

The Looking Ahead program is watching out for Hollywood's next generation of talent

By Kathleen Gutierrez

AFTRA president John Connolly and young friends at a recent Looking Ahead event



Keeping a Watch

ask any kid, and they'll tell you: Being one isn't always easy. The same is true of being in an actor in Hollywood. Imagine, then, the challenges of being a child actor in Tinseltown. Hollywood history is rife with tales of young performers who couldn't handle the pressures of fame — or the sometimes-harsh ride back to reality when their celebrity status languished.

Keeping that in mind, the Actors' Fund of America has created Looking Ahead, a program designed to provide guidance for Hollywood's youth (ages 12-18) and their parents as the young actors transition into adulthood.

"Statistically, a very small number of these kids will be (industry) working adults," Looking Ahead career counselor Tami Kirchiver says. "Adolescence is a challenging time, and we guide them on how to balance their careers and their lives."

The program, funded by grants from the Screen Actors Guild and AFTRA, is supported by various other union leaders, including studio teachers, managers and parents of children in the entertainment industry. It is underwritten by a \$150,000 grant from the SAG-Producers Industry Advancement and Cooperative Fund.

The ultimate goal of Looking Ahead is to offer as many positive options that are available for children in the industry. It incorporates six

key segments of learning: career and educational planning, counseling services, social activities, community volunteer programs, financial planning seminars and an annual weekend retreat. The program treats young actors as professionals and respects their concerns for the future — all the while maintaining the idea that, ultimately, they're just children.

Kids in the program get a chance to mingle with other performers their age in a non-competitive setting, allowing time for friendships to cultivate. Looking Ahead hosts pizza parties, roller skating events and the like, in hopes of encouraging such friendly interaction.

"A lot of the times, these kids are isolated from other kids, unless they work on the same set," Kirchiver notes.

Looking Ahead also encourages volunteerism and allows the children to go outside themselves to give back to those in need. Volunteering in soup kitchens and collecting items for donations are just some of the ways the kids have become more involved in their community.

Aside from the philanthropic excursions, Looking Ahead focuses most of its attention doing what its name implies — looking ahead at a child's future. The program hosts monthly seminars tailored to the special needs of young performers and their families.

"As a former child actor, I know firsthand how challenging working in the industry can be for a young person. Looking Ahead is what performers need during the formative years of adolescence," says Melissa Gilbert, SAG president and Looking Ahead committee member.

Seminars include financial planning for teens, discussions about advanced education and counseling for those who need to work out a proper direction for their future. Parents are

encouraged to participate in the program. "Most of the parents reaching out to us already on the right track," Kirchiver says.

For now, Looking Ahead focuses on children in Los Angeles and, based on its success, he to branch out to New York and Chicago.

"Through Looking Ahead, the Actors' Fund has both recognized the particular need of young performers and has provided a program that assists them and their families with the developmental, financial, social, scholastic and career-shaping challenges that face them," says actor Richard Thomas, Looking Ahead advisory committee chairman. "This is a great resource for young performers and their families. I'm excited for the kids, and I only wish Looking Ahead had been looking after me when I was a child actor."

The program's resident social worker, Heather Vanian, says that resources directed specifically for teens circulate around three key points of interest — education, leadership opportunities and financial planning — with the emphasis based on input from surveys and one-on-one conversations with kids.

"We also have a lot of interest in panel presentations," Vanian says. "These are regular kids with regular interests, but they also have a lot of questions."

On Saturday, Nickelodeon Animation Studios in Burbank opened its doors to Looking Ahead by offering young performers and their families a day of fun, interaction and learning, as well as a speaker panel of former child actors who have made the successful transition into working adults. Speakers included Joseph Lawrence and Malcolm-Jamal Warner.

"One thing we wanted to stress was, 'Learn your craft but go play baseball. Go spend time with your family,'" Kirchiver says. "We wanted a place where kids could take off their competitive hats and just be kids." ■

