



## **Working with Hollywood to Deliver Your Message to Millions**

Written for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
by Karen Brailsford and Andy Goodman



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



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THE GENETIC DISORDER OSTEOGENESIS IMPERFECTA (OI) does not attract a bevy of A-list stars vying to host charity events in its name, nor does it generate much media attention. In fact, there is very little public awareness of OI, a condition that can cause a rib to crack from coughing or a leg to break from simply rolling over in bed. A relatively small number of Americans – somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 – are afflicted with OI, which probably explains its low profile. This lack of attention, however, does not mitigate the fact that for those suffering with OI, every day is filled with seemingly mundane moments that may lead to serious injury.

In 2002, William Bradner, then director of communications and events at the Osteogenesis Imperfecta Foundation (OIF), was charged with raising his organization’s profile. Bradner was also seeking ways to identify those afflicted with OI who were not already listed in OIF’s 9,000-member database. To accomplish both tasks he needed to cast a wide net, publicizing OI to millions so that the tens of thousands with the disorder who were scattered across the U.S. would hear his message. Bradner would find precisely what he was looking for in prime time television.

*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, a reality show airing Sunday nights on ABC, selects a family facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles and rewards them with a top-to-bottom remodel. Each week, host Ty Pennington leads a team of designers, contractors, workmen, and neighbors in a dramatic race against time. The team must completely rebuild an entire house—every room plus the exterior and landscaping—in just seven days. Viewers witness the incredible transformation of the house, and each show ends with an emotional finale showing how the makeover affects the selected family.

Bradner recognized that the program’s inspirational, triumph-over-adversity tone would resonate with his target audience, and its format – changing a house to better meet the needs of its occupants – was a perfect fit. He drafted a letter to the show’s producers describing OI and explaining why a profile of a family afflicted with it would be particularly suitable for *Extreme Makeover*. Individuals with OI often experience limited mobility, he wrote. Accidents, surgeries, fractures, even fatigue, can require an OI sufferer to use a wheelchair. Remodeling a home to make it wheelchair accessible would clearly improve the day-to-day lives of a family affected by OI.

*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* did not just remodel a house; the show helped make over the OI Foundation, too.

Bradner mailed his letter and waited patiently for a reply. And then he waited some more. Two years would pass before the show responded. Inundated with thousands of similar letters each week, the producers had filed away Bradner’s pitch for future consideration. In early 2004, *Extreme Makeover* producer Andy Lipson placed a call to Bradner. Did OIF have candidates with dramatic stories that could be featured on the program? The foundation immediately polled its members and submitted the case histories of five such families. The show’s producers selected the heart-wrenching story of the Burns family of Garden Grove, California.

Benjamin Burns appeared to be healthy when he was born in 1997, but signs of the disorder began to surface after six months. When his sister grabbed Benjamin to prevent him from falling, she accidentally fractured his arm. Over the next several weeks, Benjamin’s parents, Gerald and Ellen Burns, had to take him to the hospital repeatedly due to injuries incurred from routine tasks.

Doctors determined that the boy’s arm had been re-injured and that he had a fractured skull. The hospital contacted Child Protective Services, the Burnses were accused of child abuse, and for a time they lost custody of their son. Only after Benjamin was diagnosed with OI was he returned to the parents who had loved him and cared for him all along. By age seven, Benjamin was so fearful of causing a fracture he walked on his knees.

OIF worked closely with *Extreme Makeover*, providing an expert with OI, architect Karen Braitmayer, who directed the necessary design changes needed for the Burns family home. Braitmayer recommended modifications such as widening all the hallways and walkways to render them wheelchair accessible, and installing a home security and intercom system with interior video cameras so Benjamin could call for help when he needed it.

The episode devoted to Benjamin Burns aired in November 2004 to a prime time audience in the millions. Within minutes of its conclusion, the OIF website was registering dozens of new members. Within days, hundreds of people had sent emails to the foundation requesting information. The number of hits to the site increased by 103% from the previous November, and the number of first time visitors increased by 143%. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* did not just remodel a house; the show helped make over the OIF Foundation, too, giving it broader reach and heightened visibility. And all it took was an eye for opportunity, a lot of patience, and the ability to respond quickly when the phone finally rang.



The Burns family poses with *Extreme Makeover* host Ty Pennington (second from left) in front of their newly remodeled home.

© Photographer/American Broadcasting Companies, Inc.

EVER SINCE TRANSMITTERS FIRST BEGAN sending signals to broadcast systems, ambitious souls have wanted to harness the power of television. Like the Wizard of Oz, television has the ability to transform—to instill courage in the fearful, to enlighten the uninformed, and to give heart to those in need —simply by providing a window to disparate worlds and peoples: Lucy and Ricky’s New York City apartment building, a Muppet-strewn neighborhood called Sesame Street, the chaotic, blood-splattered halls of an ER.

Of course, movies projected onto giant theater screens can also capture the imagination of an audience. Every year, Hollywood dresses up and fetes itself with little gold statues in celebration of this accomplishment. But shortly after the red carpet is rolled up and stored away, do we even remember who won an Oscar? According to Lisa Cho Allen, director of The Media Project, a nonprofit organization devoted to reproductive and sexual health issues, it is more beneficial for nonprofits to target television shows instead of films because “there is greater opportunity for success in that medium.”

Films can take years from inception to final product whereas a television show has a much quicker turn-around. A movie-going experience is usually a one-time, two-hour experience,

whereas a television show is a weekly, even daily, event that can continue to reach and influence its audience for years. And a typical television series requires a constant feeding of ideas and subject matter to sustain it because it airs so frequently. Movies are a one-shot deal. And while the public service announcement is a powerful tool for delivering a message, by virtue of its brevity, it cannot go into much depth.

Those astute enough to recognize the power of television acknowledge that its full potential has yet to be realized. At a time when advertisers are increasingly turning to product placement in movies and television to reach audiences, those who want to draw attention to serious issues are considering similar strategies.

PAGING DR. TUBE

In a 2002 survey of 3500 regular viewers of the NBC medical series *ER* conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), 53% said they learn about important health issues from watching the show. One in seven (14%) talked to their doctors about a medical issue after seeing it on the show. More than one in five (23%) consulted other sources for additional information as a result of watching *ER*.

The 2001 Porter Novelli Healthstyles Survey determined that over half of regular TV drama viewers (viewers who watch two or more times a week) learned about a disease or how to prevent it from TV.

KFF studies indicate that audience awareness about an issue decreases as early as two months later, suggesting that not only is it important to broadcast these critical messages, it is necessary to air them repeatedly for long-term effect.



BETTER THAN THE NEWS?

In the 2002 report, “As Seen On TV: Health Policy Issues in TV’s Medical Dramas,” the Kaiser Family Foundation outlined why entertainment television can be more important than the news in raising public awareness about health policy issues.

- The messages can be more engaging, often playing out in compelling human dramas involving characters the audience cares about.
- Fictional TV shows can make an otherwise dry or abstract discussion of a policy issue seem more “real”—and thereby more powerful—to viewers.
- Instead of bill numbers and budget figures, policy issues can be portrayed through the lives of human beings, often in life or death situations.

If the judges on *American Idol* can influence consumers by casually sipping Coke as they rate contestants’ performances, surely, the thinking goes, actors reciting lines about a disease, or a mentor program, or a human rights issue, can increase public awareness about a given subject. Entertainment education, or “edutainment,” as it is popularly called, is a contemporary way of selling an idea. The purpose is not to get viewers to buy, but to *buy in*: to volunteer, to exercise compassion, or to take better care of themselves and the Earth.

The impact of pro-social messages in television became clear in the 1970s when Fonzie’s decision to get a library card inspired thousands of *Happy Days* viewers to pay a visit to their local libraries. Requests for cards increased by 500%, according to series creator Garry Marshall. Viewers also paid attention when the protagonist of *Maude* struggled with an unwanted pregnancy. In 1988, Dr. Jay Winsten, director of The Harvard Alcohol Project, met with the writers and producers of popular situation comedies and prime-time dramas and asked them to incorporate a brand new concept, the “designated driver,” into upcoming episodes. One year after shows began airing episodes featuring the concept, 67% of adults surveyed nationwide recognized the term. In 1991, “designated driver” debuted as an entry in Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.

Ever since, numerous organizations have attempted to encourage the creative community to incorporate pro-social messages in their

work. But how and where does one begin this process? Hollywood is not some monolithic creature. It is a tightly woven community of industrious, creative and eclectic individuals charged with the dual task of entertaining the masses and making money. The way Hollywood writers and producers reach this goal is, first and foremost, by telling a good story. They usually generate ideas for these stories from three primary sources: personal experiences, news events, and topics of discussion among their peers.

Most writers and producers do not view it as their responsibility to promote a cause, nor do they see television as a marketing tool for public interest organizations. Still, they *are* interested in any information, whether it’s new research or the true story of a person’s experience with a given disease, which can ultimately serve as the catalyst for a story they *do* want to tell. It is possible, in other words, for these two very different worlds to intersect without colliding.

An analysis of the efforts of those organizations that have successfully placed pro-social messages in television shows indicates that this is by no means an easy task. It’s arduous, time-consuming work. And as producer Jonathan Shestack, the cofounder of the nonprofit group Cure Autism Now puts it, “There are more dogs than bones. There are only so many television shows on the air at any given time—but there are plenty of causes, charities, diseases and issues.” So how do nonprofits make it happen? By adhering to the guidelines on pages 8-9.

MAKING THE PSA WORK FOR YOU

The public service announcement can be a powerful tool in drawing attention to public health issues, according to Marisa Nightingale, senior director, Media Programs & Youth Initiatives, of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, but it has its limitations. Nightingale believes that the ideal media strategy involves PSAs as well as working with television writers and producers because:

- With a PSA, you control the content 100 percent, so you can deliver a particular piece of information or encourage a specific behavior.
- Working with the entertainment media is more of an exploration of an issue. “It’s about a longer-term communication between the audience and the TV show,” says Nightingale.
- The best PSA alerts viewers to an organization’s cause—and promptly directs them to a carefully designed website overflowing with facts and figures that explore the issue in a more in-depth fashion. (The National Campaign’s website, [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org), has won numerous awards.)
- You can get more nuanced messaging when you work hand-in-hand with a drama series where you can explore your issue from all kinds of angles over the course of a whole season,” says Nightingale, who has worked with several shows at the WB network, including *Dawson’s Creek*, *One Tree Hill*, *Smallville* and *Gilmore Girls*.

“There are a lot of people here who have a lot of consciousness in terms of wanting to deal with real issues, and [who] know that TV and film are important tools. But we are not in the field of education. It’s about trying to figure how to use issues that are real and have meat, but also make compelling stories.”

–TV director Lesli Linka Glatter

**B**ASED ON OUR RESEARCH, we have identified 14 principles that can help public interest organizations like yours partner more productively with Hollywood’s creative community. Adhering to these principles may not guarantee success, but it can help you avoid the most commonly made mistakes and should increase your chances of achieving positive results.

**1**  
**Build your Rolodex and work it relentlessly.**  
You can’t make your pitch to someone who won’t take your calls, so the first order of business is establishing a network of reliable contacts. (Pages 11-12)

**2**  
**Deliver a strong pitch by keeping the facts hard and the sell soft.** Producers and writers are busy and they aren’t inclined to take advice from outsiders. When the window opens, provide them with the hard information they need to develop or advance a story and let your solid research sell your issue. (Pages 13-14)

**3**  
**Immerse yourself in the Hollywood community.**  
If you want to be treated like an insider, you have to learn the language as well as the lay of the land. Permanent residency isn’t required, but it can make the difference. (Pages 15-16)

**4**  
**Become an indispensable research assistant.**  
When writers and producers view you as a go-to source for information on a given issue, your opportunities to shape story lines and suggest new ones will increase. (Pages 17-19)

**5**  
**Let the writers do the writing.**  
Influencing story lines and program content is analogous to diplomacy. Your role is to provide information and, when appropriate, to suggest ways it may be used that will fit the program and its characters. Leave the creative implementation to the creative types. (Pages 20-23)

**6**  
**Even when they say yes, be careful.**  
Programs that feature your issue may do so in ways that do more harm than good, so constant vigilance is required even after they say yes. (Page 24)

**7**  
**Look beyond the Nielsen Top 20.**  
Daytime television serials and reality programs can both be fertile territory for planting your story lines. (Pages 25-28)

**8**  
**Keep it light to shine a light.**  
Serious issues are not confined to dramas; situation comedies can also find ways to tell your story, even when the potential consequences are far from amusing. (Pages 29-30)

**9**  
**Partner with proven experts in entertainment outreach.** Organizations are already in place to help non-profits connect with the Hollywood creative community. (Pages 31-33)

**10**  
**Aim high by approaching networks, not just specific shows.** One connection can lead to myriad on-air hits when you make the connection at the network level. (Pages 34-35)

**11**  
**Capitalize on network initiatives already in play.**  
Sometimes the mountain is already coming your way. You just have to keep your eyes open. (Pages 36-37)

**12**  
**Make the most of storylines that touch on your issue.**  
When opportunity finally knocks, you can do more than send out a press release. (Pages 38-40)

**13**  
**Put a very recognizable face on your cause.**  
Celebrity spokespersons can be a double-edged sword, but if you know how to handle them, those famous faces can help you cut through the clutter to get your message across to millions. (Pages 41-43)

**14**  
**Reward the entertainment community.**  
Awards ceremonies in Hollywood are about as common as waiters-with-head-shots, but when it comes to attracting local attention to your cause, they still do the job. (Page 44)





11

[PRINCIPLE 1] BUILD YOUR ROLODEX AND WORK IT RELENTLESSLY



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OLLYWOOD IS A TOWN OF RELATIONSHIPS, where a studio head gets her start working in the mailroom of a talent agency thanks to the largesse of a family friend, and a television writer lands gig after gig, season after season, due to the alliances he has struck. Understanding these kinds of I'll-scratch-your-back relationships is essential for any nonprofit seeking to form partnerships with Hollywood insiders to promote its cause in storylines.

Three years ago, Larry Bloustein, director of the entertainment group for the American Heart Association (AHA), began strategizing on ways to promote his “Go Red for Women” campaign. The campaign’s goal is to alert Americans that heart disease is the number-one killer of women. Bloustein started by introducing himself to staffers at the cable channel SOAPnet, and by compiling a comprehensive list of people who worked at the nine daytime dramas. The next step: “I attempted to buy their love,” he says, only half-jokingly, by sending them AHA pins, bracelets, and t-shirts, and copies of *The No-Fad Diet*, the group’s cookbook. “Sometimes they disregarded everything I sent,” recalls Bloustein. “At first you’re just another piece of mail

in a huge pile. But eventually they begin to say, ‘Oh, here’s another something from Larry Bloustein.’ Then it’s ‘Oh, it’s a cookbook.’ Then, ‘He told me he watched our show and that he liked a particular episode.’ After a while, you sort of break down the barriers that exist between total strangers.”

Eventually, Bloustein began receiving email responses to his releases and packages: “Thanks for the cookbook. Can’t wait to go home and use it.” In the next stage of his solicitation, Bloustein became more direct, asking, “Is there any way we could do a little more together? I wish you guys would take more of our messages, find them dramatically interesting, and then include them in your work. And by the way, if you *do*, here are the doctors and patients and case histories



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–Larry Bloustein, American Heart Association



that might inform that. I want to be the open door to you and what you need.” He also made it a point to schedule lunches with publicists, whether in Los Angeles, where he is based, or when visiting New York. “I work those relationships the way a guy who sells insurance would work relationships!”

It took a few years, but Bloustein’s efforts began to pay off. Go Red for Women posters appeared in a scene on the NBC daytime drama, *Passions*, in 2005. The setting was a restaurant hosting a promotional event for AHA. The show’s costume designer also dressed most of the women in the scene in red, in keeping with the organization’s theme.

Bloustein admits he wishes the daytime drama had included a tagline at the end of the episode directing viewers to AHA’s website, but he is grateful nonetheless for the exposure. “It was good for *Passions*. It was good for us.”

Bloustein generated another hit after he sent Andrea McKinnon, publicist for NBC’s *Days of Our Lives*, a release alerting her to the special pins that had been created to mark the campaign. She immediately took the pins to the show’s writers because she knew the soap was working on a relevant scene: After a character fakes a heart attack, her doctor lectures her about the prevalence of heart disease among women and recommends diet and exercise tips. “Can we just place this pin on the doctor’s lab coat?” McKinnon asked the writers, carefully pointing out to them, “We don’t have to change the script.” The writers readily agreed and the scene aired in March of 2006 with the pin in place.

The reason why McKinnon found it easy to approach her show’s writers is because the plug for AHA was a simple one to make—and because of her relationship with Bloustein. “We’re very bombarded,” McKinnon explains. “Every charity has a legitimate cause, but we can’t become a public service announcement for everyone who comes our way,” she adds. Knowing Bloustein made all the difference in the world when it came to her receptivity.

“I’d love to say in five years I’ve melted all the walls and everybody takes my call, but it’s not true,” says Bloustein. “The staffs constantly change, shows get canceled, and the networks have different needs. But you just keep working it. You keep spinning that Rolodex.”

AFTER A YEAR OF LOGGING monthly phone calls to the CBS legal drama, *Judging Amy*, Robin Smalley, the director of The Media Project, a nonpartisan nonprofit specializing in reproductive and sexual health issues, was finally granted a meeting with the executive producer and several writers. She began the hour-long meeting by giving a brief synopsis of her organization’s efforts. Then she launched into a detailed presentation explaining how various characters on the *Judging Amy* might react to different sexuality issues and how these topics might come up naturally in storylines on the show. During a seven-year stint with The Media Project (before leaving in 2004), Smalley had become familiar with every character on every television show that might conceivably feature her issue. Not long into her meeting with *Judging Amy*, she sensed that she had impressed her audience. “It’s just like performing. You know when your audience is interested,” she says.

Afterwards, Smalley followed up by steadily emailing the writers relevant newspaper clippings and information. A few months later, she received a script to review for fact-checking purposes. The episode focused on Tyne Daly’s character. One of the character’s former clients, a prodigy who had left the foster care system and excelled in college, returns to tell her mentor



Amy Brenneman and Tyne Daly from *Judging Amy*



she is pregnant. When Daly asks how such a smart girl could have let this happen, the young woman begins to recount the old wives’ tales her boyfriend had told her. Among them: since he’s a swimmer, he is constantly immersed in chlorine, which kills sperm – so she doesn’t have to worry about contraception.

After researching sex education in public schools, Daly decides to hold a class in her own home. The episode managed to weave in legislative issues and touched on all the subjects and statistics Smalley had discussed in her meeting with the writers. The collaboration was so successful, the writers continued to send her scripts to review and frequently called her for the latest research.

Smalley also cemented a relationship with the staff of the teen drama *Dawson’s Creek* by impressing them with a dynamic presentation. In her meeting with the relatively young writers she tested their knowledge of sexual health issues by quizzing them about show characters. Sample question: If Pacey slept with one girl three times and another girl just once, and did not use protection two out of three times, what is the percentage of chance he would contract a sexually-transmitted disease? Winners walked away with condoms, candy or toys as prizes.

Smalley’s pitches were successful because she adhered to the following guidelines:

- She did not waste her words or the writers’ time.
- She made it very clear that she was not out to preach or tell them how to do their job.
- She positioned her visits as “intended to present the latest research only”; she did not have an agenda.
- She knew the show’s characters and their motivations.
- She was entertaining and did not talk like an academic.

“There’s no point in going in and talking to people if you haven’t done your homework,” says Smalley. “It’s knowing the business and knowing how to talk to people in a way they can respond to.”

IF YOU WANT TO BE TREATED like a Hollywood insider, you have to learn the language as well as the lay of the land. Permanent residency isn’t required, but it can make the difference.

**Know what shows are currently on the air or in the pipeline.**

Lisa Cho Allen, The Media Project’s current director, reads periodicals like *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter* to gain information about writers, television shows and projects. Julie Lofton, head of Animal Content in Entertainment, is already consulting with the writer of a pilot that may or may not secure a spot on next season’s lineup. Lofton believes that when a series is just starting out, it is considerably less structured and the writers are more receptive to input from outside sources. Today many nonprofits want to target the phenomenally successful *Grey’s Anatomy*, she notes. But what if a nonprofit had managed to establish a relationship with the show’s writers in its early stages?

**Know which shows might cover—and have already covered—your issue.**

It helps to streamline your approach. *ER*, *House*, and *Grey’s Anatomy* all feature health-related issues, but a nonprofit hoping to target them should know from the outset if a show has already covered its particular subject area in an episode. “Cause fatigue” is very real in Hollywood. Consider if there may be a different angle to explore. The nonprofit should also have an intimate knowledge of the show’s characters and any concerns they might have.

**Set up camp among the campers.**

It is next to impossible to make inroads in Hollywood without actually having a presence there. By all accounts, you simply cannot make the necessarily connections by flying into town once a year for a round of lunches and drinks. Sharon Carothers, the Washington, D.C.-based American Legacy Foundation’s vice president for Strategic Partnering, recently relocated to Los Angeles to build the relationships that can help her carry out the group’s mandate of tobacco prevention among youth.

“You’ve got to go to the frontline people, not to the people sitting safely in the Pentagon.”

–Sonny Fox, Population Communications International

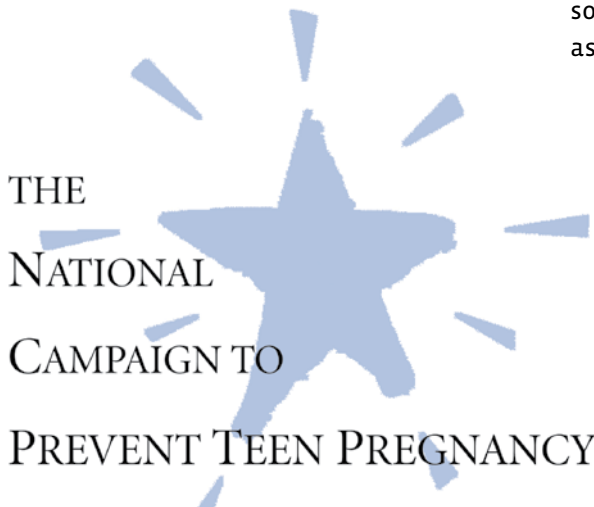


**Tap a Hollywood vet to make the approach.**

To understand the industry, it helps to have a background in entertainment. Many nonprofits that successfully collaborate with Hollywood writers and producers are headed by entertainment industry vets: Robin Smalley, the former head of The Media Project (who now serves as international director of Mothers2Mothers, a program serving HIV-positive women in South Africa), is a former television writer and director. Animal Content in Entertainment’s Julie Lofton was recruited by the president of the Humane Society of the United States after Lofton won the organization’s Genesis Award for her documentary on pet overpopulation, *Best Friend Forgotten*, in 2005. While heading up public relations for MTM, Mary Tyler Moore’s production company, which produced *St. Elsewhere* and *Hill Street Blues*, the American Heart Association’s Larry Bloustein worked closely with veteran TV producer Steven Bochco. The Environmental Media Association’s Debra Levin honed her story-pitching skills as a Hollywood producer.

**Make nice.**

Hollywood writers and executives will definitely not want to talk to you if you’re ranting and raving. “Our posture has always been carrot not stick,” says Marisa Nightingale of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. “We do not media bash. I would be pretty upset if someone told me what a terrible job I was doing and then the next day asked, ‘Oh, will you help me?’ ”



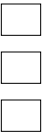
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ONPROFITS THAT SUCCESSFULLY COLLABORATE with Hollywood understand that they are valued most for their knowledge and ability to deliver on demand. (To paraphrase a former President: ask not what Hollywood can do for you....) Even when writers already have a sense of the story they want to tell, nonprofits can find inventive ways to collaborate with them. When writers on the popular NBC crime show *Law & Order: SVU* were constructing a storyline about a rape victim with Down syndrome, they knew to contact Gail Williamson, executive director of the Down Syndrome Association of Los Angeles. Over the years, Williamson had repeatedly reached out to members of the Hollywood community—to comment on previously aired depictions and to offer research information for upcoming shows—and was widely recognized as the go-to person on the subject. Williamson arranged

for the episode’s writer to visit a Down syndrome adult day program. Accompanied by Williamson herself, the writer met everyone – from the bus driver to the job coordinator at the program – whom a person with Down syndrome would encounter in her daily life.

And when Williamson sent her son, Blair, an actor with Down syndrome, to consult with writers on the CBS legal drama, *The Guardian*, they incorporated some of his comments into the script. Towards the end of the interview, the writers asked Blair, “What’s it like to have Down syndrome?” He replied, “It sucks. I want to drive a car; I want to go to college; I want to get married.” In the 2004 episode, the character explains at one point, “I want to drive a car; I want to have a girlfriend; I want to take care of babies.’ ”

Williamson is not content to only lobby current television shows. Concerned that a whole generation was not going to be sensitized to Down syndrome—there are currently no series on the air featuring an actor with it—Williamson launched a campaign last year to get



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Warner Bros. to release *Life Goes On* on DVD. The popular series starring Chris Burke (who has Down syndrome) in the role of “Corky,” went off the air in 1993. After she collected 1,000 letters, Warner Bros. consented. (Williamson is currently collecting stories of real people with Down syndrome to be featured on a new website.) Thanks in part to her efforts, portrayals of those with Down syndrome have grown more nuanced over the years. Previously, they were depicted as either “pitiful” or “inspirational.” Now, Williamson observes, they are much more “true to life,” or “middle-of-the-road.”

Other nonprofits have also made themselves indispensable to writers in numerous ways:

## By connecting shows to people with dramatic true stories

When the producers of *Girlfriends* were crafting a three-episode story arc centered on a woman who had contracted HIV from her husband, they called upon Robin Smalley of The Media Project to assemble a panel of real-life women infected with the virus. “We sat there for about three hours with the cast and the writers,” Smalley recalls. “Everyone was just crying and laughing.” While working with the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, Lisa Cho Allen frequently held informational briefings for writers. *Judging Amy* writer Paul Guyot was so moved by a story told by one teenager at one of these briefings that he created a character based on the teen. Similarly, writers for the ABC daytime drama *All My Children* were inspired to produce a storyline on the drug Ecstasy, after attending a briefing Allen coordinated. “Even if they don’t go out and write a script, a writer will never look at that particular issue in the same way,” Allen explains. “Their sensitivity will be markedly different. This is a unique way of sharing a life experience with someone to convey important health information. And that gets translated to the writer.”

### By creating websites

Most writers conduct research on the Internet. When writers explained they needed access to immediate information late at night and on weekends because they worked irregular hours, the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign created Drugstory.org. The website provides contact information for experts on various topics ranging from methamphetamines to international drug trafficking, personal histories of persons affected by drug use, and statistics. A credible, well-researched site like Drugstory.org is extremely helpful to writers who would otherwise have to sift through thousands of hits from a typical Google search.

### By convening conferences

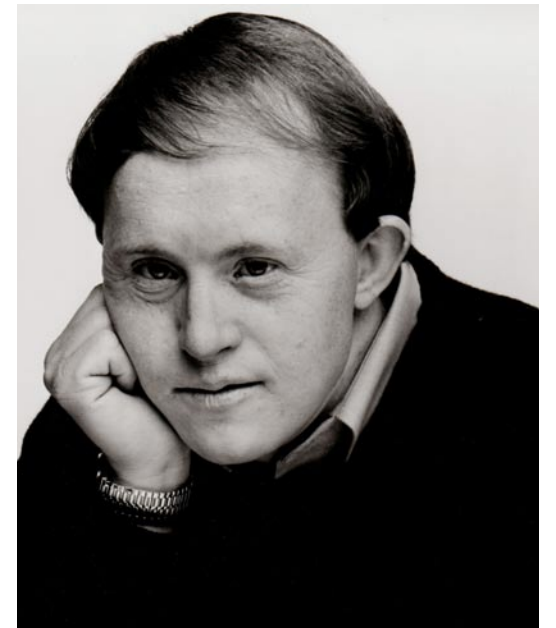
Nickelodeon executives were already sold on the idea of creating a show with a little girl in the lead, but *Dora the Explorer* did not truly take shape until Nick Jr.'s executive vice president, Brown Johnson, attended a conference sponsored by Children Now. The Oakland, California based children's advocacy group convincingly conveyed the lack of representation of Latinos in the media and in children's television. Nickelodeon jumped at the chance to fill that void by making Dora a Latina. Dora debuted in August of 2000 and quickly became the number 1 show for children ages 2 to 5.

**By providing ancillary materials**

In need of stock footage of a “canned hunt” – a sickening scenario in which an animal is drugged and then released to make her easier prey for hunters – *CSI* writers turned to Animal Content in Entertainment. “We’re making us more of a resource than an outright lobbying group,” explains the group’s director, Julie Lofton, who was able to provide the footage the program needed.

**By delivering accurate information on demand**

Producers on ABC's short-lived *Geena Davis vehicle, Commander In Chief*, wanted to show a photograph of a real-life woman with Down syndrome to represent a mentally disabled woman on death row whom they were writing about. Gail Williamson of the Down Syndrome Association of Los Angeles understood why: a person with Down has become visual shorthand for disability. "You see that face and you just know," she says. But when Williamson quickly polled experts in her community, she discovered that, just as she had suspected, no one with Down syndrome had ever been convicted of a violent crime. Respecting the irrefutable evidence Williamson had presented, the writers opted not to use the Down syndrome woman's image.



Chris Burke, who portrayed Corky in *Life Goes On*



W

OULD YOU EVER CONSIDER making lyric suggestions to Paul McCartney or telling Christo to wrap the houses in your neighborhood? Hollywood writers and producers may go into offices each day and look just like us (except in nicer clothes and more expensive cars), but they still consider themselves *artists*. Instead of creating songs or paintings, they are rendering stories, and the pride they feel in their acts of creation is just as fierce.

As the executive producer of *Law & Order: SVU*, Neal Baer is always searching for riveting stories. Due to the nature of the show’s “ripped from the headlines” mandate, he and his staff of writers regularly scour the news for real-life issues that can become the basis of a storyline on the crime show. If there were a place where a nonprofit could successfully mesh with a particular

show, you would think it would be there.

Think again. “I’m not a conduit for nonprofits’ messages,” Baer says emphatically. “I think it’s a very slippery slope to get in bed with nonprofits to get their messages across. I have truly no interest in their messages. Now, that doesn’t mean I’m not interested in the research. Nor does it mean I’m not interested in putting very controversial and political issues on my show, because I am.”

During his six years with *SVU*, Baer has covered topical issues ranging from childhood obesity to abortion to sexually transmitted diseases. A pediatrician who previously worked as a producer on *ER* for seven years, he co-chairs the advisory board of Hollywood, Health & Society, which provides experts and research for writers. “I think it’s okay to advocate for good health because I don’t think that’s a political issue,” he says.

Even though writers seek autonomy in crafting the stories they want to tell, they want to get it right. “We use the most up-to-date data we can find,” says Baer. For this, he



Law & Order: SVU executive producer Neal Baer

frequently turns to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Kaiser Family Foundation. KFF is open about its advocacy: “Just like Coca-Cola may try to get their Coke brand into a show, we’re trying to get a public health message into a show,” Tina Hoff, vice-president and director of entertainment media partnerships at KFF told the *Hollywood Reporter* last year. “It really is a form of pro-social product placement. Part of the reason I think it works is we really help writers come up with stories that are first and foremost compelling for their audiences.”

Baer becomes excited when discussing recent research that comes across his desk at *SVU*: statistics reveal that while first trimester abortions are decreasing, *second* trimester abortions are on the rise. Another study finds that 50 percent of African-American and Latino children in California drink soft drinks, compared to 32 percent of Caucasian children. This interesting fact emerges at a time when there is an enormous push to heighten public awareness about childhood obesity, and is making its way into a storyline on *SVU*. Note that it was the research, and not an advocate directly lobbying for a specific storyline about a child with obesity, that got Baer’s attention. “It doesn’t work very well for us to try to be the writer,” observes KFF’s Tina Hoff. “We want to give ideas that spark stories.”

If an advocacy group had simply pleaded with Baer to write an episode on this topic or any other, for that matter, it probably would never have happened. “I think writers tend to be a very willful sort,” says Jeff Greenstein, who has written for *Friends* and *Will & Grace*. “They’re allergic to anything that feels like propaganda.” *West Wing* executive producer Lawrence O’Donnell

concurs: “If you wake up and say, ‘I want to write a show that makes a statement,’ I guarantee you that will be a bad show. It’s just a bad place to start writing. What everybody in television should be trying to do is entertain.”

What writers do not want is for their characters to sound as if they are on a soapbox spewing research statistics and information, or as if the writers themselves are speaking through the characters. The characters must always sound like themselves. When *Will & Grace* created the character of an environmentalist, at the urging of the Environmental Media Association, which places environmental messages in television and film, the group offered up ideas about the character’s duties. The most persuasive environmental messages in the show, however, were more subtle: Debra Messing’s character, Grace, takes along a mesh bag when she goes shopping, or tosses an aluminum can into a bin designated for recycling in her apartment.

For some writers, the most effective way to raise awareness about an issue is not to write it into the dialogue, but to simply allow certain characters to exist. “I’ve always said that *Will & Grace* waved the flag of equality and homosexuality by its very existence,” says Greenstein. The show, which concluded an eight-year run in May of 2006, depicts gay men living relatively unencumbered by prejudice or narrow-mindedness. When the gay marriage issue surfaced in



Slutkin laughs as he recalls conversations he had with writer Lisa Zwerling detailing the possibilities for the storyline, and the search for the actress to play opposite Phifer: “Its

23

111

–William E. Duke, Entertainment & Health Group

M

AY G. KENNEDY, a former communications analyst with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and an associate professor in the public health program at Virginia Commonwealth University Medical School, worked on several studies of the impact of health storylines on viewers with Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S). A program at the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California, HH&S provides television writers with accurate information for health storylines. “You have to lean like Ginger Rogers, backwards in heels,” when doing business in Hollywood, Kennedy observes. “They control the content. If the ratings go down they might change something you’ve discussed to be more dramatic, and it may distort the health message. And you really don’t have veto power, or any say, really, in what actually comes out of that character’s mouth.”

Or even as to how a disease might be depicted. The American Cancer Society (ACS) has worked extensively with Hollywood writers. Jane Cohen, ACS’ strategic director of Marketing Communications, takes issue with how cancer patients are portrayed on television because writers frequently want to depict them doubled over in pain. In reality, pain control has reached a new level of effectiveness, she says. In such a scenario, the nonprofit and the writer can be at odds. The writer wants the more visual and dramatic rendition, but ACS recognizes how these scenes could frighten cancer patients needlessly. In these cases, ACS gently attempts to dissuade the writers from their stance by presenting them with irrefutable facts.

On occasion a nonprofit’s purpose can be diametrically opposed to that of a television show. For example, after one reality show approached ACS about a potential candidate for an episode, it became clear that the series was less interested in helping other cancer patients or aiding the public in understanding the reality of cancer, and more interested in exploiting them for storylines. The tip-off for Cohen is when a show outlines the specifics of the candidate they are seeking—age, race, kind of cancer. They already know the story they want to tell and the patient is an afterthought. “They have their needs and we have ours,” says ACS’ director of Media Relations, David Sampson. “And when the two can work together it’s a wonderful thing. There are times, however, when the producers and the writers have a message they want to send out and we say, ‘That’s not the truth. Because you can actually do more harm than good.’”

Even so, Sampson still believes in being flexible and always looking at the big picture. A few years ago, a producer for the Fox family comedy *Malcolm in the Middle* approached the organization for a PSA it could run at the end of an episode. The show centered on the youngest son’s smoking addiction and his attempts to quit. “A lot of people would’ve said, ‘A kid smoking, we don’t want to show that.’ But we thought this is an opportunity and this is the audience we want to reach,” says Sampson. The group let the show premiere a brand new PSA. After it ran, ACS logged numerous calls to its hotline. “We hope it encouraged people to get their loved ones to consider making a plan and quitting,” he adds.

W

HILE MOST NONPROFITS focus their efforts on prime time programs, daytime television serials and reality shows can be surprisingly fertile territory for planting your story lines.

**Opportunities in Daytime: The Early Bird Gets the Plug**

Viewers of daytime dramas are by definition an extremely loyal and devoted audience. They develop an intense bond with the characters they watch because these compelling fictional beings come into their homes five days a week and become a part of their daily lives. They also comprise a large part of the population—some 38 million Americans regularly watch daytime dramas.

Every fall The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society sponsors Light The Night evening walks to increase awareness of blood cancers and to raise funds for cures. Neighborhood streets across the country are awash in a sea of participants carrying illuminated balloons—red for supporters and white for survivors. The walk creates the kind of moving, visual event that television writers like to dramatize and viewers like to watch.

In 2002 the Society teamed up with the daytime drama, *Days of Our Lives*, to incorporate an onscreen walk, led by one of *Days*’ characters, Abby Deveraux, who was battling the disease. Scott Lansky, a publicist working with one of the show’s corporate sponsors, Mrs. Field’s

Cookies, initiated the collaboration. The partnership was a huge success, according to Andrew Phillips, the Society’s national director for Corporate Development. He estimates the episode generated the equivalent of over \$6 million in media time, and markets such as Los Angeles and San Diego, where cast members made appearances, saw a significant increase in donations to the organization.

The episode marked the start of an ongoing partnership between the daytime drama and the nonprofit. *Days of Our Lives* cast and crew continue to participate in walks around the country. And in celebration of the show’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2005, *Days of Our Lives* once again featured a Light The Night walk in its storyline, as the leukemia



Ashley Benson, Rachel Melvin, and Darin Brooks from *Days of Our Lives*



NOT JUST ABOUT SOAP

The three sources from which regular daytime drama viewers report they most often learned something about diseases or how to prevent them:

- Television (88%)
- Newspapers/Magazines (81%)
- Family/Friends/Doctors/Nurses/Others (74%)

Source: “Audience analysis research for developing entertainment-education outreach: Soap opera audiences and health information.” W.E. Pollard and Vicki Beck, 2001. Paper presented at the American Public Health Association.

survivor character solicited sponsors and participants for a second outing. Phillips is aware he has hit the jackpot when it comes to generating attention for his organization.

Such opportunities are hard to come by but not altogether impossible. In 2001 Bradley Bell, executive producer of the CBS daytime drama *The Bold & the Beautiful* was so moved by the numerous news stories he read chronicling the global AIDS epidemic, he wanted to weave the critical health issue into a storyline. The episode that he crafted would have a profound effect on viewers, show talent and crew alike.

In Bell’s story, one of the show’s principal female characters, Kristen, falls in love with Tony, a fashion designer, and they plan to marry. After Tony’s former lover commits suicide, he discovers that she had been despondent over a positive AIDS diagnosis. Tony struggles with getting tested himself and ultimately learns that he, too, has the virus. Despite his initial withdrawal from his new relationship, Tony and Kristen remain a couple and later adopt a little boy from Africa who was orphaned after his parents died from AIDS. “Through our story we showed how two people could love each other safely,” says executive producer Cynthia Popp.

The show turned to the CDC for help in drafting the storyline. Two behavioral scientists from CDC’s HIV/AIDS program assisted with the script by providing information on HIV testing, partner notification, living with the disease and orphanages in Africa. Statistics about AIDS were incorporated into scenes between Tony and his therapist since this was the most logical place to put information that would otherwise feel excessively technical or “preachy” coming from other characters.

Couples struggling with the same issues wrote in to *The Bold & the Beautiful* in support of the episode, which debuted on August 3, 2001. The greatest response, however, came from callers who telephoned CDC’s national, toll-free hotline number seeking more information on HIV/AIDS. As part of the collaboration with CDC, the network produced a public service announcement (PSA) starring the actor who played Tony. It aired again ten days later, after Tony informed his fiancée of his HIV status on the show. Within a few minutes of the broadcasts,

the phone lines were jammed. Call levels were more than 1,000 calls higher than the next highest levels for those two days. *The Bold & the Beautiful* reaches approximately 4.5 million households in the United States and approximately 350 million people in one hundred countries.

Opportunities in the “Real World”

As the Osteogenesis Imperfecta Foundation (OIF) discovered in its collaboration with *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, another potential area for nonprofits to explore is the burgeoning arena of reality television. Television purists tend to dismiss this growing phenomenon, but within the framework of unscripted dramas are numerous opportunities for nonprofits to deliver their messages.

In casting these shows, producers are able to raise very important social issues. Over the years, the godfather of the reality television genre, MTV’s *Real World*, has depicted a young man with HIV, a woman with an alcohol addiction, and another suffering from depression and an eating disorder. “It’s an opportunity for our audience to learn a tremendous amount without ever being preachy about it,” says executive producer Jonathan Murray, who also created *Starting Over*, a version of the roommates series targeting older women.

To find families to profile on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, casting director Charisse Simonian reviews thousands of unsolicited applications she receives from the general public. But it’s the advocacy group that comes prepared with a great cause and a family in need that immediately gets her attention. Twenty-eight families representing 28 different causes have appeared on each of the show’s three seasons. Over the years, *Extreme Makeover* has worked with the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Disabled American Veterans, The Red Cross, The Kidney Foundation, the National Marrow Donor Program, Larry Bloustein’s American Heart Association, and dozens more.

While your nonprofit’s issue may not be as natural a fit as OIF’s was with *Extreme Makeover*, opportunities still abound in reality television. *Survivor* is closely affiliated with the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation (EGPAF) and annually auctions off props on eBay to raise funds for the organization. The partnership grew out

of host Jeff Probst’s relationship with the group. He was first introduced to EGPAF through its college dance marathons when his mother, who was active in college sororities, introduced him to a professional AIDS speaker in their college outreach program. And when EGPAF asked Probst to become its spokesperson, he jumped at the chance. “I became aware of how incredible an organization they were,” he has said. Mark Burnett, the show’s executive producer and creator, sits on the board of directors of EGPAF and has raised over one million dollars on its behalf.

While shooting the third season of the series, *Survivor: Africa*, in Kenya in 2002, Probst and the show’s producers wanted to devise a way to help the country, which was ravaged by AIDS. The genial host contacted the foundation seeking ideas on how they might possibly work with the local Wamba Clinic, the only hospital serving those living with AIDS in the four countries sharing borders with Kenya. The series decided to incorporate the hospital into a “reward” on the show in which a contestant won a pickup truck loaded with toys, diapers, powered milk and medical supplies in one of the show’s weekly challenges. Probst and the winner drove to the hospital to deliver the goods—on camera no less. “We love that kind of stuff,” says the show’s executive producer Tom Shelly. “We know our audience appreciates moments of kindness and moments of joy.”

From the start, producer Mark Burnett’s other hit show, *The Apprentice*, has worked closely with several charities, including EGPAF, Autism Speaks, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Proceeds from a Jessica Simpson concert at the end of season one were funneled to her pet charity, Operation Smile. *The Apprentice: Martha Stewart* featured two of the home guru’s favorite causes, Safe Horizons, a domestic violence organization, and The Boys and Girls Club of America. Showcasing such groups is a good fit for these reality series. *The Apprentice* is devoted to depicting all aspects of business—and big business donates billions of dollars each year to charity.

“There are very few times in your career you’ll be able to say, I feel very proud to be a television show producer. With so much garbage on television—and a lot of it in reality TV – this is a show I think we’re all very proud of.”

–Tom Forman, former executive producer, *Extreme Makeover*

NONPROFITS MAY OVERLOOK lighter-weight television shows when trying to place serious pro-social messages, but comedy can be an effective vehicle because of its ability to disarm the viewer. A three-episode story arc on UPN’s *Half & Half* in 2006 starred Destiny’s Child band member Michelle Williams in the role of a rival record producer who is HIV positive. When one of the show’s regular cast members pursues a relationship with her, she unexpectedly backs away from the romance. After she divulges her HIV status to him, they spend a chaste Valentine’s Day together. Undeterred by her status, he tells her that they may have to do things differently if they decide to continue their relationship, but that he likes her just the way she is. “Just because you have these heavy issues, it doesn’t mean you cannot laugh. In fact, you should laugh, you should smile,” Williams told a reporter.

These issues-oriented stories, jokingly called “very special episodes” by Hollywood writers, can be harder to pull off in a comedic situation because even when dealing with a serious subject, the laughs must flow. Fast and furiously, too. *Eve*’s Meg DeLoatch always takes great pains to make such episodes as irreverent, honest and funny as possible. One episode showed Eve’s title character being tested for HIV/AIDS —a scenario more prone to controversy than comedy. DeLoatch, however, believes that even in the midst of an uncomfortable or painful incident, humor and lighthearted banter can be appropriate. (To see how DeLoatch handled the scene, read the script excerpt on the following page.)

Another *Eve* episode explored physical disability in a similarly comedic fashion. While preparing for an important business meeting, Eve’s character parks in a disability parking spot. The writer of the episode uses crutches because of polio, and actor Darryl “Chill” Mitchell, who is paralyzed in real life, makes a guest-starring appearance. “Everybody can get very sensitive and very PC. But when a character says or does something that is ignorant, it can be a point of view a lot of people have. The challenge is when you take on an issue like that, there are a lot of eyes on you and a lot of people nervous that you are going to offend someone. The truth of the matter is, I feel that if you haven’t offended somebody, you probably haven’t done your job,” says DeLoatch.



The cast of *Eve*



HOW “EVE” KEEPS IT LIGHT

The following is an excerpt from “Testing, Testing, HIV,” an episode of the series *Eve*, written by Beverly D. Hunter.

ACT ONE, SCENE 4

INT. HEALTH CLINIC/INT. EXAM ROOM - A FEW DAYS LATER (SHELLY, J.T., RITA, JANIE, NICK, DONOVAN, LADONNA, EXTRAS)

THE GANG IS SEATED IN THE WAITING ROOM AREA. NICK IS NERVOUSLY PACING THE FLOOR. THE OTHERS ARE READING PAMPHLETS ON HIV/AIDS.

NICK

I wish they would hurry up so we can get this over with.

DONOVAN

The longer it takes, the more time we have to spend together. At least if I get deported I'll still have my memories.

DONOVAN HOLDS UP A CAMERA.

DONOVAN (CONT'D)

Say HIV!

RITA

That is so inappropriate.

DONOVAN TAKES A PICTURE.

RITA (CONT'D)

Now take it again. My eyes were closed.

RITA POSES. DONOVAN TAKES ANOTHER PICTURES. J.T. SHOWS A BROCHURE TO SHELLY.

J.T.

Check this out. It says here the best way to prevent HIV is abstinence. Just say no.

SHELLY

No.

J.T.

Come on, Shelly, these are the facts. It says right here that HIV is the number one cause of death for African-American women your age.

SHELLY

What?! J.T., I'm already nervous. Stop freaking me out.

J.T. CLOSES THE PAMPHLET. JANIE TURNS TO RITA.

JANIE

My head had been throbbing for a week. Is that a symptom of HIV?

RITA

No, that's a symptom of your weave being too tight.

JANIE

Oh.

FOR NONPROFITS THAT DO NOT HAVE the resources (human or otherwise) to launch a comprehensive entertainment outreach program, groups like the Entertainment Industries Council (EIC) and Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S) can become invaluable allies.

Formed in 1983, EIC works to bring together writers and advocates from health and social issue organizations. Hollywood insiders, including network and studios executives, and writer/directors such as the Oscar-winning writer and director of *Crash*, Paul Haggis, sit on its board. For writers and producers, the organization provides experts on everything from addiction to depression to firearm safety and human trafficking through its First Draft hotline. For nonprofits wanting to reach out to these writers, EIC maps out a carefully executed strategy.

When the Organ Transplant Network (OTN) grew increasingly outraged over television depictions of organ transplants—in one episode of the medical drama *Chicago Hope*, a transplanted organ fell to the floor—the organization turned to EIC. To help offset the damage caused by the episode (the OTN feared that already low organ donations would decline even further), EIC implemented several proven strategies:

- Produced entertainment industry-friendly literature
- Constructed an informational website
- Held meetings with transplant surgeons and top writers from current medical shows
- Networked with producers to place the group's poster onset

When you consider that the poster was featured for nearly 60 seconds and at the time, comparable advertising time was close to half a million dollars, “there's some value there.” says Marie Gallo Dyak, EIC's executive vice-president.

Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S), a partnership between the venerable Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes for Health (NIH), the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and the Norman Lear Center at USC's Annenberg School, also acts as a liaison between writers and nonprofits. HH&S meets regularly with nonprofits wanting to leverage the research center's relationships in Hollywood and offers the following services:

- Mobilizes nonprofits to coordinate outreach to news media
- Enlists nonprofits to provide individuals who have had experience with a personal health issue to appear on their panels





- Provides up-to-the-minute research for writers
- Holds industry briefings on various issues, from bioterrorism to health insurance to genetics. The group works closely with the Writers Guild of America (West).

HH&S is effective, explains director Vicki Beck, because it has access to thousands of medical experts around the world—and because its members understand the pressures of being a Hollywood scribe. In the past year alone, HH&S responded to 243 requests for health information from writers. “There are many challenges in trying to work with writers, the first one being that they don’t have a lot of time,” says Beck. “It also requires a sustained effort. You have to be in touch with them all the time. They might call you one week about cancer and the next week, they’re calling you on bird flu and the next week, it’s about some sexually-transmitted disease,” she adds.

HH&S frequently takes the lead in identifying hot topics in the medical community. In February of 2005, the group convened a briefing and panel discussion on the Breast Cancer Gene (BRCA) at the Writers Guild. Testing positive for a BRCA gene mutation, along with a family history of breast cancer, increases a woman’s lifetime chance of

developing breast and/or ovarian cancer, from 13 percent to between 36 to 85 percent. HH&S brought in an expert from NCI and Selma Schimmel, a California woman with the gene HH&S had identified, to speak to the writers. As a result, writers from both *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy* developed storylines about BRCA, which aired in October and November of last year, respectively.

The Entertainment & Health Group (E&HG) also provides accurate medical information and experts for writers. Through the Nursing Shortage project, an effort funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the E&HG lobbies for accurate depictions of nurses on shows like *Scrubs*, *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy*. Nurses are often presented as playing a secondary role in health care, when in fact they provide much of the primary care to the patient. E&HG successfully lobbied for the inclusion of a recurring nurse character on *ER*. In June of 2002 the organization brought together four top Hollywood producers—*Scrubs*’ Bill Lawrence, *NYPD Blue*’s, David Milch, *CSI: Crime Scene*

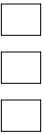


*Investigation*’s Anthony E. Zuiker and *ER*’s Jack Orman, to discuss end of life issues at the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

Seeking new ways to collaborate with nonprofits, veteran Hollywood outreach experts with the Entertainment Resource Professionals Association (ERPA), formerly Entertainment Resource Guild (ERG), recently launched a website to help nonprofits develop Hollywood outreach strategies, [www.entertainmentresource.org](http://www.entertainmentresource.org). Among the group’s services:

- Conducting formative research to determine the best message placement in popular entertainment products
- Developing strategies for entertainment media outreach (including executives, producers, writers, editors, and researchers)
- Developing and refining the nonprofit’s message for targeted entertainment media

Population Communications International has held a dozen summits on entertainment outreach since 1994. Last year’s event, held in Washington, D.C., on November 15, explored the successes of entertainment outreach and featured a talk by *Law & Order: SVU*’s Neal Baer.



“The worst thing that could happen is if you have more than one group advocating the same issue. You’re going to end up hurting yourself. People should work together if they’re on the same issue.”

–Julie Lofton, *Animal Content in Entertainment*



A

S PART OF THE KNOW HIV/AIDS CAMPAIGN, the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) partners with Viacom and the CBS Corporation, conducting briefings on HIV/AIDS for CBS and UPN (now CW) writers, producers, and executives at the beginning of the television season, and providing research support to the writers throughout the year. KFF also produces special programming, including news and documentaries for MTV, BET and Univision.

The initiative grew out of KFF’s track record with companies within the Viacom family. In 1997, dissatisfied with the limited success they had achieved using PSAs in a traditional approach to broadening public awareness of health issues, the nonprofit approached MTV. KFF recognized that the network had the same target audience—young people—and that it had a long history in pro-social issues, having produced such efforts as Rock the Vote. KFF successfully pitched executives on creating a joint branded campaign, Be Safe, that included television programming, websites as well as PSAs. The following year, KFF approached executives at BET, a network they realized was also concerned about pro-social issues, about expanding their relationship to include partnering on programming. KFF had previously consulted with the network, providing ongoing research materials for the network’s teen forums and other shows. KFF also collaborated with CBS on a children’s health insurance policy in 2001, and with UPN on a sexual health campaign after thoroughly researching and targeting these networks.

During a meeting held at Viacom in 2001, executives discussed the possibility of coming together in a coordinated pro-social effort. Robert Johnson and Tom Freston, who at the time ran BET and MTV, respectively, pointed to their companies’ collaborations with KFF. Viacom’s CEO, Mel Karmazin, was interested. The nonprofit was recognized both within and outside Viacom as a reputable,



knowledgeable group. Six months later, in the spring of 2002, Tina Hoff, KFF’s vice-president and director of Entertainment Media Partnerships, received a phone call from Viacom’s Imara Jones asking the nonprofit to put together a proposal. KFF submitted its program ideas that summer, and before the new season’s fall launch, held its first briefings for writers and producers. KFF-produced PSAs began airing in the following January. “When a media company wants to do something, you’d better move pretty quickly. That kind of interest doesn’t come along every day,” says Hoff. “But we were coming in with an organizational familiarity and a background in doing this work. Plus we had interest from the top.”

The initiative is the very first global cross-platform public education initiative to eradicate ignorance about HIV/AIDS. “The motivation is to do something good and relevant and helpful,” says John Wentworth, executive vice president of communications at Paramount Television. “It was sort of a no-brainer to get onboard.”

Since the official launch of the Emmy and Peabody Award-winning campaign in January of 2003, 61 broadcast and cable programs have incorporated HIV/AIDS into programming. KFF has produced more than 100 PSAs tagged with toll-free hotlines or Web sites, which have aired tens of thousands of times on company television and radio networks, and Web sites developed exclusively for these campaigns. In its first year alone, 58 million viewers watched campaign-related programming and more than seven million hits were posted on the campaign’s website.

**THE KNOW HIV/AIDS INITIATIVE IN ACTION**  
After attending a CBS breakfast during which researchers from KFF discussed key findings and statistics about the disease, *Cold Case* executive producer Meredith Stiehm wrote about HIV/AIDS, but only, she says, because it felt “organic” for the series to highlight the disease. The crime drama repeatedly flashes back in time as detectives investigate unsolved cases. Stiehm says exploring HIV/AIDS made perfect sense for the show’s premise. In the resulting episode, set in the 1980s at the onset of the disease, a gay man infected with AIDS is presumed to have been murdered by his uninfected partner. The show was able to present a historical perspective on the disease and weave in KFF facts and figures.

“This effort has been great for us as a company. We really feel that we’ve been able to have an impact on HIV/AIDS.”

-Sonya Lockett, BET

President Bush signed the bill that became The Justice For All Act of 2004, which speeds the DNA testing of rape kits, into law *after* Lifetime collected 110,000 signatures in an online petition.

Through its Stop Violence Against Women Campaign, Lifetime has been instrumental in getting five pieces of legislation passed: the Advancing Justice Through DNA Technology Act of 2004, the Video Voyeurism Protection Act of 2004, the Violence Against Women Act of 2005, the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act and the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. Next up is an

To build awareness for its programming, Lifetime usually enlists the aid of various nonprofit organizations, which the network counts among its many “outreach partners.” After the broadcast of *Terror At Home*, a documentary about domestic abuse, the National Domestic Violence Hotline experienced a 7,000 percent increase in calls. At the end of *Speak*, a movie about date rape that aired last year, Rape and Incest National Network (RAINN) also saw a dramatic rise in the volume of calls to its hotline. Lifetime has reached out to RAINN numerous times in the past ten years and invited the organization to run the PSA after the movie had been made. (RAINN also does outreach at concerts by artists such as Tori Amos, Destiny’s Child, Hootie & the Blowfish and No Doubt, distributing literature at a table set up in the venues.) “Nothing compares to TV exposure,” says RAINN’s Scott Berkowitz. “When you’re at an arena you’re getting exposure to maybe 18,000 people. Even on a low-rated cable show, that’s at least a couple of hundred thousand people, and maybe even millions.”





IN FEBRUARY OF 2006 BRYAN STEWART, director of communications for OneLegacy, an organization promoting organ donation, received a consultation call from a writer at *CSI: New York* who was working on a script about a hijacked liver. The writer had been directed to Stewart by Hollywood, Health & Society. In the script, a wealthy man hatches a plot to steal the liver while it is being transported by helicopter to the transplant center so that his dying wife can be saved instead of an alcoholic who is next in line to receive it. The writer had very specific questions about the transit process: What did one call the person who handled the transportation? At what point would an organ be delivered to the recipient?

Stewart immediately became alarmed. Not because the LifePort brand cooler that was being featured in the episode is actually designed to pump kidneys (and not livers) during transportation. He understood why they wanted to feature the cooler. “It was such a cool-looking device,” he says. What concerned him was that the man who had conceived the plot in the script was *wealthy*. Stewart felt that this conceit would feed the popular misconception that only the rich are able to buy organs. Stewart suggested that the writer make the nefarious character a doctor because a doctor could have access to the kind of privileged information that would enable him to know whether a liver was available. Since it would not dramatically alter his storyline, the writer agreed to the change.

But Stewart was not finished. Next he sent a “DramAlert” to the media and to members of the organ transplant community to ensure their awareness of the March 29, 2006 broadcast. Stewart’s two-page brief:

- Announced the particulars of the broadcast (airdate, show, plot synopsis)
- Outlined potential media targets (local news affiliates of CBS, *CSI: New York’s* network, and print health sections) for tie-in stories
- Listed contact information for local experts, including himself
- Provided information about the genesis of the episode
- Offered “the reality behind the drama” by emphatically stating that organs have *never* been stolen during transit; detailing the real purpose of the LifePort device; and explaining that people who need liver transplants due to alcoholism are not discriminated against, although they must sign a contract and comply with a minimum six-month abstinence period. Additionally, the DramAlert pointed out that in the episode the doctor “gets his comeuppance,” for his conduct is illegal. Says Stewart, “Rather than treating episodes as an opportunity to

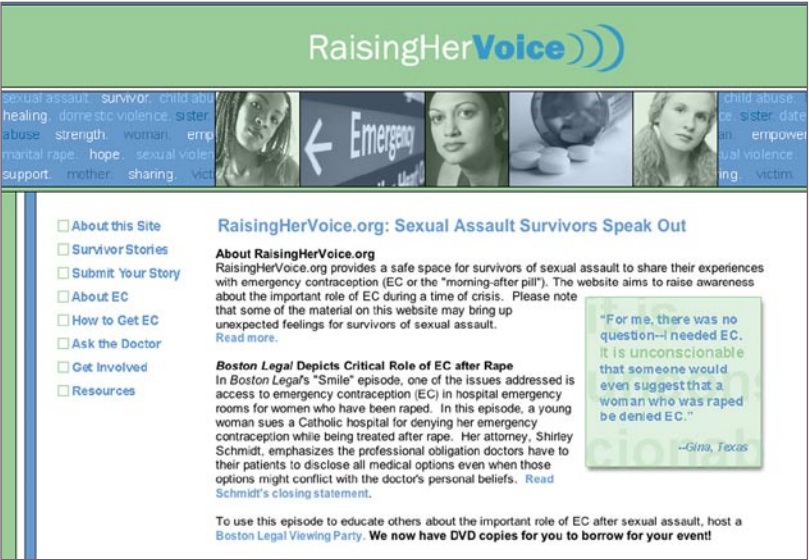
freak out beforehand, we can inform people. ‘Here are some PR opportunities. Here’s the truth behind the story.’ It’s not good to react out of emotion. You don’t make friends out of the shows or the networks. The more we can be a resource, the better off we are.”

Even when nonprofits do not consult on a script, smart ones know to capitalize on the opportunity to promote their cause. To craft “Smile,” the February 14, 2006 episode of *Boston Legal* that tackled the thorny subject of emergency contraception, writer Corinne Brinkerhoff contacted Planned Parenthood of Massachusetts for research information. She had been inspired by newspaper articles she read highlighting the controversial topic.

In the episode, a teenager is taken to an emergency room at a Catholic hospital after she is raped and assaulted. The hospital refuses to provide emergency contraception and after the young woman becomes pregnant, she successfully sues the institution with the aid of the show’s fiery lawyer Shirley Schmidt, played by Candice Bergen.

Thrilled to have advance notice of the upcoming episode, Planned Parenthood alerted Carol Petraitis, the director of the Clara Bell Duvall Reproductive Freedom Project, an arm of the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation of Pennsylvania, in December of 2005. Petraitis was unsuccessful in obtaining a copy of the script from *Boston Legal* beforehand, but she surreptitiously secured a draft copy from a woman who runs the show’s unofficial website. (The show

**EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION GETS ITS DAY IN COURT**  
The following is the closing statement made by Candice Bergen’s character, Shirley Schmidt, in an episode of *Boston Legal* that dealt with emergency contraception:  
“One of our many rights in this country is what is called informed consent. Every patient has the right to decide what happens to his or her body. And to make that decision, a patient needs to rely on her doctor to disclose all available options. Do you want chemotherapy or surgery for a brain tumor? Do you want to amputate below the knee or hope for the best and risk death from gangrene? Do you want to prevent pregnancy or have your rapist’s baby?  
“Amelia didn’t get to choose. She was deprived of a crucial, medically relevant option because her doctor did not approve of it. She didn’t choose to receive health care restricted by religious doctrine. She was taken to the ER unconscious. She relied on her doctor at St. Mary’s to provide her with proper care or refer her elsewhere. And, he failed her.  
“Twenty-five thousand women will become pregnant from rape this year. If all of those women took this emergency contraception, 22,000 of those pregnancies could be avoided. Doctors provide a crucial public benefit to a diverse society and we cannot condone it when they impose their own religion on patients whom they are professionally obligated to serve—especially patients in their most vulnerable states. A teenager, for example, brought into an emergency room after a brutal rape. A teenager, who is now left to choose between violating her own moral principles and terminating the pregnancy or postponing college to deliver this child. A child conceived against her will, a direct result of the most traumatic ordeal she has ever endured.”



RaisingHerVoice.org features an excerpt from a *Boston Legal* episode that relates to the nonprofit’s work with survivors of sexual assault.

has since given Petraitis final copies of the episode.)

Over the next two months, Petraitis put together a plan of action which included preparing materials for the group’s website, RaisingHerVoice.org. The site provides a safe space for survivors of sexual assault to share their experiences with emergency contraception. Among the materials featured on the site were a viewing party Host Toolkit featuring an episode guide with talking points, and a fact sheet about emergency contraception and sexual assault. RaisingHerVoice.org also urged visitors to write letters to the show’s network, ABC, and to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) demonstrating their support for these kinds of storylines.

Petraitis also targeted the media. After she pitched the story to Marie McCullough, a medical writer at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, it was picked up by Knight-Ridder News Service and carried in at least a dozen newspapers around the country coinciding with the episode’s airdate. Petraitis later called Brinkerhoff to thank her. “I thought it was an issue that deserves a national audience. I think it’s a really tricky issue that people are divided on,” says Brinkerhoff when asked what prompted her to write about emergency contraception.

FOR NONPROFITS, CELEBRITY SPOKESPERSONS are not unlike uranium. Handled properly, they can generate extraordinary amounts of energy, lighting up the brightest media spotlights. Handled improperly, they can make your hair fall out. So how can nonprofits tap into this awesome power while avoiding the unpleasant side effects? To find the answer, we interviewed two Hollywood veterans with deep expertise in the unwritten (until now, that is) rules of celebrity engagement.

Larry Winokur, a founding partner of BWR Public Relations, has spent 25 years matchmaking stars and causes. His Beverly Hills-based firm represents numerous A-listers (e.g., Brad Pitt, Adam Sandler, Reese Witherspoon) and has helped garner attention for issues from breast cancer to global warming. Josh Baran, CEO of Baran Communications, has worked closely with one celebrity, Richard Gere, for several years, publicizing the plight of Tibetan monks as well as the AIDS epidemic in India.

While neither Winokur nor Baran would claim that their advice would automatically deliver a household name, following their seven guidelines should increase your chances for success the next time your organization reaches for the stars.

**Guideline #1: Find the right celebrity**

Soliciting celebrities for their star power alone rarely serves your cause or leads to long-term relationships. “Qualify your targeted celebrities for some kind of connection to your issue,” says Winokur. When the Scleroderma Foundation approached BWR for help, the firm reached out to former “Seinfeld” star Jason Alexander because his sister suffers from the disease the foundation combats. Obviously, not everyone can be privy to such inside information, but Winokur and Baran repeated the same advice: do as much homework as you can to find the celebrity with the best fit for your issue. “Without a natural fit,” Baran warns, “it will never happen.”

**Guideline #2: Find the right handler**

Like stars in solar systems, celebrities are circled by bodies of varying size and proximity. Your first objective is to determine which body – agent, manager, publicist, attorney, spouse, best friend, herbalist, or whoever – is the optimal carrier of your request. If you don’t have a personal connection or better information, try the publicist first. “Agents are loath to bring nonpaying opportunities to their clients, and 15% of nothing is nothing to their managers,” says Winokur.



“So these kinds of requests usually fall under the purview of public relations.” The Screen Actors Guild maintains an “Actors Locate” line that directs callers to a celebrity’s representatives: 800.503.6737, 9 am to 4:45 pm (PT), Monday through Friday.

**Guideline #3: Make your request clear, concise and in writing**

One of the most common errors nonprofits make in pursuing celebrities is lack of clarity in their requests. “Too often it’s just a treasure hunt with no specific sense of the treasure they are pursuing,” says Winokur. And nonprofits do not improve their chances by suggesting ten or fifteen different things the celebrity can do for them. “The ask has to be very specific and time sensitive,” Baran adds. Winokur recommends that the initial request be made in a letter supported by just enough background material to explain the issue without overwhelming the reader. “It’s better than a clumsy phone conversation,” he says, “and a fax or email can appear half-hearted.”

**Guideline #4: Have celebrities speak as informed citizens, not experts**

With rare exceptions (Ed Begley on environmental issues, Mike Farrell on capital punishment), celebrity spokespersons should not be positioned as experts. Once they agree to speak on your behalf, “they can comment from their heart, convey their passion, express their own personal interests,” says Baran, “but they can’t cross the line and come off as experts.” If their role includes delivering specific talking points, provide a script. “In many cases, celebrities want to be scripted,” says Baran. “They’re used to reading material and memorizing it. At the very least, provide bullet points.”

“Qualify your targeted celebrities for some kind of connection to your issue.”

–Larry Winokur, founding partner of BWR Public Relations

**Guideline #5: Everyone loves surprises. Except celebrities**

Nothing fouls a relationship with celebrities (and especially their handlers) faster than a deviation from the agreed plan. If you asked for an hour, for example, keep the event to one hour. “The organizations that are smart defer to the individual’s handlers,” says Winokur, ensuring that an event is going as expected and the talent is content. Being clear on every detail in advance also protects the nonprofit from unpleasant surprises. With musical artists who donate their time, Baran points out, the singer who made the commitment may be free, but the band and set-up may not be part of the donation. When in doubt, ask!

**Guideline #6: Thank you, thank you, thank you**

After the celebrity’s time has been donated, thank you notes (or gifts) are in order for both star and handler(s). Contact the handlers to solicit candid feedback on how everything went from their client’s perspective, says Baran, and if there is an indication of interest in future collaborations, keep in touch. A friendly phone relationship or the occasional business lunch with a star’s handlers can help build the foundation for a long-term relationship.

**Guideline #7: Be careful out there**

Celebrity spokespersons bring their own set of risks – just ask the organization whose A-list star just got arrested for shoplifting. (Or drunk driving. Or assault. Or...you get the picture.) Scandals aside, they can still eat up disproportionate amounts of an organization’s time and attention and distract you from programmatic goals. That said, you can’t get away from the fact we live in a celebrity-hungry culture, and when the objective is to pull cameras into a room, few things are as magnetic as stars. “They bring tune in, they bring audience, and they’re usually subject to less scrutiny by journalists,” says Winokur. “That’s a pretty big window for the assertions you want to make.”



In 2004, Noah Wyle of *ER* used his celebrity to draw media attention to *Cover the Uninsured Week*.



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SING ANNUAL AWARDS CEREMONIES to honor television writers and shows that highlight issues of concern is one way nonprofits can bring additional attention to their causes while befriending Hollywood at the same time. The chart below profiles four such issue-oriented ceremonies that have become staples of the Hollywood awards circuit.

**Organization:** Environmental Media Association  
([www.ema-online.org](http://www.ema-online.org))

**Award given:** Environmental Media Awards, Green Seal Awards

**Purpose:** “To honor film and television productions that increase public awareness of environmental problems and inspire personal action on these problems,” To recognize shows whose sets use environmentally sound materials.

**Years in existence:** 15

**Organization:** The Humane Society ([www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org))

**Award Given:** Genesis Awards

**Purpose:** “Pays tribute to the major news and entertainment media for producing outstanding works, which raise public understanding of animal issues.”

**Years in existence:** 20

**Organization:** Hollywood, Health & Society  
([www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org))

**Award given:** Sentinel for Health Award for Daytime Drama

**Purpose:** “To recognize exemplary TV storylines that best inform, educate and motivate viewers to make choices for healthier and safer lives.”

**Years in existence:** 6

**Organization:** Entertainment Industries Council  
([www.eiconline.org](http://www.eiconline.org))

**Award given:** Prism Award

**Purpose:** “For outstanding accomplishments in the accurate depiction of drug, alcohol and tobacco use and addiction in film, television, interactive, comic books, music, and video entertainment.”

**Years in existence:** 10

**Now It’s Your Turn...**

Under the right circumstances, television can be a force for good by dispensing invaluable information and imparting worthy messages to viewers. Conveying a message that Hollywood writers and producers can absorb and then shape into one that meshes with their creative impulses is a delicate act, requiring the dexterity of a politician and even the sleight of hand of a magician. The work is not for the unprepared or faint of heart.

By doing the necessary groundwork, however, nonprofits can cultivate relationships built on mutual understanding and trust with the Hollywood creative community. It takes time and perseverance, but the pay-off—the opportunity to shape television programming and the opinions and behaviors of millions of viewers—makes it worthwhile.

**RESOURCES TO GET STARTED**

**Entertainment Industries Council (EIC)**  
**Marie Gallo Dyak**  
**703-481-1414**  
**[eiceast@eiconline.org](mailto:eiceast@eiconline.org)**

**Hollywood, Health & Society**  
**Mandy Berkowitz**  
**800-283-0676**  
**[Hhs@usc.edu](mailto:Hhs@usc.edu)**

**Entertainment Resource Professionals Association (ERPA)**  
**Rachel C. Flores, Health and Media Research Group**  
**Deborah Glik, Health and Media Research Group**  
**Lisa Cho Allen, The Media Project**  
**[www.entertainmentresource.org](http://www.entertainmentresource.org)**

**Entertainment & Health Group (E&HG)**  
**William E. Duke**  
**310-454-3480**  
**[www.sojourncommunications.com](http://www.sojourncommunications.com)**

**Population Communications International Summit**  
**212-687-3366**  
**[www.population.org](http://www.population.org)**

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