

in the mix

SOUL POWER

Training industry pros while nurturing Christian souls is the mission of Act One.

KOREY SCOTT POLLARD, FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ON FOX'S *LIE TO ME*, IS HAPPY TO TALK ABOUT ACT ONE, a non-profit organization that trains Christians for mainstream careers in TV and film. But only after he's finished playing with his kids.

The importance of carving out family time in long TV workweeks was a hard-won lesson for Pollard — and one he's eager to impart to his students at Hollywood-based Act One, where spirituality is as crucial for industry success as a well-written script.

For the past ten years, pros such as Pollard have come to Act One to teach and mentor Christians of all denominations. Instructors include Dean Batali (*That '70s Show*), Barbara Hall (*Joan of Arcadia*) and David McFadzean (*Home Improvement*). Their efforts have been paying off: Alum Kurt Schemper won a Primetime Emmy this year as a producer of A&E's *Intervention*, deemed outstanding reality program. Other alums have written or produced shows for broadcast and cable, among them Monica Macer (*Lost*) and Sheryl J. Anderson (*Charmed*).

"Much of our curriculum is similar to what you'd find in any high-caliber TV writing or producing program," says Act One's executive director, Gary David Stratton, an educator and pastor whose daughter, an aspiring writer and Act One alum, asked him to apply for the position. "We want to develop world-class writers, producers and entertainment executives. Our goal is not to produce explicitly religious entertainment, but TV professionals who draw from rich spiritual

resources to do some of the best work in the industry.

"The modern world can be soul-deadening," he adds. "We want to provide a place that is soul-nurturing. The word *Christian* does have a pejorative aspect to it — people think of it as right-wing. That's not us."

Founded in 1999 by a group of Hollywood professionals, Act One began as a four-week summer writing program. Nowadays writers can also take a two-week retreat and, beginning in January, enroll in a fourteen-month course. A twelve-week executive program, which includes summer internships at studios, agencies, production companies and law firms, will be replaced next June by a more comprehensive fourteen-month curriculum. Act One also offers writing workshops around the country, script consultation and various alumni activities.

Pollard, who previously worked as a second assistant director on *Monk*, *House* and *Grey's Anatomy*, says he makes it a point to share his mistakes and struggles with his students, some of whom he has hired as production assistants for one-day stints.

"They're hungry to be around," he observes. "[Their attitude is], 'I'm going to roll up my sleeves and do the best job I can.' It's not, as I've seen with others, having a sense of entitlement and trying to meet as many people on set as they can."

Schemper, a 2000 alum, says that "if you were to walk into an Act One class, it wouldn't feel any different than being at UCLA or USC. But from a Christian perspective, it's a community where people can think out loud."

The community has recently taken on another endeavor: raising funds for its former programs coordinator, who was shot in the chest during a June robbery and is facing months of rehab. "It caught us all off guard," Stratton says. "Her doctors said no one had ever survived this sort of wound."

As for Act One's everyday mission, "We've found that the spirituality taught by Jesus is an ideal starting place for guiding industry professionals on a soul-nourishing spiritual journey," Stratton says. "We're helping students navigate that journey through Hollywood."

—Libby Slate



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