

DONOR OF THE DAY | By Melanie Grayce West

Appreciation for the Biz

Steve Kalafer attended his first Broadway show around the age of 10. He saw “Bye Bye Birdie” with his dad, who loved theater. That enthusiasm for the arts passed on to Mr. Kalafer and now, through his involvement with national non-profit the Actors Fund, he’s helping support some 12,000 performing arts professionals.

The Actors Fund is not “just a charity for actors,” says Mr. Kalafer, 62 years old, the chairman of two New Jersey automobile dealerships, Flemington Car & Truck Country and Clinton Car & Truck Country, as well as the chairman of the Somerset Patriots minor-league baseball team.

Founded in 1882, the Actors Fund serves everyone in the industry—from ticket taker to back of house—with support programs designed specifically to help people weather the ups and downs of contingent work.

“What most people don’t understand is that this really is a profession for these performers, technicians and stage managers. It’s a volatile business and we’re here to help them during that volatility,” says Mr. Kalafer.

The Actors Fund supports programs to help entertainment



Steve Kalafer

professionals find supplemental employment or transition to a new career. A housing program offers access to affordable apartments and connects roommates, while separate programs are designed for seniors and people with HIV or AIDS. Physical and mental health services are provided through a variety of programs and the organization’s Al Hirschfeld Free Health Clinic. There’s even a mini-fund to help actors buy new pairs of shoes so they can look sharp for an audition.

Mr. Kalafer joined the board of the Actors Fund in 1997 and presently serves as assistant treasurer. He’s been a consistent supporter of the group and most recently gave a gift of \$100,000.

He admires the efficiency of the organization and the dedication of his fellow board members, many of them big-name performers. “On any given day, you don’t know who will show up for a meeting,” says Mr. Kalafer of the star-studded board.

In his own right, Mr. Kalafer is also part of the entertainment industry as a film producer. He says he likes to tell stories and he’s helped to make 11 documentaries, including a short film about seniors at the Lillian Booth Actors Home, an assisted-living facility for entertainment professionals operated by the Actors Fund. Another film, “The Soprano State,” focuses on corruption in New Jersey. Three of Mr. Kalafer’s documentaries have been nominated for Academy Awards, but the films have not won. To that, Mr. Kalafer echoes the words of many a producer: “It’s fun to have the film validated by people.”

While Mr. Kalafer says he’s never been a performer or desired to enter the profession, he does have a deep appreciation for those in the biz. He also knows what it’s like to put on a show, he says. “As a car dealer, some days you feel like you’re tap dancing.”