

Alive at 25

The SAG Foundation celebrates its anniversary by continuing

By Daniel Holloway

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The Screen Actors Guild Foundation was formed 25 years ago out of necessity—a necessity that now seems a bit silly, given the scope and success of the organization it gave birth to.

"At that time, there were a lot of telethons," says JoBeth Williams, the foundation's president. "That was a very popular thing to do, TV fundraising telethons, at which our guild members would waive their salaries." But even though SAG members may have declined their paychecks, that money was still legally obligated to go

somewhere. "The guild is a union, not a charity," Williams explains. "People wanted to be able to use this money for membership help, aid, emergency assistance, basically. So the foundation was formed first for the purpose of being able to accept those checks and use the money to be able to assist guild members in need."

Since it was formed in 1985, the SAG Foundation has continued and expanded its mission to help actors in times of need, through its emergency assistance and catastrophic health funds, through its career assistance programs and seminars, and through new additions at the Actors Center, its state-of-the-art resource facility in Los Angeles. But just as the foundation serves actors, it also gives actors the opportunity to serve the community. Through a children's literacy effort that encompasses multiple programs, the foundation has found success using actors' skills to promote reading and writing.

One of the organization's best-known proponents, Elliott Gould, first became involved through the foundation website StorylineOnline.net, which features videos of actors such as James Earl Jones, Elijah Wood, and Amanda Bynes reading children's books aloud. Gould has lent his own voice to the project and helped recruit former Vice President Al Gore, whose reading of the book "Brave Irene" is currently featured on the site. The experience brought the actor into the foundation's fold.

"I got to know Marcia Smith and the staff there," Gould says. Smith is the foundation's executive director. "I have since been involved in different situations to bring help and guidance and support to people in our membership who struggle and suffer and who the foundation is there to help." Gould served for three years on the foundation's board of directors and is now a member of its advisory board. "I'm available to do whatever I can to help the people in need as well as the foundation, which always needs support and help."

Pamela Reed, the foundation's 1st vice president, is also deeply attached to its literacy effort, having recorded a reading of her own for Storyline Online and dedicated time to another foundation program, BookPALS, which sends actors to public elementary schools, shelters, and hospitals to read aloud to children. But Reed became aware of the programs only after she was recruited to the foundation's ranks by former guild president Richard Masur. Shortly thereafter, Reed found herself on the organization's board of directors. "I've been here ever since," she says.

A Healthy Start

In her time with the organization, Reed has become intimately familiar with how much of an impact its programs have on SAG members. The one she feels most strongly about at the moment is the catastrophic health-care fund, which, according to the foundation, provides assistance to 350 to 450 guild members per year. "I think the health issues are so important all across the board," Reed says. "We have a lot of actors who are not on a plan now after years of contributing. We American artists have families, schools, and taxes and mortgages just like everyone else. This foundation hopefully will be able to give people a leg up. We've always said we don't want to give a handout. We want to give a leg up and help people bounce back."

Gould echoes that sentiment. "A friend of mine is actually in the process of trying to get more help for his spinal and physical condition," he says. "The foundation has helped to pay certain premiums to keep this particular member current with insurance and coverage. There are other people I know where the foundation has helped them to pay their rent, their insurance. We are always in the process of looking for other avenues to generate resources so we can help more."

Help with noninsurance expenses comes through the emergency assistance program, which, according to the foundation, aids roughly 1,500 members a year. Actors such as Hilary Swank have spoken openly about having received emergency assistance from the foundation in the past. Another point of pride is the John L. Dales Scholarship Fund, one of the foundation's oldest programs. In its first year it offered \$100 scholarships to five children of guild members; it now grants 100 scholarships of \$4,000 to \$5,000 each. "There is a friend of mine who's a member, an actor, and they helped to send his daughter to college," Gould says. "They helped with the tuition."

Why is all this help necessary? Because, as Back Stage readers know, artists are, first and foremost, working people. "Most people think that everybody is a friend of George Clooney and lives like that, but that's not even 1 percent of us," Reed says. "Most of our union is, at any given time, at best 85 percent unemployed. As a member of the foundation, we try to help artists and people who are not artists. That is the purpose of the foundation, to give to the community, and this is a community that we're definitely interested in."

In the foundation's effort to provide opportunities for the acting community, one of its most important ventures in recent years has been the Actors Center, which hosts the seminars, talkbacks, and

workshops that make up several foundation programs. "We took this unusable space where the SAG offices are located here in L.A. and turned it into this great, state-of-the-art screening room," Williams says. The center also houses a computer lab open to actors who need to work on their reels. But the feature Williams calls "our latest and brightest jewel" is the Don LaFontaine Voice-Over Lab, which, when completed, will feature a high-tech sound studio and classroom for instruction in the business and technical aspects of voiceover work.

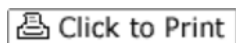
In its 25th-anniversary year, the SAG Foundation continues to move forward. Already in the works is its first-ever celebrity golf fundraiser—for which Ray Romano, Scott Bakula, and Andre Braugher of the TNT series "Men of a Certain Age" have agreed to serve as hosts. And more surprises are ahead. For Williams, the growth she's seen in the organization's first 25 years makes its future look bright.

"We've grown from this 1985 group of people handing out membership assistance into this large and really, I believe, well-rounded organization that serves our members and the community at large," she says. "So I'm very proud. It allows us to use our talent, use our resources, and also, hopefully, in the community at large, inspire younger people who might not normally think about it to fall in love with the written word. I think it's a really good marriage of serving the members and serving the community."

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