

LA DAILY NEWS

Activist for performers with disabilities

Contributed by: Pam Vetter on 6/13/2008

When Valley resident **David Zimmerman** was living in the San Francisco Bay area, he had the Hollywood sign hanging above his door.

"I'd look at that sign and say 'I gotta go there some day,'" Zimmerman said. "I was waiting tables when I got to LA and met Mary Rings. She invited me to attend a class she was teaching. I walked in and there were about 20 teens and adults with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities. I started going every Saturday to assistant teach. I've been teaching classes for more than a decade now. I act, cast, produce, while also teaching acting classes for performers with disabilities through the Media Access Office in Glendale."

Although Zimmerman's dream to act in Hollywood changed, it transformed into a once-in-a-lifetime role.



"My reward is love. I've realized I'm a people person and I don't get caught up in the disability. One time I was out with one of my students and I took him home to drop him off and he said, 'David, I need my wheelchair.' I forget about the disability. It's **Andy** ... not Andy who has a disability. And, when I got hurt on the set three years ago and then had a car accident after that, the people who were the closest to me were like **Angela Rockwood Nguyen**, who is a quadriplegic and an Ambassador for the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation. She said, 'You're going to be fine hun...' and **Cindy**, who happens to have cerebral palsy, said, 'You're gonna be fine ... or I'm going to run you over,' and she uses a wheelchair. It's truly like my family. I go on the set with actor **Blair Williamson**, who was born with Down syndrome, and it's wonderful. He gets an audition, he gets a callback and he gets work. I was his coach on the sets of 'Nip/Tuck' and the feature film 'Unknown.' Last Saturday, when I went back to the Born to Act Players, 20 students came running up to me, wanting to hug me. To give and receive the love of it all is a true blessing. I have learned that people who have disabilities are more able, more of the time than people without disabilities."

While acting slips back into Zimmerman's life now and then, he has an honest approach in describing his latest high-profile work as an actor.

"I worked on 'Meet the Fockers' for a day and that was fun. I'm in deleted scene #14 and on the extended version of the DVD. Director Jay Roach personally called me (and the other Fockers) to regretfully let us know that our scene was cut. But he asked if it was ok to add it to the DVD. How great was that! Who makes a personal call in Hollywood anymore to apologize?" Zimmerman asks with a joyous laugh. "You must have a sense of humor about this crazy business that we call show."

With the sharing of this story alone, you quickly realize that Zimmerman has the ability to put the business side of Hollywood into perspective for his students.

"It's nothing personal. But, the work is important. The environment in Hollywood is changing, but I see they're making progress when it comes to performers with disabilities. Then, we take a step back and then forward again, it's sort of like the government."

Zimmerman recently finished casting and producing "The Beautiful People" at the Media Access Office, which was directed by **Corey Allen**.

"When I introduced Corey to Gloria at the Media Access Office, he said, 'Let's do a show!' And, we did. It was my first producing role and we had two readings. A mix of disabilities and abilities. It's about breaking through the stereotypes. Integration. It was a wonderful cast! The next show we'll be casting is 'A Christmas Carol'."

As Zimmerman teaches classes for performers with disabilities, he has been expanding the scope of those classes.

"For the Meet the Biz classes, I'm bringing in producers, directors, casting directors, and working actors, to teach one night or monthly classes. We're also bringing in life coaches. I'm having teachers who are a mix of abilities and disabilities. What better way to expand your knowledge and acceptance than by learning from an actor who happens to be deaf."

No matter what role Zimmerman finds himself in, he's willing to be a voice for those who have not been heard and let them speak for themselves.

"I worked on a pilot about surfing for Showtime. Even though the roles didn't call for it, I brought in someone in a wheelchair. Then, when the lead male came in to audition, he talked about some of his surfing experiences and about a friend who had a surfing accident and was in a wheelchair. So it's fascinating, because it came full circle. I only planted a seed. It's sorta like 'The Secret.' The closer I get to directors and producers, it's easier to suggest something and let their imagination take over."

There are moments when Zimmerman finds himself surprised at a business he knows so well.

"A friend of mine went in for an audition the other day and I was shocked with the attitude of the casting director, 'Can't you let us know that she's in a wheelchair?' the casting director said. I want to say to that person, so why can't you bend your mind and think about this as an opportunity to bring something real to the table? We're all on the same planet; we're all in this together. What I'd love to see through my acting, through the casting, through the teaching and through the classes, that people stop saying, 'Oh, that's a person with CP or pointing out a person in a wheelchair.' Why not say, their name? What's wrong with saying, 'Oh, that's **Terry** or **John**.'"

Zimmerman finds his proudest moments come with his students' success.

"When one of my students gets a gig, it means so much. Whether they have a disability or not, I am always encouraging everyone else and reminding them that this is wonderful. Living the moment. I simply hope for acceptance for everybody: gay, straight, black, white, disabled and able-bodied. I want to see some positive things going on and I want acceptance. This is about making sure that diversity is accepted as part of our world. We're all on the same blue marble, so let's work together."

Zimmerman received the prestigious Media Access Award for his ongoing support of performers with disabilities in October 2007.

The staged version of "A Christmas Carol" will be directed by legend **Corey Allen** and produced by **Gloria Castaneda** and the Media Access Office, while **Joey Travolta** and Inclusion films will film the documentary.

Zimmerman will also be casting and producing a new film written by **James Helsing**, "Modus Operandi." He will be acting in the new film, "HIDE", this August, written and directed by **Bobby Shelby**, and also starring **Daamen Krall**.

For more information about **David Zimmerman**, visit www.davidzimmerman.biz.