

SHOW BUSINESS MENTORS WITH WESTERN NEW YORK CONNECTIONS GIVE BACK TO NEW PROGRAM AT BUFFALO STATE

Helping Hands

By Alan Pergament / NEWS TV CRITIC

07/06/08



When Tom Fontana was among several Western New Yorkers working as a writer in Hollywood in the 1980s, he often experienced a foolish assumption about his hometown. “I was told there has to be a Buffalo [writers] Mafia,” he recalled recently. “You all must help each other.” At the time, Western New Yorkers Anthony Yerkovich (“Miami Vice”), David Milch (“Hill Street Blues”), Patrick Hasburgh (“21 Jump Street”) and Diane English (“Murphy Brown”) were involved in some of TV’s best shows. “We were all together,” recalled Fontana, “and we were like, ‘Gee, none of us did help us get where we were. So maybe we should start, at least communicating with each other.’ The mythology of us helping each other existed before any of us actually helped each other.”

Fontana is now a key member of a group of eight prominent people with Buffalo State College ties who hope to turn myth into a reality for the next generation of Buffalo stars.

Starting this fall, the first class of 15 students is officially enrolled in the school’s new Television and Film Arts program that is operating under the college’s Communications, English and Theater departments.

Diane English, whose next project is the feature film, “The Women,” was the only one of the eight who was unable to attend a two-day brainstorming symposium in June designed to plan the program. The eight include:

- Fontana, whose credits include “St. Elsewhere,” “Homicide” and “Oz.”
- English, of “Murphy Brown” and “Love and War” fame.
- Ruben Santiago-Hudson, the Tony Award-winning actor who wrote the much-praised play and subsequent HBO movie, “Lackawanna Blues,” that was inspired by his childhood.
- Tom Calderone, general manager of VH1.

- Deborah Oppenheimer, a producer of “The Drew Carey Show” and “George Lopez” who won an Oscar for producing the documentary “Into the Arms of Strangers, Stories of the Kindertransport.”
- Marcia Mulé, the producer of “Celebrity Poker Showdown” and “Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D-List.”
- Amy Berman, vice president of casting for HBO Films.
- Rich Wall, who oversees promotions for the Buffalo Sabres.

They plan to mentor, to inspire, to give access to internships and occasionally teach.

“There is 140 years of experience from the frontline perspective,” said Wall. “It doesn’t always happen in an academic setting.”

“It’s the first time ever that [the departments and people] are all connected from the president of the college all the way,” said Calderone.

Jeff Hirschberg, a member of the Writers Guild who has sold series to Showtime and Lifetime and has a number of screenplays optioned, joined the faculty almost two years ago to create and manage the program. He is the only full-time faculty member, with the rest of the courses being taught by about a dozen faculty members in the Theater, Communications and English departments. The curriculum, which includes nine new TV arts program courses, was approved by the State University of New York in record time.

To make the first class of 15, students had to write an essay, show a creative sample of a short film, script or story and get a recommendation.

“It is difficult to get into, it is very competitive,” said Hirschberg of those who made it.

Brooke Rewa, a junior from Napa, Calif., views making the major a “great opportunity.”

She spoke with Oppenheimer during her visit here and found the talk “very motivating.”

“I want to be a producer but I never had explained what a producer does during the week,” said Rewa. “She took me through the steps. It was very helpful and encouraging.”

Oppenheimer and the rest of the gang seem to be just as passionate about the program as the students.

“We’re going to keep them engaged to the extent they want to be engaged,” said Hirschberg. “I think they are itching to be part of this program.”

He credits Fontana with being the catalyst for creating the program. Fontana worked on the major’s development with Drew Kahn, professor and chair of the Theater Department; Lou Rera, assistant professor in the Communications Department, and Kevin Railey, the former chair of the English Department who is now associate provost and dean of the graduate school.

“Tom was thinking, ‘What is a major he’d want today?’” said Hirschberg. “We were also thinking, ‘What is a way we can grow and uncover more Tom Fontanas?’ We know clearly they are out there.”

Hirschberg said students who have finished the program will have a portfolio that illustrates they have written, produced and directed short films, written short scripts and full-length screenplays and directed before a live audience.

“We want to be on the short list of everyone in the country who wants to be in this industry,” said Hirschberg.

“You hope [the program] develops the reputation of an Emerson or an NYU or UCLA,” said Oppenheimer.

Getting involved was an easy sell for all of the luminaries for a variety of reasons.

“Tradition,” said Santiago-Hudson. “First of all, it’s Western New York, Buffalo. If that’s important to you and obviously it is important to all of us.”

Besides tradition, there is the sense of giving back.

“I wouldn’t be doing what I am doing if I didn’t get what I got when I was here,” said HBO’s Berman. “I would never say no.”

“Without getting preachy about it, we’re lucky to be in these positions,” said Calderone. “It is also our responsibility, whether it is class or something hands-on in the school, to somehow [be involved].”

Hirschberg is hoping the eight will find time from their busy lives to be visiting professors for as little as three days to as long as a semester. However, teaching is not the only thing that they’ll offer.

“We have contacts,” said Fontana, “to say to people that we know, ‘hey, we really need somebody that knows this and you know this ... will you go there for three days?’ And most of the people I know in the business would go, ‘sure I’ll go do it for three days or a week or whatever.’ ”

Mulé added that the program could give students an opportunity to come to New York or Los Angeles to see how things are done. “We can give students some experience out in the field, in addition to our time on campus,” she said.

“Our job is not to teach them,” said Santiago-Hudson, who has taught at Yale University. “We’re like the godfathers, the uncles and aunts. Where do we help? Sometimes that means allowing them into a room to brainstorm, allow them on set.”

The students also will get the opportunity to seek advice from those who have made it.

“It isn’t one thing,” said Santiago-Hudson. “Your advice is like a six-day miniseries.” Several prominent Buffalo State graduates attended a two-day brainstorming symposium in June to help plan for the school’s new Television and Film Arts program. From left are Amy Berman,

Deborah Oppenheimer, Tom Fontana, Rich Wall, Marcia Mulé, Reuben Santiago Hudson and Tom Calderone.

Fontana's advice may be tough for some students to hear.

"If you can do something else, do it," said Fontana. "If you can't do anything else, then get into show business. I think it is so hard, you have to deal with so much disappointment and so much rejection, that if you can, do something else."

Santiago-Hudson seconds that emotion.

"In this business, your competence doesn't equate to your success," said the actor. "I know some amazing artists – writers and actors – who are sitting at home."

Calderone's advice is to be realistic. "Sometimes, it is telling your story of the early days," said Calderone. "They look at you like, 'you graduated from Buffalo State and then you [became general manager of VH1].'"

Of course, it isn't that easy to become a success or even know what success is.

"There is a biblical quote, 'You're not called to be successful, you're called to be faithful,'" said Fontana. "The thing to get across is success is not measured by being Tom Cruise or Tom Hanks or anyone named Tom. It is measured by how true you are to work you do. Your honesty and your integrity. That is a hard thing because we're in a culture that demands People magazine as the measure of success."

Hirschberg is aware that it would be counterproductive to set unrealistic expectations from students or community.

"We would never say, for instance, when you graduate here with a BA, you should be directing your own movie in a year or two," said Hirschberg. "Although some students actually think that's the case."

Those students obviously believe more in myth than reality.

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