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Coping With COVID-19 Crisis: Studio Teacher Linda Stone Helping Celebrities Connect With Hospitalized Kids During Shutdown

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STORY ARC



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Editors' Note: With full acknowledgment of the big-picture implications of a pandemic that has already claimed thousands of lives, cratered global economies and closed international borders, Deadline's **Coping With COVID-19 Crisis** series is a forum for those in the entertainment space grappling with myriad consequences of seeing a great industry screech to a halt. The hope is for an exchange of ideas and experiences, and suggestions on how businesses and individuals can best ride

out a crisis that doesn't look like it will abate any time soon. If you have a story, email mike@deadline.com.

Even in the best of times, child actors are the most vulnerable members of the entertainment community. That's why the state of California requires that certified studio teachers be on set whenever kids are working – not just to teach them their lessons, but to protect their safety and welfare, as well.

In these times, with film and TV production shuttered because of the coronavirus pandemic, child actors and their studio teachers have found themselves out of work along with everybody else. Linda Stone, a longtime studio teacher and former Business Rep at IATSE Studio Teachers Local 884, saw her show put on hold this week, but now has more time to devote to Famous Fone Friends. This IATSE Local 884 charitable organization, founded in 1986, connects celebrities with hospitalized children around the country. This is her shutdown story.

On Friday afternoon March 13, around the time it usually arrives, I received a Prelim Call Sheet for Monday's shooting schedule for the third to last day of shooting of Amazon's *Them: Covenant*. Friday night, the Final CS arrived, confirming the earlier information. The two mothers of my students and I discussed the likelihood of completing the last three days left to film and their concern about being able to fly home on Wednesday after wrap. Every other production we were aware of was in the process of shutting down and we were anticipating that happening with us. Sure enough, Saturday afternoon, we all received an email postponing the completion of the last episode "until further notice."

Stone

Courtesy Linda Stone

We weren't the only ones worried about productions. On Saturday, I got a call from another teacher whose show had not shut down, and her student's mother did not want to take her daughter to the set on Monday. She was wondering, was this her call to make? Luckily, it did not come to that as a few hours later, the producers on her production decided themselves to shut down. Another parent of a child texted me that his daughter's show in Albuquerque was shutting down and she was flying home that night. It was beginning to feel like we were all in some kind of sci-fi movie and the world was screeching to a halt.

But this current shutdown and complete disappearance of work could possibly have a positive outcome for the many child background actors who are home-schooled. Over the past 10 years, there has been a huge increase of home-schooled children, and the main reason is that the public schools they would normally be attending refuse to sign off on the work permit applications due to the students' excessive absences.

Schools do not collect the state attendance daily allowance (ADA) for students unless they appear in person. It's called "in-seat money" that schools do not receive, even if students are home sick and return with doctors' notes. Schools lose a lot of money if students work frequently, and they do not like it. So when it comes time for them to sign the student's work permit application, they mark "Unsatisfactory Attendance," preventing the child from working. In my opinion, this is the main reason so many child background actors are home-schooled by parents, often with minimal professional support.

But now, with every school closed in Los Angeles and all parents home-schooling their children, there already has appeared many free or low-cost online programs that provide these parents with curriculum, lessons, books and instruction on how to get the best results from home-schooling. This is available to parents who are completely new to this situation and parents who have been doing this for years, usually with little academic guidance.

When things return to normal, these home-schooled parents will now have additional resources they would not have had if this shutdown of schools hadn't occurred.

Studio teachers work with California minors on film and television productions throughout the country. Another role that studio teachers play with minors, also throughout the country, is arranging for phone calls and video messages through Famous Fone Friends, an IATSE Local 884 501(c)(3) organization. These calls are to seriously ill children from the actors we work with on these productions. This shutdown is affecting both groups: the actors have to remain home with their families (and their pets), but the hospitalized children are now alone. They are no longer able to have guests visit them during their sometimes very long and scary stays in the hospitals. Actors who participate in Famous Fone Friends fill this void with virtual visits through phone calls and personal videos.

Famous Fone Friends began in 1986 when Bugaloo Shrimp (Michael Chambers) from the movie *Breakin'* called a burn victim undergoing painful hydrotherapy at Children's Hospital L.A. This led to Fred Savage (Kevin Arnold from *The Wonder Years*), and Henry Winkler (Fonzie from *Happy Days*) calling kids at two hospitals. Five years and over 450 hospitals later, child-life specialists and doctors were referring children for calls from their favorite actors. Paul Reubens (Pee-wee Herman), Robin Williams, Jay Leno, Rob Paulson (one of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles), Jim Cummings (the voice of Winnie the Pooh), Nancy Cartwright (*The Simpsons*), Miley Cyrus and Cameron Boyce, along with many other celebrities, were regularly calling kids; as of last year, over 20,000 of these connections had been made in the past 34 years.

This week calls and videos from Joshua Bassett (*High School Musical*), Leo Howard (*Kickin' It*), Peyton List (*Jessie*) and Shelby Simmons (*Bunk'd*) and the current most popular Fone Friend caller, Tom Kenny (the voice of SpongeBob SquarePants), have been arranged for children confined to their hospital rooms, with no visits allowed from friends and family.

But a strange problem that we now have is that there are many more actors happy to call seriously ill children than the number of children referred. Unfortunately, it's not because there is a shortage of sick children. The problem is that since communication through emails has replaced phone calls as a means of hospital referrals, Famous Fone Friends is down to serving under 10 hospitals. These calls are free to every child referred, but since the annual budget for FFF is under \$3,000, there is no professional publicity or promotion to bring FFF to the attention of the pediatric staff at hundreds of children's hospitals.

Famous Fone Friends was set up to operate with zero administrative costs. There is no fund-raising component and that's intentional. All efforts are toward connecting children with celebrities. Support comes from studio teachers and other members of the community. The only costs are for literature and postage. Every child called receives a script from a popular television show and the younger, non-readers, receive gifts representing the characters who called (like a SpongeBob or Winnie the Pooh gift). So today, after hearing from a child-life specialist how special it was for her patient to get a FFF "visitor" and realizing that now, more than any other time, the impact of FFF is so significant, I sent out my first tweet to Jimmy Fallon for some free publicity (he is promoting a different charity every night on his show during this period of coronavirus).

Other studio teachers are also using their contacts to help bring FFF to the attention of pediatric staff at hospitals nationwide. Arranging for Fone Friends "visitors" is easy, no-cost and fun, both for the entertainers and the children, but most of all, to the parents who are so grateful to anyone who puts smiles on the faces of their suffering children. If they only knew...

More information: email famousfonefriends@gmail.com.

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