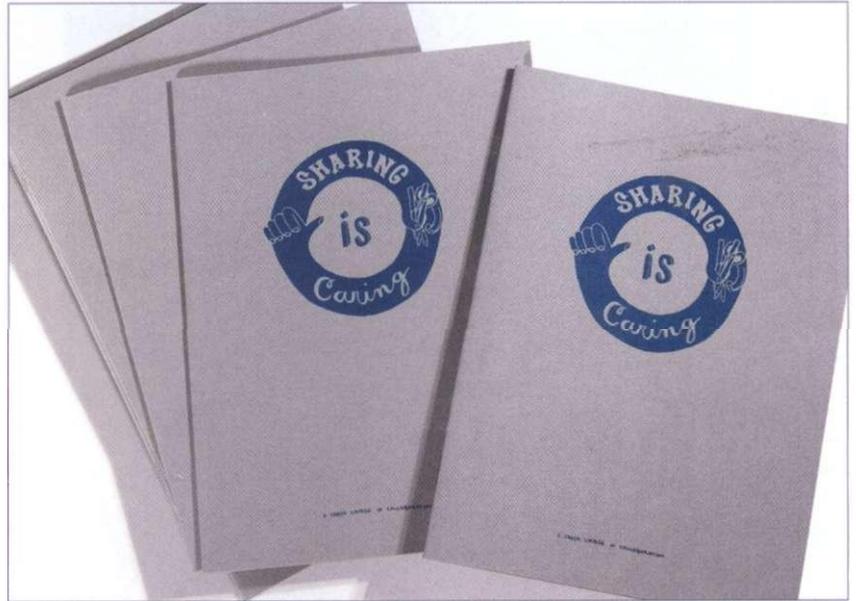
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THE PRESS

Above Left & Right: "Sharing is Caring" was a zine produced by The Post Family about the collaborative process. It was developed for use during a workshop led by The Post Family as a part of Camp Firebelly, an immersive summer-long workshop that connects fresh talent with nonprofits in need.

Below & Right: The Post Family created Post Press to publish "Designing Obama," a collection of art surrounding the 2008 Obama presidential campaign. "More Perfect Union" is a piece designed by Scott Thomas that includes the entire speech Obama delivered on race in America.