

Inside Track by Rob Kendt



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Casting Challenges Met

Casting director Vicki Huff and her associate Rick Van Noy had to cancel a number of agent-arranged sessions last week, but the agents didn't seem to mind in this case.

A breakdown had gone out for the WB's long-running family series *Seventh Heaven* calling for five actors in their 30s or 40s to play "mentally challenged" characters. Writer/producer Brenda Hampton told the CDs she expected they could find a few real-life mentally challenged actors and mix them with non-disabled actors playing the rest, à la the feature film *I Am Sam*. So Huff and Van Noy set up a number of auditions with agent-submitted actors, while simultaneously pursuing avenues to find mentally challenged performers.

Along those lines, the disabled advocacy organization Media Access pointed the CDs in the direction of Performing Arts Studio West, an acting school for mentally challenged actors run by John Paizis. And to their pleasant surprise, Huff and Van Noy found a deep enough talent pool to fill all five of the roles. "We had no reason to go elsewhere," said Van Noy. "We had set up a huge session for [non-disabled] actors to read for the roles, and we ended up canceling them all. All the agents were very happy to hear we'd found actual mentally challenged actors, and weren't concerned that we were canceling their clients."

So how did the auditions go? The performers from Paizis' school, said Van Noy, came in "totally prepared, and Vicki gave them adjustments they took in the room."

Mental disabilities have a wide range of origins and symptoms, and the actors casting were "disabled to varying degrees." None had the familiar Downs Syndrome look of Chris Burke, the actor who played Corky on *Life Goes On*, but Van Noy indicated that their appearance marked them in some way as disabled; one performer, for instance, had cerebral palsy. And some were already in SAG, while others had to be Taft-Hartleyed.

Paizis reportedly went with his students to the set every day to coach them. Van Noy indicated that the roles are guest star parts with considerable screen time near the episode's end. "We've seen the dailies," he said, "and they did a great job."

Which only goes to show that any casting director who thinks it's impossible to find qualified disabled actors is, shall we say, professionally challenged.