

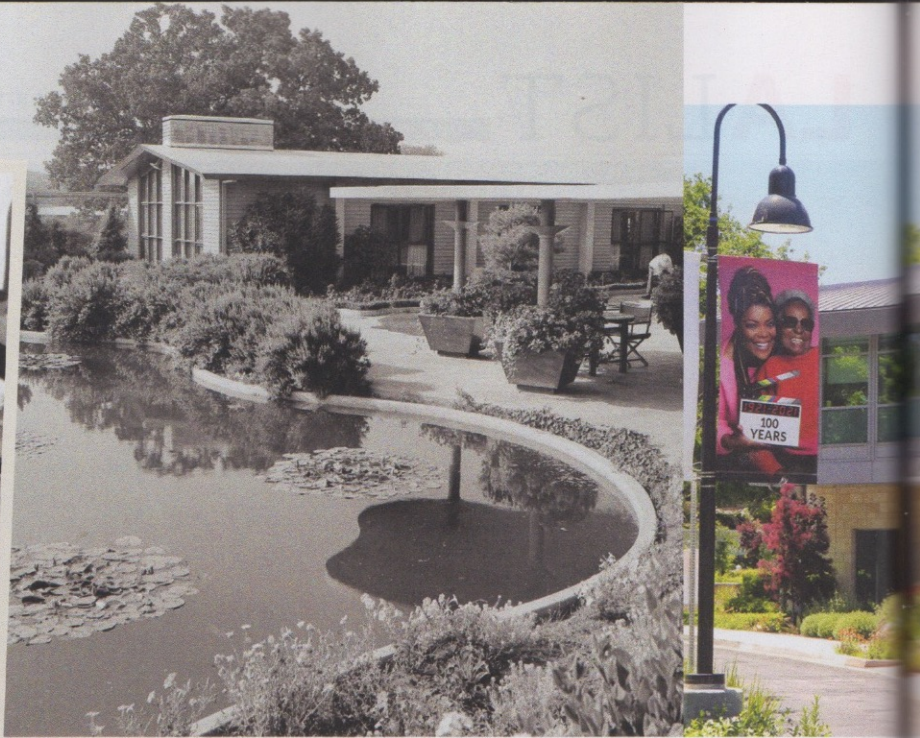


A Safe Haven For Old Stars

HOW HOLLYWOOD'S MOST FAMOUS RETIREMENT COMMUNITY—WHERE MANY FILM AND TV VETERANS LIVE OUT THEIR THIRD ACT—SPENT THE PANDEMIC PLAYING PARTY GAMES ON ZOOM WITH JODIE FOSTER



BOB BEITCHER had big plans for the 100th anniversary of the Motion Picture & Television Fund. There was going to be a glitzy, star-studded gala—years in the making—that he expected would rake in millions of dollars in donations. That money was desperately needed to pay the bills for the organization's retirement community in Woodland Hills, the one started by silent-film star Mary Pickford, where, over the decades, hundreds of movie industry veterans—Norma Shearer, Mary Astor, Elsa Lanchester, Hattie



NO PLACE LIKE HOME

From left: Jean Hersholt, founder Mary Pickford, Kay Kyser, and Ginny Simms, at the groundbreaking for the Motion Picture & Television Fund Country House in 1941; the original grounds; the facility today, renamed the Wasserman campus after benefactor and late Universal Pictures chairman Lew Wasserman.

McDaniel, to name a few—spent their final years in dignity and security.

Beitcher, MPTF's CEO—himself still sprightly at 68—had dreams of finally remodeling the residential structures, which, like the residents themselves, were starting to show their age. He also had plans to build a new, state-of-art memory care center to be named after benefactor Kirk Douglas. The centennial gala he'd been planning was supposed to have raised a good chunk of cash for those and other upgrades.

But then COVID-19 struck. Six residents died of the disease in the early days of the pandemic. Two employees died a little later. Like retirement homes and assisted living facilities all over the country, MPTF's campus was put on lockdown. Obviously, the gala had to be canceled and, with it, Beitcher's plans for all those improvements.

"We've had some harrowing months here," Beitcher says over Zoom from his offices overlooking the facility. When we spoke in January, almost all 240 occupants were vaccinated and boosted, as

were all of the home's 600 employees. But Omicron was swirling, and nine infected residents were back in isolation. "They aren't happy about it," he notes. "But they're good sports."

Indeed, as harrowing as the last couple of years have been for everyone, it's hard to imagine a more pleasant place to ride out a pandemic, especially for actors and film-crew professionals in the third

act of their lives, many of whom find themselves in unexpectedly precarious financial circumstances.

It is, in every possible way, a perfect place for a Hollywood ending.

UNLESS YOU know where to look, it's easy to miss.

Tucked away off

Mulholland Drive, across the street from a cluster of shopping centers, the facility—originally named the Motion Picture Relief Fund Country Home, but rechristened in 1998 as Wasserman Campus, after the late Universal mogul Lew Wasserman, a generous benefactor—is deliberately low-profile, to protect the privacy of

its once high-profile residents. The only hint of its existence is the name of the street leading to its winding driveway. It's called Spielberg Drive, a hat tip to another big benefactor.

Once you get past the gate, you find yourself in a veritable Shangri-la, only with better landscaping. There are neatly trimmed hedges; towering trees (oaks, maples, sycamores, magnolias); fountains and koi ponds; topiaries shaped like lions, whales, and horses (not to mention Bugs Bunny); bougainvillea and other plants; a dog park (named Doggywood); and endless stretches of finely manicured lawns as well as paths and trails winding throughout the 20-acre property. There are also, peppered around the grounds, a few surprising statues, like the one in the Roddy McDowall Rose Garden that the actor bequeathed to the campus, a perhaps too-lifelike rendering of Caesar, the talking chimp he played in *Planet of the Apes*.

Situated around the campus are dozens of buildings, including the Louis B. Mayer movie theater and an assortment of restaurants. There are a jumble of architectural styles, some supermodern, like the steel-and-glass block that houses the Jodie Foster Aquatic Center, while others—including many of the studio and single-bedroom villas, cottages, and

It's hard to imagine a more pleasant spot to live during a pandemic. It is the perfect place for a Hollywood ending.

TOP RIGHT AND LEFT: COURTESY, MPTF; MIDDLE PHOTO OF COUNTRY HOME: HARVARD L. PARKER; PHOTOGRAPHY



cabins where the residents live—date back to early in the last century. A few structures on the property were designed by William Pereira, the architect whose firm later went on to build LAX's Theme Building.

"A lot of the spaces on campus were built 70 or 80 years ago," Beitcher says. "We've maintained them beautifully, but they need to be redone—torn down and rebuilt in a more contemporary style, with larger rooms and more amenities to accommodate additional residents."

In its present configuration, the facility can house only about 250 people, which means competition to get in can be pretty fierce. Just to get on the waiting list at Wasserman, you need to check a number of boxes. For starters, you have to be over 70 and have worked in the entertainment industry for a least 20 years. Those with limited resources or who've suffered a personal disaster can jump to the top of the list. Rent ranges from \$4,000 to \$8,000 a month, although donations and other funds pick up the cost for tenants who can't afford to pay it on their own.

"Half of our residents are supported by our charity to varying amounts. Some have social security but no pension or savings," Beitcher tells me. "Part of our budget is paid through Medicare reimbursements, but the bulk of the funds come through the generosity of industry members and sponsors."

For some entertainment veterans, the place can literally be a lifesaver. For instance, Harry Northup, 81, a poet and actor whose appeared in 37 films, including *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, and *The Silence of the Lambs*, was renting a place with his wife in Los Feliz when disaster struck in 2017. "It was a hot summer night," he recalls. "My wife, Holly, got up around three in the morning with her walker and said, 'Harry, there's no electricity.' I smelled something

burning and looked in her study. All of a sudden, I saw flames."

The two managed to escape unharmed, but the fire was still a catastrophe. "We lost almost everything," he says.

Luckily, the year before, he'd filled out the paperwork for a spot at the Wasserman campus. Within two months of the fire, they were settling into new digs. "We were so thrilled to be here, the first month I'd just break down crying," he says.

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For tickets and information visit lamag.com/whiskeyfestival





ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE

From left: Holly and Harry Northrup, Sandy Bollinger and her late husband, Henri.

Sandy Bollinger, 74, moved into one of the Fran and Ray Stark villas in 2018, after her husband, Henri—five-time president of the Publicists Guild—underwent emergency brain surgery. When he died six months into their residency, she chose to stick around. “I was surrounded by so much love and support,” she says. “My friends said to me, ‘Why are you staying there with all those old people?’ I looked around, and I didn’t see old. I saw people. My best friend here is 92.”

OF COURSE, when COVID arrived in 2020, pretty much the whole world was caught up in the catastrophe, and MPTF did its best to respond. It expanded its mission—if not its living spaces—to include a range of support services, assisting those in need, regardless of age, with everything from legal advice, access to vaccines, patient advocacy, medical support, and suicide counseling. “On an average day pre-pandemic, we’d maybe get ten to 15 calls,” notes Jennifer Jorge, director of community social services for MPTF. “During COVID, we’ve been hitting 50 to 100 calls a day.”

On the Wasserman campus, employees and residents struggled to find ways to minimize isolation and depression during the long, lonely lockdown. “I knew that even if

this lockdown only lasted a month, people would be climbing the walls, because we have such an incredibly dynamic creative community,” says Jennifer Clymer, director of MPTF Studios and executive producer of programming for Channel 22, the campus’s closed-circuit television station. “The residents want to produce content and perform, so the best way for us to do that during COVID was a live variety show on Zoom five days a week.”

That variety show ended up with some pretty impressive guest stars. Jodie Foster moderated a Zoom party game called Mafia. Helen Hunt partnered with residents for a Zoom version of Password. Northrup hosted Harry’s Poetry Hour, during which he read some of his own verses. “It kept us sane,” says Bollinger.

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MEANWHILE, up in his office, Beitcher was managing another COVID-related crisis—dwindling cash reserves. As it happened, the pandemic arrived just as Jeffrey Katzenberg was exiting as head of the MPTF Foundation, a fundraising arm he’d established and had been overseeing since 1993. During his three-decade tenure at the job, the former Disney chief brought in an estimated \$500 million in donations, although about half of that was in legacy gifts (meaning MPTF

won’t see a dime until the donor dies). Still, it was a huge chunk of change, and MPTF needed every penny; it spends about \$70 million a year running the campus and funding its other endeavors. Typically, the organization runs at a \$7 million-a-year deficit. So when Katzenberg stepped down last year, he left a gaping fund-raising hole.

“There’s only one Jeffrey Katzenberg,” Beitcher says, “and we haven’t been able to figure out who could replace him.”

The pandemic obviously made fundraising all the more difficult. Along with the centennial gala, other MPTF events—like the annual “The Night Before” Oscar party and “The Evening Before” Emmy soiree—were put on hold or scaled down as virtual celebrations. And as less money was coming in, more was going out, with massive, unexpected expenditures on PPE, COVID testing, financial relief, and increased medical care for Wasserman residents, all of which further strained resources.

To help pick up some of the fundraising slack, MPTF has recruited board members like George Clooney, J.J. Abrams, and Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson. But having A-listers on your side can have its drawbacks. “People think MPTF doesn’t need help—that they’ve got every star supporting this organization,” says Courteney Bailey, MPTF’s chief development officer, who oversees its fundraising efforts. “That’s not the case.”

Still, as COVID finally appears to be receding, a ray of hope has started to shine over the Wasserman campus. “We’ve only had one COVID case since January!” Beitcher tells me when we reconnect over email in late May. “Life on our campus varies from day to day . . . [but] with the industry back to full force, we’re seeing less demand for financial services.”

Best of all, he finally got to throw his dream party. The MPTF centennial gala took place in June. ■