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Pitching In: SAG Foundation's Marcia Smith at Actor's Center on Miracle Mile.

Desolate Scene

By DAVID HALDANE - 2/16/2009

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Geri Jewell was a big hit on the 1980s prime-time television series "Facts of Life." Later she had a regular role on the recently ended HBO series "Deadwood." After that, she lived for a time on celebrity appearances, autograph signings and part-time jobs.

But in the last year or so, all that has dried up.

Acting opportunities have diminished as the major studios slowed production in anticipation of a possible actors' strike. And the recession has limited the temporary employment that traditionally helps entertainers weather difficult times.

"I'm doing everything I can," said Jewell, 52, who recently relocated to a cheaper North Hollywood apartment to cut costs. "I'm just trying to think of ways to survive."

Last year, though, Jewell was extended one economic lifeline: a roughly \$3,500 emergency grant from the SAG Foundation, a non-profit designed to help needy members of the Screen Actors Guild.

It turns out Jewell was one of the lucky ones. The same economic forces that have made getting by so difficult for Jewell and other actors are also straining the foundation.

The non-profit has experienced a fivefold increase in requests for emergency aid from struggling actors, at the same time that a falloff in donations has cut into its budget.

What's more, said Marcia Smith, the foundation's executive director, the organization has suffered from its association with SAG, which for months has failed to reach a new contract with the studios amid the threat of a strike.

The foundation and executive office of SAG share the same Wilshire Boulevard building on the Miracle Mile, but they are actually separate organizations with different offices and funding sources. Even so, Smith said, big production companies – historically important donors – have declined to fund the foundation as they have in the past, amid the contentious contract talks.

The grim bottom line: The foundation's \$3.5 million annual budget has shrunk by 20 percent at the same time requests for emergency grants – ranging from about \$750 to \$5,000 – have increased to nearly 50 a day from just a handful last year.

"It's put a huge strain on our resources and we're way over budget," Smith said. "Lots of actors are losing their homes."

Dipping into capital

The foundation's financial predicament isn't exactly obvious, however.

Just last week, it opened a \$1.5 million Actor's Center. The 3,000-square-foot facility features a large screening room for movies and seminars, a computer lab in which actors can spruce up their resumes and apply for jobs, video equipment for shooting reels and a studio suitable for auditions.

The foundation started the center before it was fully funded by dipping into its capital for half the cost, assuming it could pay back the money later with donations. But those have shriveled.

"We borrowed from the endowment with the idea of repaying the corpus," she said. "The big production companies that we thought would be happy to help have said, 'Not now.'"

Smith did not provide specific examples of movie production companies that had withheld support, and several major production companies did not return telephone calls for comment. But in a statement, the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers – the trade group with which the actors are negotiating – said that its members are not holding back on SAG Foundation donations.

“The current labor situation has nothing whatsoever to do with contribution levels to this fund,” the statement said.

Whatever the case, the Actor Center’s financial situation has not kept struggling actors from showing up there in droves.

One recent visitor was Anna Califia, 57, who hasn’t worked in a year. Though in the past she supported herself between acting jobs by working as a secretary, an usher or in sales, Califia said such work is now hard to find.

“I’m living on credit cards and unemployment and that’s about to kick the bucket,” said the North Hollywood resident. “I spend money only on gas, groceries and bills. I don’t have any money for head shots, and I’m keeping the groceries to a minimum.”

David Hillberg, 49, said he’d come all the way from Fountain Valley seeking distributors for a film project.

“It’s insanely tough,” Hillberg said of his chosen profession. “The perception is that actors are rich, so nobody gives us a break.”

Extraordinary times

Experts say the foundation’s situation is not unlike that of other non-profits in trouble, with Hollywood seemingly being hit particularly hard.

Just last week, for instance, controversy erupted again over a decision by the Motion Picture & Television Fund, another charity, to close its hospital and nursing home for aging and infirm entertainment industry workers in Woodland Hills.

“They’re not alone,” Regina Birdsell, president of the Los Angeles-based Center for Nonprofit Management, said of the SAG Foundation’s struggle. “Universally, everyone we talk to is looking at how to sustain themselves in extraordinary times. What it means is that you have to first look at your mission to decide whether it’s still relevant, then look at your funding to decide whether it’s still realistic.”

Smith said she believes that the foundation’s finances will improve once SAG and the studios reach an agreement. And there are have been signs that could happen.

After talks with the major studios broke down, a majority of the guild’s board recently voted to replace its chief negotiator and his team. Attempts to prevent the change were blocked by a judge, and now negotiations are expected to resume this week.

“We hope they reach an agreement soon,” Smith said.

In the meantime, Jewell said that her \$3,500 foundation grant was a lifesaver.

“It paid for my auto insurance, car payment, medical bills, telephone line and rent for that month,” she said. “It allowed me to take a breath and restructure in order to move to a less-expensive place. It was a godsend. When this turns around, hopefully I can turn it around for another actor.”

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