


Heroes Every Day

By David Geffner



**Rana Platz-Petersen, Local
767 Business Agent, Medical
Department, CBS Studio Center**

It's a cool spring afternoon at CBS Studio Center, just off Ventura Boulevard in the heart of the San Fernando Valley. Pilot season is winding down, so the morning has been relatively quiet for Local 767 Business Agent, Rana Platz-Petersen, who has overseen the lot's medical department since the mid-1970s.



**Rana Platz-Petersen,
Local 767 Medical
Department, CBS
Studio Center,
treating eye injury**

Her tidy three-room care center is marked by a small Red Cross sign, overshadowed by several large television sound stages like a cub bear hidden under its mother. But it's actually Platz-Petersen and her staff who do the mothering, treating upwards of 50 people per day when the lot is brimming with productions. Injuries can range from a bad headache to a grip falling off the "perms" (permanent scaffolding above a set) and incurring serious neck trauma. Suddenly, the door pops open and a young painter walks in holding her hand in the air. "I sliced it open

with a razor a few hours ago," she says wincing in pain. "I had too much work to come in right away."

Platz-Petersen, who has extensive emergency room training and can clear a human airway with an 18-gauge needle, gently scolds the woman for delaying treatment. "This works just like a suture," she explains, expertly cleaning and gauzing the wound. "You'll need to wear these gloves when you shower. It won't adhere if it gets wet." The painter thanks her sheepishly and hurries back to her work. Platz-Petersen logs the woman's name, time, date, and type of

injury, before disinfecting her medical chair with bleach. “People in this industry think the company and work always come first over their own health,” she sighs. “I wish I could change that.”

In truth, Platz-Petersen and the 270 members of Local 767 First Aid Employees (which includes paramedics, nurses, EMTs, rescue divers, physician assistants and MDs) make substantive changes to industry safety every day of their careers. Without their presence, in-town or on location, productions would lose countless man-hours and dollars due to untreated work injuries. And medical care for the movies is the only job Platz-Petersen. She remembers sharing a lunch-table with crews from the TV show *Emergency* while studying for her nursing midterms at Harbor General Hospital. Up until a Teamster at the Santa Anita racetrack (her grandfather was an agent for horse jockeys) pulled out his health and welfare card, and urged her to join Local 767, Platz-Petersen had no idea professional nurses were employed in the movies. “He worked at Warner Bros,” she recalls, “and he said they needed qualified people to help out in the medical department. I ran over to Warner Bros and got an interview with Marvin Haffner. I became one of the first female RNs to join the local.”

Platz-Petersen’s commitment to medical safety extends far beyond just tending to scrapes and cuts. In 1998, the business agent and her recording secretary, Joanie Page, undertook a study, at the behest of the International, to gauge the impact of sleep deprivation in the industry. Judgment and ability become impaired with lack of sleep, and several deaths during that period had sent the industry reeling. With 20%

of the Local and two studios participating in the study, it was discovered that thousands of injuries occurred within a three-month period.

Just a few miles away, in a small wooden trailer on the Warner Bros lot, Local 884 Motion Picture Studio Teacher Adria Later is concerned with numbers of a different kind. Later is immersed in helping her only pupil, Angus Jones, the 12 year-old co-star of the hit TV show *Two and a Half Men*, find the perimeter of irregular shapes.

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Jones, who has been working in features, television and commercials for more than eight years, calls her “the best studio teacher” he’s ever had. Besides running math problems, Later will dissect science and history with Jones, who must dash back and forth between his sitcom set and her studio classroom in 20-minute blocks of time. “It’s easier to learn things with Adria in a one-on-one situation than back at my regular school, where the smallest class is, like, 24 kids,” the easy-going Jones grins. “It was Adria who got me into reading, too. I’m in the middle of *Eldest* right now. It’s a really cool book.”

The intimacy and one-on-one nature of the studio classroom fosters

close relationships, which Later, an ex-kindergarten teacher, relishes. After graduating from UCLA with degrees in sociology and education, she spent five years teaching public school and discovered that the classroom was not her path. “In the 1970s, studio teachers were run through the Board of Education and it was difficult to get placed,” Later explains during Jones’ 30-minute lunch-break. “The freedom and lack of structure in studio teaching are exciting to me. But finding a way into the industry was difficult.” Later remembers visiting the Board of Education without an appointment, prepared to sit all day until someone put her on a list. “We’re not just teachers,” the thirty-one year veteran says proudly. “We’re welfare workers, bound by California’s labor laws to protect the kids in our care.”

People like Polly Businger, Business Agent for Local 884, and Wesley Staples, president, have spent much of their careers helping the industry to understand the rules that govern the employment of minors. In 1986, after California’s child labor laws were overhauled, the pair helped Local 884 create a one-stop shopping volume called *The Blue Book*. “The origins of *The Blue Book* go all the way back to 1926, when the Board of Education was asked to provide teachers to the Hollywood studios so children could work during school hours,” Staples explains over lunch in West Hollywood. “The teachers needed help because they were venturing into uncharted territory. They drew up a book of guidelines that they called *The Blue Book*.”

“This current version of *The Blue Book*, which was approved by the Divisions of Labor Standards Enforcement for California and the AMPTP



Fern Carter teaches the cast of "Our Gang" on the roof of the Park Central Hotel, NYC, 1928

(Association of Motion Picture & Television Producers)," Businger adds, "gives relevant parties like producers, parents, and the Screen Actors Guild, a single concise source that summarizes Title 8 provisions [in the California Code of Labor Relations]. Title 8 mandates that all studio teachers must have both the California Elementary and Secondary teaching credentials. These Title 8 rules keep the level of quality in our union as high as it can possibly get."

Businger notes that being part of a strong labor force like IATSE has benefited teachers in the film & television industry. "President Tom Short has been a champion of issues with children working in the industry and very supportive of studio teachers," Businger notes. "We're primarily day-hires. We're tied to the hours of working children, and typically don't bank as many overtime hours as the other crafts in our industry. This can make it difficult to build up a quality pension. Fortunately, the Hollywood Basic Agreement provides for an IAP (Individual Account Plan), which allows us to take a lump sum when we retire. The IAP has been very important for studio teachers."

Like many Local 884 members, Businger and Staples are veterans of the

nation's public school system. After teaching high school English in Cleveland, Businger moved out west and became a substitute teacher for the Los Angeles Unified School District. Her first studio job was on location in Stockton, California with *Bound For Glory*, where hundreds of real-life migrant children were employed on a blanket permit. Staples taught high school in the South Bronx, before going on the road to teach child actors in legit theater. He arrived in Los Angeles with *The King and I* and moved over to studio teaching on series television. He says that parents, who are required by state labor laws to be "within sight or sound" of their acting children at all times, impact the effectiveness of the studio teacher. "I worked on *Boy Meets World* for seven years," Staples recalls. "Education was a top priority to Joanne Savage [mother of the show's co-star Ben Savage]. She wanted her kid to have the week off before finals, and she wanted to choose the studio teacher. The ideal model for a stage parent is someone who lays out ground rules that benefit the child. That way everyone's on the same page."

The antithesis of Joanne Savage is a parent willing to place a child in harm's way for a paycheck. Staples insists they

are well in the minority. But it only takes one to ruin the efforts of even the most experienced studio teacher. "We are hired to protect the children from anyone who would dare to go so far as to compromise a minor's safety," Staples says firmly. "I taught a little girl years ago who is now a parent herself. She brought her child up to work on a movie in upstate California. My student kept asking where the studio teacher was and they kept insisting someone was on the way. Another parent on the show allowed her child to be placed in a 20-foot wooden tower with a live bear! A complaint was filed after the fact and the production was fined \$50,000 for their actions. No one was hurt. But the moral of the story is that without a studio teacher there to call the local, safety was compromised on the set."

Over the years, California has certified more than 900 studio teachers. But through attrition, only about one-tenth of that number still reside in-state and call studio teaching their careers. Film and TV is not the only destination for the 110 members in Local 884: studio teachers work on recording sessions, operas, ballets, circuses, still photography, modeling, and rock n' roll tours. Their purviews on the set cover infants 15 days of age up to a child's 16th birthday. Studio teachers will go to great financial and political lengths to guard their ability to educate and care for minors in the industry. Local 884 spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in media and political advertising to mount a court challenge threatening their two-credential requirement.

"We sued the California Labor Commissioner under Governor Wilson's administration because they were allow-

ing single-credentialed people to work as studio teachers,” Businger explains. “Multiple and secondary level credentials allow someone to teach K-12. But the reality in any school district is that the multiple credential is for the elementary level, and the single credential is for secondary grades. Wilson was shortchanging our high school kids [some of whom take advance AP honors classes in chemistry, trigonometry, calculus, language studies, etc.] by giving them only elementary level teachers. We had former students like Kirsten Dunst, Fred Savage, and Tatyana Ali all come to testify on our behalf, and, ultimately, a state-appointed panel of experts agreed with our position.”

Over the years, Local 884 has worked closely with SAG to monitor child labor violations on movie sets. SAG’s rules for minors (which are more restrictive than most state laws) were taken from Local 884’s Blue Book. When things go wrong, as with the industry’s most famous incident involving minors, *The Twilight Zone*, it’s usu-

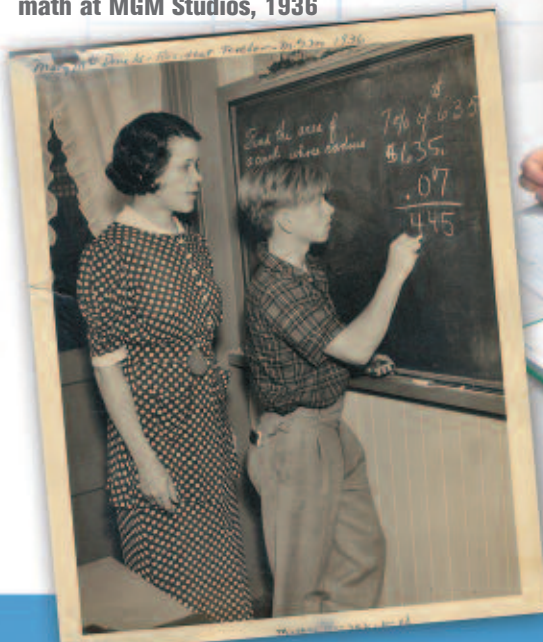
ally because protocols have been subverted to save time and money. “*The Twilight Zone* was shot in three episodes,” Businger recalls “They had studio teachers the week before for another episode. But on the night of the accident, the company went downtown and hired non-professional kids off the street, whom they paid in cash.” “They smuggled them onto the set, and never bothered to hire a studio teacher,” Staples adds. “Despite all the horrible consequences, the only thing the production was held accountable for was failing to observe child labor safety.”

Local 884’s Blue Book contains reprints of more than 35 Safety Bulletins issued by the Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee, which consists of representatives from all the major industry unions and

guilds, as well as AMPTP companies. They include issues on firearm safety, seat belts and harnesses, exotic venomous reptiles, hot air balloons, motorcycles, water hazards, and poisonous plants. The recent practice of using children to perform stunts has spurred Local 884 members (and all IATSE crews) to keep an extra-watchful eye out for safety violations with minors.

Ironically, it’s often a lack of basic safety measures that accounts for most of the injuries IATSE medics see on location. One of Local 767’s most experienced first aid workers is president Howard Keys, a former ambulance driver who has carried an advanced first aid card since he was 11 years old.

Mary McDonald checks Mickey Rooney's math at MGM Studios, 1936



Angus Jones and Studio Teacher, Adria Later, Local 884, in Later's Warner Bros. classroom



Local 884 member Frances Whitfield on location for a commercial with Adam Wade, Jr. California, circa early 1960's.



Local 884 studio teacher Margaret Cobb in her Paramount Pictures school room with the cast of "My Six Loves", May 1962

Keys worked with L.A. County Sheriff's mountain rescue unit before joining IATSE in 1980. He's treated everything from a hangnail to a gunshot wound (inflicted by rival gang-bangers near the set of *China Beach*). He once sent Arnold Schwarzenegger to the hospital for a wound he suffered on *Commando* (Arnold was back on the set in ninety minutes thanks to Keys' efficient prep work), and saved the life of an actress on an MOW (she was about to take a nap in a trailer leaking carbon monoxide).

Watching Keys on the night set of *Rest Stop*, a low-budget horror film shot in a cluster of oak-drenched hills 40 miles north of downtown Los Angeles, illustrates his intense preparation. He dons a bright yellow fire retardant jacket in advance of an explosion effects shot. He lifts a large backpack that carries everything from an automatic defibrillator and BVM resuscitator to an assortment of creams and dressings needed to treat burn victims. He has cervical collars, and backboards to immobilize a spine injury, as well as a kit to clean up blood spills. (Local 767 medics are the only ones on a movie set trained in the recent changes governing blood-borne pathogen standards.)

As Keys hikes up to within 15 feet of a small building, veteran special effects coordinator Dennis Dion begins a safety meeting for cast and crew. Dion will set off explosive charges inside the building, while a female stunt double leaps from the roof and scampers up a nearby trail. A 400-gallon water truck stands by in case the explosion ignites the nearby trees, which Dion says is unlikely given the heavy rains in the area. Keys quietly takes the stunt double aside and arranges a visual cue in the event she has a minor injury that Keys would treat out of site of the crew. "It's a courtesy I do on every show," Keys says. "Stunt people don't like to broadcast an injury no matter how minor."

Moments later, the set is rocked by two deafening explosions. Other than some debris that falls from the roof, the shot goes off without a hitch. As the crew bursts into spontaneous applause, Keys removes his safety helmet, and heads back to his medic's wagon. Dennis Dion, still charged with adrenaline, walks over. "These Local 767 guys are like my right hand," he says excitedly. "In thirty years, I've never had a bad medic. And if someone does get hurt, these guys run the set."

Experience has shown that stunt and effects coordinators who keep Local 767 medics involved have the lowest rate of accidents on the set. Dennis Dion hasn't had a serious mishap in three decades of working with explosives. Terry Leonard insisted on three to four safety talks per night on *The Fast and the Furious 3*, making sure to check with Howard Keys on every stunt. "You rarely see any injuries from even the most complex or dangerous stunts or special effects," Keys explains, "because of the extra time and precautions that are taken."

Some of the challenges facing IATSE first aid workers come from their own union brothers and sisters, who are reluctant to report their injuries. Reporting all injuries, no matter how slight, has become an imperative given the current climate of worker's comp claims. "People get hurt Friday night when they're rushing to wrap," Keys explains, "and then come in Monday morning saying they injured their backs. Worker's comp looks at that and says: 'How do we know they didn't get hurt when they went skiing over the weekend?' If it takes five minutes to dress a cut, or treat a sprained ankle, then it takes five minutes. Not reporting that injury and continuing to work will

extend the life and potential of the injury, which ends up hurting the production and the individual's health."

Hesitating to report an injury makes even less sense when you consider the level of medical quality Local 767 puts out in the field. How many other IATSE locals can boast that its members literally save lives? Medic Tim Lamprose was working on *The X-Files*, in July 2000, when a speed rail pipe hit a high-voltage power line, killing one crewmember and trapping five others on scaffolding 15-feet above the ground. With a 4,800-volt charge surging around the workers, Lamprose helped to create a safe zone that would get the men to the ground without being electrocuted. Thomas Krueger, whose Local 767 credits range from *Pearl Harbor* to *In Her Shoes*, was an army medic in Baghdad when he was injured by an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) while out on patrol. An estimated 500-lb. bomb hit the fourth vehicle in the convoy, breaking both of Krueger's feet and ankles, and ripping him with shrapnel. After he regained consciousness, Krueger crawled over to a wounded soldier, installed an airway, and began CPR. He then crawled to another soldier and gave him morphine. The wounded Krueger continued to direct arriving rescue units while he was being loaded into a Medevac helicopter. Krueger was honored with an IATSE gold card in December 2005. One month later he rejoined his platoon in Fort Bliss, Texas, where he received a Bronze Star.

IATSE studio teachers and first aid employees act like heroes everyday, albeit absent the wartime dramatics of a Thomas Krueger. Just ask child stars Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, who

worked with Adria Later from infancy until they were 8 years old on the TV series *Full House*. Later, who became a confidante and close friend, helped the children weather a difficult divorce at home. In April, the twins attended Later's wedding. Likewise for Brooke Shields, who will never forget the months spent reading lesson plans, in waist-deep tropical water, on *The Blue Lagoon*. Shield's mother demanded that Polly Businger be her daughter's studio teacher, despite the distant and remote location.

David Hollander will always remember the skill and compassion of Wesley Staples, who was Hollander's studio teacher on *Call To Glory* when the actor's brother was killed in a car crash. Jaimie Alexander might never have survived her first starring role in *Rest Stop* if not for Howard Keys nursing her through a series of cuts, scrapes, bruises and pains. When Local 44 propmaker/construction coordinator Michael Casebolt begins a new job, he might very well recall the day at CBS Studio Center when he nearly cut off his hand. Casebolt was "pale and bleeding profusely" when Local 767 medic Rana Platz-Petersen came to his aid. This was 1978, before the 911 system was active; Petersen not only stopped the bleeding, but she arranged for an ambulance, and a hand specialist to be waiting on-call at the hospital.

The pride these men and women feel in helping their union brethren is summed up by thirty-year first aid veteran Howard Keys, barely a third of the way through his all-night call in Placerita Canyon: "When *Crash* won the Oscar," Keys says, "I felt like I won the

Oscar, too. The producers weren't required to give me a screen credit but they did. I kept the crew going so the show could be finished on time and on budget. Even though I never looked through the camera, set a light, or pushed a dolly, I made a real contribution to that picture." The medic pauses, squinting into the inky dark night. "Just checking to make sure there are no hidden power lines over where they're setting up that next shot," he says intently. "I'm sure they scouted it out in daylight. But it never hurts to have another set of eyes backing things up."



Howard Keys, President, Local 767, on set of "Rest Stop", Placerita Canyon, CA