

Assistants in the news...this New York Times article from June 8, 2004

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**HEADLINE:** Celebrity Assistants Keep the Stars Twinkling

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Unedited text

## When Their Wish Is Your Command; Pg. 1

There is a moment in the documentary "Elaine Stritch at Liberty" when this Broadway legend is tromping through her hotel room at the Savoy in London, raised fist shaking, berating her assistant for failing to get tickets for someone.

"You didn't succeed with it yesterday, so do it right now," Ms. Stritch yells in her sandpapered rasp.

At Wednesday night's screening of the film at HBO's private theater in Manhattan, the audience gave a knowing laugh. It was, after all, also the monthly meeting of New York Celebrity Assistants -- a "survivors meeting," as someone called it -- and who there had not had to wrangle tickets for a finger-tapping boss?

If diaper launderers have their own association and cosmetics chemists have their own society, why should celebrity assistants not have their own organization, a place where they can confide, consult and kvetch?

At least that is what Bonnie Kramen (Olympia Dukakis's personal assistant for 18 years) thought when she helped found the group with a handful of colleagues eight years ago.

"Most of us run one-person offices, and you're in a vacuum," said Ms. Kramen, who does everything from picking up prescriptions to reading scripts. "But we have such a need to know each other, such a need for resources, contacts who we trust."

Where else could you find out the best place to get a 50-pound beaded gown cleaned or who is owed a favor by the maitre d'hotel at Nobu or how you ship a dog from New York to Africa? It's all in the spirit of "Why shouldn't my plant man become-your plant man?"

"It's a wonderful source," says Audrey Bamber (Richard Dreyfuss, 21 years), whose 24/7 job has meant spending weeks on location in places like "ravingly hot and sweaty" French Guiana, and bone-chilling Libby, Mont., where there were "not enough rooms in the town to house the crew."

One thing that it is not, though, is gossipy, Rick Borutta (Ms. Stritch, four years) insists. Assistants know secrets you would not want to share with your therapist; the lipo that was suctioned, the bills that went unpaid, the herpes that was transmitted.

"It's one of the most difficult relationships in the world," said Ms. Stritch, outfitted in a fisherman-style rain hat, sweater vest and silk-dotted tie, in varying shades of beige and tan.

"I'm the new assistant," the actress Stockard Channing announced as she arrived with Ms. Stritch. Her prospective employer retorted, "You wouldn't last 15 minutes."

Ms. Stritch complimented Mr. Borutta, whom she called an "adorable pain," on his blue-and-yellow-dotted tie, one she had given him. "She would like me to dress how she's dressed: a sweater vest, a tie, a shirt and everything matching," he said.

For a while Mr. Borutta and Ms. Stritch lived in the same Sag Harbor house, where they watched late night television and sang show tunes. "She'd even call my mother on Mother's Day," Mr. Borutta said.

The job requires walking a fine line between intimacy and professionalism, a bit like the nanny who is paid to feed, bathe and hug your child. Ms. Kramen has attended weddings of the Dukakis children, and Ms. Dukakis was there for Ms. Kramen's son's bar mitzvah. Still, she knows, "we're friends, but our business relationship comes first."

Karen Palmer (Itzhak Perlman, 15 years) said, "We have a very clear understanding that his life and my life are two separate entities."

That does not mean there is not some dish. No names please, but Ms. Kramen does know of stories like the one about the A-list actor traveling in London who called his assistant in New York at 4 a.m. to say "the toilet paper was running out in the bathroom, and could she call the hotel and handle it?" One assistant can attest to the rose petals that Barbra Streisand insists be strewn over her bathroom.

Those are the stories that are making some former assistants money from tell-all books, like "The Devil Wears Prada" (Broadway), a thinly veiled fictional account of working for the "boss from hell" by Laura Weisberger, a former assistant to Anna Wintour of Vogue.

Yet much of the work of longtime assistants is usually less juicy; people with bosses like the supermodel Naomi Campbell, who cracked her assistant in the head with a telephone, usually don't make it to "longtime" status. Much of the time it's business as usual. And that is when New York Celebrity Assistants is most helpful to its 90 members.

"We can send out a group e-mail to our members, and answers come back in five minutes," Ms. Kramen said.

For instance there was the time that she needed someone to teach Ms. Dukakis to fake playing the trumpet for her role in the 2000 television movie "The Last of the Blonde Bombshells." Out went the e-mail request, and within minutes a former assistant to Isaac Stern hooked her up with a trumpet player from the New York Philharmonic. The tutor carried an extra trumpet and made house calls.

After Luther Vandross, the R&B singer, had a stroke last year, his assistant, Max Szadek (eight years) did not have to send out an e-mail message to get a call from another assistant he had met in the ticket line for the organization's night at "Urinetown." She worked for a doctor who headed a hospital rehabilitation unit.

"That referral was just a breakthrough," said Mr. Szadek, who was able to get Mr. Vandross into the unit.

To join the New York group, assistants have to have a year's experience. Dues are \$150 a year, and everyone must sign a nondisclosure statement. Members are listed next to the names of their employers, a bit like 50's-era wives who are introduced by their husbands' names at society functions. The perks of membership include special movie screenings, theater premieres, four-star restaurant banquets and seminars on topics like security and hiring a stylist. (A Los Angeles group originally was associated but now is independent.)

Ms. Kramen, who teaches a course at the Learning Annex about becoming a celebrity assistant, tells aspirants that they should consider how much they like cleaning out closets, color coding files and organizing books, not to mention phoning and getting.

After Elton John sent Ms. Stritch an orchid when she was in London, she asked if he would send one to every hotel room on her national tour. Immediately he signaled his assistant. For months afterward a bigger and bigger orchid awaited her, till the one sent to her home base at the Carlyle Hotel in New York was so large that it is now sitting in the lobby.

As for her own assistant, Ms. Stritch was notorious for giving out Mr. Borutta's number to Stephen Sondheim, Dixie Carter, William Goldman -- people, Mr. Borutta, said, with whom you "know that 'no' was not the word you could use" -- who wanted last-minute tickets to her Broadway show.

These sorts of demands do not phase Ms. Kramen, who happily considers herself "a lifer." Other assistants, though, often use the position as a stepping stone. Ms. Channing said she had just hired an assistant after going years without one. "I didn't want to get too dependent on someone," she said.

"They will grow up and leave you," Ms. Stritch said. Mr. Borutta, for instance, is now studying documentary filmmaking at Hunter College.

As for their relationship now? "Now I am going to school only 10 blocks from the Carlyle," he said. "I run into her on the street, and we walk together. 'One of these days,' we say to each other, 'we are going to have dinner together.'"