

Young Performers Look Ahead at the Actors' Fund

by Lauren Horwitch

It wasn't your typical meeting at the Actors' Fund of America. Not one of the nine experienced actors brought up dues caps, runaway production, residuals, or the three-voucher system. Instead, after the board members helped themselves to pizza and determined who got their driver's licenses over the summer, they moved on to planning an upcoming costume bowling party, a seminar titled "The Ins and Outs of Hollywood" featuring casting directors and agents, and a trip to build gingerbread houses with the residents of the Hollenbeck assisted-living home. The SAG and AFTRA members concluded their session with a rowdy game of musical chairs.

The actors in question are members of the Leadership Council of the Fund's Looking Ahead Program, a group for performers ages 12-18 and their families that combines social activities, informational seminars, and community service.

Looking Ahead social worker Heather Vanian said she strives to keep the program fun and flexible. "The idea is to provide support and to create a community for young performers," she said. "We want to be able to shift with their needs as they develop."

Vanian said Looking Ahead focuses on helping its members develop the skills necessary to lead fulfilling adult lives rather than on teaching them how to succeed as actors. "We want to instill the life skills they'll need to go into any direction," said Vanian. "So we don't really push them to stay in or out of the business." The program emphasizes the importance of pursuing interests outside of acting, making friends, getting a good education, and just being a kid. "We absolutely do not encourage the business or talking about the business," she added. "We really want it to be as normal of an environment as possible."

The program, which was founded last year with a \$150,000 grant from the Screen Actors

Guild's Producers Industry Advancement and Cooperative Fund, offered a wide range of activities and programs in its inaugural year. Bowling, roller skating, and laser tag were popular, as was serving lunch at the Union Rescue Mission and playing bingo with the Motion Picture & Television Fund's retirement community.

Looking Ahead counts 467 families among its current members; Actors' Fund hopes to expand the program in 2006 by reaching out to 9- to 11-year-old performers and their parents.

Makeda Murray, who participated with her son Raymond last year, said Looking Ahead is a welcome opportunity for parents to socialize away from the competitive industry. "It's a different atmosphere than when you take your kid on an audition and talk to another parent," she said. "It's very relaxing here. I don't feel like I'm competing with anyone."

The parents said they recommend the seminars about handling their children's finances and preparing for college. They praised an extensive tour of the UCLA campus the members took last year, during which the young actors ate in the dorms and met with faculty from the theatre- and film departments.

"It's just wonderful for the kids to get together in an environment where they're not competing for roles. They just get to be friends and be themselves," said Judianna Castle, mother of 11-year-old Amy Castle, who has appeared on *Ally McBeal*, *Lizzie McGuire*, and *Malcolm in the Middle*.

"I just think it's awesome," said Amy, who is homeschooled, like many Looking Ahead members. Although she has several outlets for socialization, she said Looking Ahead is an ideal situation for homeschooled young performers. "If you are homeschooled and you don't have many friends, it's a great way to meet new people," she said.

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For more information about the Looking Ahead program, call (323) 933-9244 or visit www.actorsfund.org.