

Hollywood takes on SA health issues

By Linda Krige

PHOTOS BY KOBUS LOUBSER



Hollywood writers, producers and executives visited South Africa in May as part of efforts to inspire more global health storylines on popular US television shows.

The visitors were Karen Tenkhoff, a development partner at Walt Disney Feature Animation who has worked as producing partner with Robert Redford on films including *The Horse Whisperer* and *The Motorcycle Diaries*; Carol Barbee, consulting producer on *Hawaii Five-O*

issues. “Writers always need ideas – that’s why they come to us,” she explained on her recent visit.

Among the shows that have consulted HH&S are not only a host of medical dramas like *Grey’s Anatomy*, *ER* and *House*, but also shows such as *Army Wives*, *Law & Order: SVU* and the soap *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

The programme has been specifically working to inspire more storylines on health issues of a global nature, and has already seen these storylines increase from only nine in 2009 to 27 storylines in 2010 – an increase of 300%. The visit to South Africa, followed by a visit to India, formed part of efforts to inspire a greater focus on diseases like HIV/Aids, TB and malaria by putting writers in touch with issues ‘on the ground’.

To do this the Hollywood contingent visited clinics and hospitals in and around Johannesburg and listened to the personal stories of patients and recovering patients and the staff who treat them, to try and understand the health challenges facing the country and the innovative solutions used to address them.

“We’ve responded most to real stories of people who have really transformed their lives, and we’ve heard some amazing story tellers,” said De Castro Buffington. “It’s been so inspiring, I’m sure we’re going to see a lot of creative output as a result.”

SA vs Hollywood approach

The Hollywood visitors also interacted with the South African educational entertainment industry during a panel discussion at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg on 5 May. The South African industry was represented by Harriet Perlman of the Soul City Institute, Makgano Mamabolo of Puo Pha productions and Harriet Gavshon of Curious Pictures.

During the discussion the different approaches of HH&S and the South

African industry to imparting health messages through entertainment were clear.

“South Africa is a bit of an anomaly in that we show edudrama in prime time. Some of the best drama on South African television is actually educational,” said Harriet Gavshon, owner and managing director of Curious Pictures, the company behind edutainment hits such as *Intersexions* and *Hopeville*.

Intersexions, for example, was produced as an educational drama in partnership with Johns Hopkins Health and Education in South Africa (JHESA) and SABC Education, with funding from USAID and PEPFAR. In South Africa specific health messages are often carefully researched and worked into scripts while they still aim to make series as entertaining and accessible as possible.

South Africa was chosen as a destination for the HH&S visit partly due to the country’s long history of edutainment. However, De Castro Buffington said that HH&S follows ‘almost the opposite model’ when sending health messages.

While the programme tries to encourage and inspire writers and producers, it has no control over the actual health messages that go out on the shows they work with, since entertainment is the main aim of popular television. For example, while HH&S bought the Hollywood industry experts to South Africa, the visitors are under no obligation to use the material gathered.

“The purpose of the trip was to learn about global health in a local context and hopefully inspire its accurate portrayal in some form,” she explained.

Although entertainment comes first in the Hollywood approach, De Castro Buffington said they have extensive documented proof published in scientific journals of the impact of health messages in popular television. “When health messages are integrated into Hollywood’s riveting storylines, the impact on

knowledge and behaviour is exponentially greater than with traditional public health campaigns.”

Life-saving impact

Carol Barbee also testified to the potentially life-saving impact that popular entertainment can have, citing her time as the creator and writer of the medical drama *Three Rivers*. The drama is set at a transplant hospital and each episode tells the story of organ donation from the perspectives of the donor families, the recipients and the doctors.

“During the time the show was on air the rate of people registering to be organ donors went up nearly 10%, with people documented as saying they signed up to be donors specifically because of what they saw on *Three Rivers*,” explained Barbee.

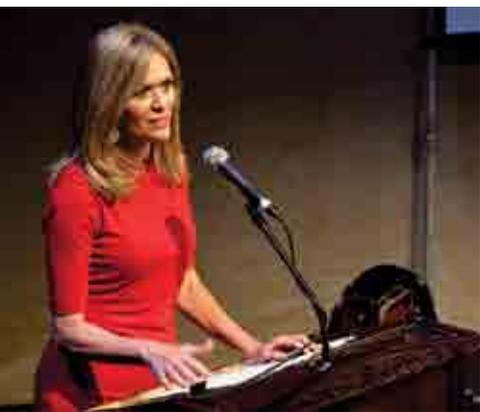
The day the network (CBS) called her to say the show was cancelled, she got an email from a woman saying that her daughter had received a heart transplant because the donor (a teenage girl) had watched *Three Rivers* with her parents the previous week and decided to become an organ donor.

“Our job is to make money for our corporate overlords firstly, then to entertain, not to educate,” said Barbee, “but contrary to popular belief Hollywood is actually filled with people who care deeply and want to make a difference.”

However, during the panel discussion Hollywood and South African industry experts agreed that health messages are strengthened when they are not sent out in isolation.

Harriet Perlman from the Soul City Institute emphasised that for educational drama to promote collective action and social change, it needs to be linked to wider social movements and campaigns for change within society.

De Castro Buffington concluded: “There is more power in acting together than acting alone.”



HEALTHY DISCUSSION –
Sandra de Castro Buffington

and creator of the medical drama *Three Rivers*; and John Max Burnett III, creator and executive producer of Nickelodeon’s *The Troop*.

The group was hosted by Hollywood Health & Society (HH&S), a programme of the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California, funded by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Cancer Institute and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

According to HH&S director Sandra de Castro Buffington the programme is a free service to writers and producers of prime time television and daytime soaps. It encourages the accurate portrayal of health issues in popular entertainment by offering story ideas, case studies, expert consultations and briefings on health