

Team Leader

Manager Barb North helps comedian/actors with all aspects of their careers—and she doesn't do it alone.

by Cressandra Thibodeaux

Barb North of Brook Forest Entertainment, LLC, has been in comedy development and management with her husband, Steve North, for 10 years. Originally from Chicago, the Norths are no strangers to acting and comedy; they began as a comedy team in the 1970s. In the late 1980s the Norths were head writers for *The Gong Show* and wrote and produced for many others, including *Candid Camera*, *Make Me Laugh*, *Bachelor Party*, and *Switcheroo*.

Eventually, her husband was asked to coach some of the talent. "My husband was coaching comedians to help them with their act, and I started coaching comedians to help them with their acting," said North. Some of the comedians were becoming working actors who needed management, so the Norths started managing. "It's weird, because there was a time *we* still had a manager because we were performing, writing, and producing," North recalled. "And then we started managing, so we would introduce our manager to our clients as their 'grand-manager.'"

Ten years later, Brook Forest Entertainment is going strong. The Norths work side by side; North takes care of the business and emotional support, while Steve, who coaches hundreds of beginning and working comedians, offers the creative support. It's always a team effort.

Who and what their company handles: For Barb North management is about career development, career direction, and pulling the whole team together. The performer is an integral part of the team and the product. The Norths keep their roster small—six to 10 clients. Currently they represent actor/comedians James P. Connelly, Eric Schwartz, Jay Hewlett, Rob Brackenridge, writer Joey Green, and actor Coleman McClary.

Where they find their clients: They've found clients through their workshops, referrals, festivals, and competitions—and one blind-submitted a photo and resumé. But North doesn't want people to think blind submissions will do the trick. "We have to feel a connection," North explained. Because the first year of the relationship is laying the groundwork, the right client is someone the Norths want to be with for a long term, who has a promising career, and who wants to work with them long-term. "It's like asking people how they find friends," North said. "There are many ways."

Many of their clients came to them initially for coaching—for help in developing their own voices. "Finding your own voice is about who you are, what your life experiences are, and what part of your comedic character is funny," North said.

North admitted she has chosen not to manage certain people even though she sensed talent, because she could also sense that as soon as they found success they would instantly want to change managers. "Sometimes you do have to move to a different agent," said North. "But managers are your team player. Our relationship with our clients is personal."

A success-and-failure story: One young actor/comedian the Norths managed was very talented but new to standup, coming to Los Angeles from New York. After she had spent three years in Los Angeles with nothing to show, the Norths met her and worked with her for four months. They got her an agent, booked her into a comedy festival, and landed her a national commercial. It was the beginning of July, and she



Barb North.

had three auditions within two weeks for series regulars. And then it was quiet for a week. And then the next week she quit, dismissed her agent and managers, and went back to N.Y., telling North, "I'm not happy. It's not going fast enough."

"It was so sad to see what she was doing with her career," North said. "When we see someone with tremendous talent who's been around for a while, we need to say, 'Why hasn't it happened for this person?' What she was doing was so incredibly destructive."

Her ideal actor: The Norths are looking for someone they are convinced possesses tremendous talent and tremendous potential. According to North, management is like a marriage: It takes time to know a person, who they are, what they're about, and how you work together.

"I'm at a time in my life where I want to work with people that I love working with and that I can be committed to in their career," North said. She's also looking for clients who can be committed to her.

What happens once you're in the door: North reminds actors that a manager, like an agent, can only do so much. A manager takes 15 percent of your income, which means you have to do 85 percent of the work. Even with an agent or manager, she insisted, it's your responsibility to work hard, be in class, network, do theatre, etc. The manager is not a shortcut to success but someone heading up your team.

The Norths try to offer a full environment for comedians, offering showcases, classes, and guidance. Brook Forest Entertainment holds showcases every Thursday at the LA Connection. The participating actors are usually in their workshops, are existing clients, or are being coached by Steve North. The company also holds four industry nights per year.

What her clients say about her: The Norths are highly praised by client James P. Connolly, who in turn has been described by industry professionals as "a young Steve Martin with a healthy dose of Ted Baxter."

After graduating from Harvard University and serving as a Marine Corps officer for four years, Connolly was a disc jockey/karaoke host and Universal Studios tour guide before finding a home with Brook Forest Entertainment, where the Norths have managed him for seven years.

Under their management, he's been the Host of VHI's *Movie Obsessions*, a Grand Comedy Champion of Ed McMahon's *Next Big Star*, and seen recently on HBO's *The Sport*. Connolly performs regularly in Las Vegas, Reno, and Lake Tahoe; in Los Angeles at such top clubs as The Improv, Catch a Rising Star, Zanies, and the Ice House, and throughout the country.

"The best thing is that Barb North has experience on both sides," said Connolly. "Having been a professional performer, she knows what it's like to be in my shoes. And having written and produced shows, she knows what it's like to be on the other side and what people are looking for. She can speak both languages, she can talk to me as the performer and then say, 'All right, but this is what's happening on the other side.' I'm learning it's two different worlds."

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