

# Sweeping Up Stardust

**Production assistants gofer it**

**BY KAREN BRADDOM**

PHOTO BY BARRY SCHWARTZ, OREGON STATE U.

**E**VER DREAM OF WORKING SIDE BY SIDE with Martin Scorsese? Can you imagine Quentin Tarantino asking your advice on whether to leave in the ear-slicing scene? Would you be willing to risk an ulcer to give stardom a chance?

If you're one of the risk-takers, chances are you're heading toward your first position: production assistant — a.k.a. the glorified, underpaid, underappreciated, catch-all position that thousands of college students and recent grads pour into each year.

## **Plebes Anonymous**

At the bottom of the totem pole, PAs often find themselves working 16-hour days, making average pay and submitting to a lot of psychological abuse. "All the pressure trickles down to the PAs," says Sarajane Bos, a '95 graduate of Western Michigan U. and a PA for *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Movie*. "If you don't have thick skin, you'll never survive."

Rubbing elbows with Hollywood moguls for a living sounds like fun, but not when you're everyone's keeper. Getting actors on the set at the right time is easier said than done.

"When the actors wouldn't listen to me telling them they were needed on the set, I'd get reamed," Bos says.

Bradley Ross, a graduate of the U. of Missouri who has PA-ed on the sets of *On Deadly Ground*, *Maverick* and *Little Giants*, says he didn't like being treated like a subhuman species. "I almost got fired once for not checking to see if there was sour cream on one of the lunches I was sent to pick up."

New York U. film student Jordan Montminy, who has spent a few semesters working as a PA for Iron Fist Productions and several student films, remembers driving more than an hour to a location to find he was the only one there. "The crew hadn't bothered to tell me that they wouldn't be filming that day," he says. "There's no place for pride in the PA position."

Cleaning the set down to the last cigarette butt is just another demeaning experience for PAs, but it's a blessing compared with other tasks. "I've known PAs who have had to search for hours for a certain kind of cigarette, and one who was ordered by an actor to buy condoms," Ross says.

The highs are real high, but the lows are real low for PAs, says Donald Cager II, a graduate of the U. of Southern California who has PA-ed for Haggmann/Landau Films and recently worked on the set of the upcoming movie *Eye for an Eye*. Cager recalls one of his worst days as a PA: "A two-ton generator that took 12 men to push it around rolled onto the tip of my big toe. I yanked my foot away just in time but limped around the rest of the day."

How do PAs cope with the psychological warfare? "No matter what somebody else yells at you about, you cannot say anything back," says Bos, who once was accused of lying to the first assistant director and could say nothing in her defense.

"It helps to have a team of PAs to vent to," she says. "When we all came together at the end of the day to wait for the OK to go home, it would quickly turn into a PA support group."

Without other PAs to console him, Ross agrees, "I just had to suck it up."

## **A lose-win situation?**

Despite the grunt work and humiliation of the humbling, pay-your-dues position, being a PA does expose you to the action.



**Wanna be the wind beneath a Power Ranger's hair? Be a production assistant.**

"Once when the Power Rangers were shooting pick-up shots for their movie," Bos says, "I got to wave a piece of cardboard to create a breeze in one of the Ranger's hair."

The highlight of Ross' career as a PA was being on the set of *Little Giants* with executive producer Steven Spielberg. After watching him give direction in the movie, Ross was determined to speak to him.

"I asked him if he wanted a water. He said no," Ross says.

"In between my PA duties, I once got to hang out with Sugar Ray Leonard's son, who had accompanied his father to the set for a home video boxing game commercial," Cager says.

"Kid from Kid 'n Play came over to one of my friends and started rapping with him," says Tim Kelly, a '95 graduate of the U. of Southern California who has on-set experience working for Galaxy Films and for student productions. "A month into it and you're no longer star struck."

Mark LaFontant, a graduate of Michigan State U. who wants to write feature films, paid his dues working as a PA for *Rescue 911*. The pain is worth the price, says LaFontant: "Unless you have other connections, this is really the only way into the entertainment industry."

## **Dear Abby...**

Catherine Schwenn, a U. of Arizona graduate who worked as a PA for the movie *IQ* and is now an assistant to the executive producer on the set of *Birds of a Feather*, has seen PAs crying on the set. Besides just enduring the pressure, learn all you can by absorbing everything everybody tells you, Schwenn advises.

"Take your job seriously, no matter how demeaning it is," Ross says. "There are thousands of PAs out there with attitudes, so you have to automatically prove yourself. Double and triple check people's lunch orders because that's your existence."

"Use the job as a stepping stone," LaFontant says. Which is exactly what he did. By the end of LaFontant's three-year stint at *Rescue 911*, running for bagels turned into producing the second half of the segments aired on television.

Working as a PA does get you on the sets of major motion pictures, but it isn't as glamorous as it may seem. You have to start at the fish-food end of the Hollywood food chain before you get to rule the jungle.

*Karen Braddom, a '95 graduate of Manhattan College in New York, would kill for a plebe position in the publishing industry.*

