

Inside Philanthropy

Wendy Paris | March 6, 2026

Meet the Entertainment Philanthropy Older Than the First Talkies



On Wednesday morning in Los Angeles, 43 teens from the diverse student body of the Reseda-based Cleveland High school sat on conference chairs in the bright community room of the swanky Wasserman Campus retirement community in Woodland Hills. Five visiting, seasoned entertainment industry mentor-insiders sat on chairs facing the teens, sharing the scoop about their jobs and what it takes to succeed in the field. These were not big stars or famous names, but rather the type of behind-the-scenes professionals and “below-the-line” workers essential to making a movie or TV show.

The presentation was part of a day-long mentoring program created by [“Passing the Torch,”](#) a two-year-old intergenerational initiative of the [Motion Picture & Television Fund \(MPTF\)](#), a philanthropy-backed, 100-plus-year-old nonprofit. MPTF supports working and retired members of the entertainment industry, including by running the [Wasserman Campus](#). A retirement community for 265 entertainment industry workers over the age of 70 — ranging from retired actors to still-working stage hands — the Wasserman Campus has housing options ranging from independent living to skilled nursing and memory care, as well as a dining room, gym, pool, theater, production studio and koi pond stocked with healthy-looking, chubby, bright orange fish. It subsidizes residents as needed.

The campus also hosts a variety of intergenerational programs, including Passing the Torch. The vision of Fredda Johnson, director of engagement at MPTF, Passing the Torch connects high school seniors from underserved Los Angeles schools, afterschool programs and early-career training programs with retired and semi-retired professionals from the entertainment industry through online and in-person events, like the one on Wednesday.

One of the day’s mentors, Darrell Redleaf-Fielder, age 68, was the first Native American key hair stylist and make-up artist/department head in the industry. He looked the part, wearing a stylish grey blazer over a black, open-necked shirt, his long black hair pulled into a ponytail with a streak of white at the front. Redleaf-Fielder talked about coming to the industry as an outsider from a very poor Indian reservation in North Dakota.

“When I went to beauty school, I had no idea I would become a hairstylist in the industry,” he said. Redleaf-Fielder went on to earn three cosmetology licenses — itself the kind of insider fact that outsiders might not guess. He explained that he was a “personal,” a hairstylist assigned to a specific actor and written into the contract, and had worked for leading ladies including Helen Hunt, Cameron Diaz and Uma Thurman.

Other panel members had different jobs, including production coordinator, documentary film maker, a cinematographer, and a writer. They hit on recurring themes, such as the need to be cooperative and uber-dependable, and the importance of arriving on set early because so many others are relying on you. “There’s an industry joke,” said Redleaf-Fielder. “If you’re on time, you’re 15 minutes late.”

Panelists talked about glamour, travel and the inconsistency of gig work. They shared tales of being held up at gunpoint, traveling to the Amazon, almost being eaten by a lion. “You’ll have experiences you can’t even imagine,” one panel member said. They reiterated the message: “Whatever your interests are, there is a job for you.”

These are the kinds of details that nepo babies hear from the cradle, but outsiders don’t. The MPTF launched Passing the Torch to provide experience-based insight and connection to diverse future crew members. “In 2017, I had an idea of bringing seniors in high school together with our seniors on campus. We went through many iterations and finally landed on this beautiful

intergenerational idea of having retirees from below-the-line jobs mentor kids from underserved communities,” said Johnson.

This year, more than 60 mentors are working with students from 14 schools and after school programs, including Venice Arts and South L.A.’s SoLa Studios Film Production Program. Mentors have connected with more than 600 students since the program started.

A history of philanthropy as old as the movie industry

A recurring theme of the afternoon was that while the work itself is exciting, the economics can be brutal — and are only getting more so. While the program is designed to provide an on-ramp for students from challenging circumstances, the industry itself is struggling. One mentor, Venezuelan-born cinematographer Arthur Albert, who has shot some 30 movies, including “Happy Gilmore,” said he moved into TV in part to have steady work when so much of the film work left the U.S. He served as the cinematographer on TV shows such as “Better Call Saul,” “Breaking Bad,” and 165 episodes of “ER.” As Albert put it, “I love working with actors, writers and crews.” The business part? Not so much. “It is extremely unpredictable.”

While so much about the industry is changing, its economic precarity remains a consistent thread. Of the more than 2 million entertainment workers out there today, only [2% of actors make a living at it](#). The median pay for below-the-line jobs like [film and video editing and camera operators](#), as of 2024, was \$70,570. “There is a misconception that everyone in the industry is making a lot of money. The majority of people are not,” said Johnson.

That’s where MPTF comes in. Silent picture star Mary Pickford created the first iteration of today’s MPTF in 1921, along with Douglas Fairbanks, D.W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin, to support colleagues who were struggling financially. Then “talkies” came out in the late 1920s, decimating work for silent screen actors, and the Great Depression hit. The growth of the studio system in the 1930s, with its centralized control and focus on efficiency, pushed even more people into the ranks of the unemployed.

In response, Pickford came up with the Payroll Pledge Program, a payroll deduction plan that lets those earning more than \$200 a week sign up for automatic withdrawal in order to fund living expenses for others. That was in 1932. Throughout the 20th century, the MPTF went on to attract major donations from a who’s who of Hollywood, from Judy Garland to Humphrey Bogart and Elvis Presley, who gave \$125,000 in 1965, then the largest donation by a single person. By the 1980s, the Payroll Pledge was routing the equivalent of roughly \$10 million a year to the MPTF (as measured in today’s dollars).

MPTF president and CEO Bob Beitcher, who showed up for mentor day dressed casually in black leather tennis shoes and a crisp denim shirt, said he remembered being asked to sign up for the Payroll Pledge while doing the paperwork in the first week of his very first job in the industry. “It was part of the culture,” he said.

The Motion Picture & Television Fund needs support, too

As an active, robust organization atop one of America's most iconic industries and global exports, the MPTF expanded its services to include social workers, veteran's services, palliative care and child care. But rising costs and the 2008 Great Recession put a strain on the MPTF, raising the threat of cuts. In 2012, the MPTF launched a [\\$350 million capital campaign](#) to help. [Jeffrey Katzenberg](#) and George Clooney spearheaded the effort. Katzenberg, Steven Spielberg, David Geffen, Steve Bing and [Barry Diller and his family](#) each pledged \$30 million legacy gifts. The Sumner M. Redstone Charitable Foundation gave \$20 million, as did Anne and Kirk Douglas and Rupert Murdoch.

Meanwhile, funds from the Payroll Pledge had steadily declined as studios increasingly converted crew positions to freelance work, meaning fewer crew members could regularly contribute as they lacked consistent salaries. Then COVID hit and much of the industry shut down. By 2022, the MPTF was once again facing fiscal strain.

It wasn't that people had stopped giving. As the [2024 annual report](#) shows, MPTF received just over \$25 million in gifts in 2024. Those who gave a total of \$1 million or more over the past 10 years include: Roma Downey and Mark Burnett, Susan and Robert Downey Jr., Caitlin and Kevin Feige, Jim Gianopulos, Kathleen Kennedy and Frank Marshall, Megan Haller and Peter Rice, Karen Rosenfelt, Steven E. Tisch, and John and Marilyn Wells.

Three dozen corporations and foundations also donated \$1 million or more over the past decade, including the Berlanti Family Foundation, the Milchan family, Johnny Carson Foundation, Katie McGrath and J.J. Abrams Family Foundation, Delta Airlines, Netflix and Paramount Global.

The MPTF distributed \$5 million in 2024. Sixty-five percent of the financial assistance covered insufficient retirement savings; the rest went to those experiencing loss of employment or underemployment.

Beitcher pointed to a few reasons for the financial strain, including the reduction of production in L.A., the layoffs of crew and the consolidation of studios into ever-larger entities. "Every time a studio gets bought, you have one fewer studio to give us an emergency fund," he said. Meanwhile, longevity itself poses a challenge, creating both more people needing to be housed and supported at the Wasserman complex, and more complicated, expensive care.

So far, the fund continues to keep on keeping on. In 2025, after the L.A. fires, DreamWorks cofounder [Jeffrey Katzenberg](#) and his wife, Marilyn, advanced \$5 million of their legacy gift to the MPTF, as did Steven Spielberg, David Geffen and Barry Diller.

The intergenerational story of the MPTF

When Johnson decided to launch Passing the Torch, Beitcher encouraged her to find outside funding. The [Eisner Foundation](#), which focuses on intergenerational connection, stepped in with a \$150,000 grant in 2024, which helped support the program and allow it to hire a paid program manager. Eisner made another \$150,000 grant in 2025. “We know that a caring adult in a young person’s life makes a material difference in their long-term success, and we try to identify programs that create benefits for the mentors, too,” said Eisner Foundation CEO Trent Stamp by email.

“Because of how age segregated we are, older people don’t often interact with young people they’re not related to,” said Stamp. “We often hear that intergenerational relationships give older people hope for the future and even help them connect with other young people in their lives in new ways.”

Stamp pointed to other [Eisner 2025 grantees that explicitly do mentorship work](#), including [Arts for LA](#), which connects experienced arts professionals with early-career professionals; [DSF Werks](#), which pairs older adults with emancipated foster youth and underserved young adults to learn car repair and media arts, and [Operation Jump Start](#), which leverages mentors to prepare high school students for college.

Passing the Torch also has funding from the [Golden Globe Foundation](#) and partnerships with the Entertainment Industry Foundation and MENTOR California. [Mentorship programs](#) often fall through the philanthropic cracks, as we’ve reported, in part because they address such a variety of problems that they don’t easily fit under one funding priority. One way that mentorship programs find funding is by applying for grants designed to address one small aspect of all they do, such as, in this case, intergenerational connection.

“Intergenerational connection is foundational to MPTF’s mission. That’s embedded in our organization,” said Johnson. “We want to bring purpose to retirees who’ve given so much to the industry. This is a way they can remain relevant.”

MPTF engagement manager Holly Spiegel, who was helping with the post-talk lunch on Wednesday, emphasized the benefits to the youth, as well. Spiegel helps oversee the organization’s many volunteers, including high school and college students. “They learn that people of a certain vintage are wise, inspiring and funny,” she said.

Support from entry-level to exiting the stage for good

The Wasserman Campus is a major part of the MPTF’s work, and unique among housing options for former members of a specific industry. It is open to people from all parts of the industry. Hanging out at a retirement home for the stars and supporting crew feels entertaining itself. Many residents are still working, or working with students in the on-campus TV studio, or working on their jokes. I was sitting with Beitcher in the lobby of the main building of Wasserman when a 90-something resident strolled past in a navy bathrobe over a swimsuit. “Was the water wet today?” Beitcher asked.

She paused. “No, it was very dry.” And she was off.

Wasserman Campus is so attractive and upbeat, as I was strolling along a walkway lined with thick lavender bushes and tall orange firestick succulents, I caught myself thinking, “If I transition into writing for TV now, maybe I can retire here at 90.”

“There isn’t another industry in the country, and maybe in the world, that supports working and retired people like the Motion Picture & Television Fund,” said Beitcher. “That’s what we need to do for each other. I couldn’t be prouder.”