



HOLLYWOOD

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It began as a happy accident. In March 2002, screenwriter B. Daniel Blatt '85 organized a dinner for Ephs after a New England Small Colleges function for Los Angeles-area alumni trying to break into show business. When nearly two dozen Williams alumni and friends crammed around a long table at a North Hollywood restaurant and stayed until

closing to exchange e-mail addresses and business leads, Blatt knew he was on to something.

Thus began Ephs in Entertainment, a drinking club with a networking problem. Informal monthly dinner meetings circulate among area restaurants and focus on giving industry newcomers and veterans opportunities to mix without feeling self-conscious. *NYPD Blue*'s Gordon Clapp '71 is a regular attendee.

Independent Spirit Award-winning actor David Strathairn '70 and entertainment attorney Peter Nelson '76 (who has represented several *West Wing* actors and *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson) have dropped in on occasion. And Steve Lawson '71 tapped the group to help bolster an L.A. event to raise awareness of his Williamstown Film Festival.

"Instead of a forced 'meet and greet,' I wanted something relaxed and low-key,"

EPHS IN TINSEL

By Susan Karlin



Brett Hershey '94 (center), producer and director, on the set of *Fast Cars & Babies*. Photo by Jeff Wong.

FRUSTRATED BY THE DEARTH OF UNPRETENTIOUS ENTERTAINMENT NETWORKING GROUPS IN L.A., SCREENWRITER B. DANIEL BLATT '85 STARTED ONE OF HIS OWN WITH A GROUP OF WILLIAMS ALUMNI.

L-TOWN



Informal monthly dinner meetings, like this one at a Burbank restaurant, offer industry newcomers and veterans opportunities to mix without feeling self-conscious.



B. Daniel Blatt '85, founder of Ephs in Entertainment.

says Blatt, who's at work on his fifth screenplay, *The Lady of Mississippi*, an interracial love story set in the Jim Crow-era South. "L.A. is a difficult town in which to meet people. I wanted to make it easier for Williams alums who came here to reconnect with the school and meet people who've done something in the industry."

The dinners, which each attract a dozen or so participants, have a grassroots, homespun feel to them. Between the drinks and the entrées, Blatt asks guests to introduce themselves, discuss their professions and aspirations, and then pay a compliment to a fellow



Hershey (front row, left) with (clockwise) actor Ben Weber, producer Norman Anderson '97 and actor Gordon Clapp '71. Photo by Jeff Wong.

Eph or mention a positive experience they had that week. By the time the last person finishes, the margaritas are flowing and the event is off and running. This festive attitude has become such a group trademark that it tends to flavor related functions, like Lawson's Williamstown Film Festival in L.A. event, which significant numbers of Ephs attended.

Though Los Angeles is overrun with networking groups, Ephs in Entertainment offers two distinct benefits. Monthly meetings make it easier to maintain contacts in an industry that relies so heavily on relationships for business deals.

And, unlike other groups, where it's often difficult to separate players from posers, Ephs in Entertainment is decidedly unassuming, allowing friendships to emerge organically out of the dinners.

In just one year, Ephs in Entertainment managed to foster two independent-film projects. During a four-day shoot last February, Brett Hershey '94, an Internet entrepreneur-turned-filmmaker, enlisted about a dozen Ephs for a 10-minute piece that recently inked a deal with Hypnotic, a premier short-film distributor whose leadership includes Gene Klein '92.



Hershey (left) discusses a scene in *Fast Cars* with Clapp. Photo by Jeff Wong.

The film, *Fast Cars & Babies*, chronicles a husband's ill-fated attempts to sell a beloved sports car in favor of a practical family vehicle in which to shuttle around his imminent baby. Included in the credits are producer Norm Anderson '97, attorney Melanie Lerch '97, editors Harry Yoon '93 and James Towne '93, Kara Weber '94, Shawn Song '01, Blatt, Nelson and Clapp, who has a campy cameo as an effete cowboy. Participants can use *Fast Cars*, which was submitted to several short-film festivals, as a "calling card" for future work.

"This film would not have happened at its level of professionalism without this group," says Hershey. "Through it, I was able to meet people, like Gordon, who had spent a number of years in the industry and were able to refer me to other professionals who participated. The Williams connection galvanized a stable of high-quality artists and provided a community of intelligent, talented people for this project."

Hershey was so pleased with the results that in July he directed a second short film, *Bananas*, which involved many of the same participants, including Clapp as the star and an executive

producer. Clapp put Hershey in touch with *Moonlight Mile* director Brad Silberling '85, who also served as an executive producer.

Ephs in Entertainment "started out as a way of socializing with bright people who had a common experience and as a way of putting something back into the school," says Clapp, who won an Emmy for his role as *NYPD Blue*'s Detective Greg Medavoy. "But it's become a launch pad and sounding board for ideas, projects and ... new artistic avenues. I remember these kinds of salon-like groups when I was living in New York and Toronto in the 80s, and I missed them. When the opportunity presented itself again, I thought I'd give it a shot, and it's been very productive."

It was at Williams that Clapp met Strathairn and director John Sayles '72. "I decided to cast John in a senior play, and it's been paying dividends ever since," jokes Clapp, who has starred in four of Sayles' films, three with Strathairn.

Back in Williamstown, the College is delighted with Ephs in Entertainment's success. "The group fills a real need," says Lewis Fisher '89, an alumni relations and development director who coordinated last year's NESAC networking event. "It's hard for us to do things for alumni so far away without local leadership. Dan has given Ephs a structure and outlet that is really unique and wonderful."

Society of Alumni President Richard Pickard '75 calls the group "exactly the type of alumni activity that we would like to see blossom all over the world."

In the coming year, he says, the Executive Committee of the Society of Alumni and the Alumni Office will focus attention on mentoring in employment, hobbies and other areas of intellectual, athletic and artistic interest. "Participants will have the opportunity to help other alumni and enjoy each other's company in the process," Pickard says. "Ephs in Entertainment already accomplishes these objectives."

Meanwhile, Blatt—with the help of producers Cari-Esta Albert '80 and Andrea Smith '86—launched the first Purple Cow Short Film Festival on July 13 in Los Angeles. The festival, which Blatt hopes to organize annually, featured submissions from Clapp, Hershey, actress Purva Bedi '96 and Silberling, among other Ephs.

In the long term, Blatt hopes Ephs in Entertainment will continue to serve as a resource for West Coast alumni and the College.

"People should be able to use Ephs in Entertainment to help promote and support the work of Williams alums and encourage them to attend their film screenings and performances," he says. "I also want this group to be a safe haven, where members don't have to heavily market themselves but can simply be themselves." ■

Susan Karlin is an award-winning journalist based in Los Angeles.