

There's nothing more welcome in the TV business than a hand up. Just ask these five young talents — and the pros who have their backs.

GIMME FIVE!

BY LISA ROSEN

NOBODY MAKES IT IN THIS BUSINESS ALONE. No matter their brilliance, networking prowess or charisma, everybody doing well has had a hand up — if not dozens. For those fortunate enough to find success, the happy job then falls on them to reach out to support emerging talent.

Here, five masters of their craft make a point of cheering on a new associate. This particular gang is gathered under the Universal Studio Group umbrella, but anywhere it rains talent, you'll see industry veterans kindly and quietly going about the business of making the business easier to navigate for the next crew. If you are among that helpful group, kudos to you. And if you are the lucky recipient of such largesse, your turn will come soon enough.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRAKHA X2

A GO-GETTER'S GO-GETTER ROSANNE TAN AND CAROLINE WANG

Editor Rosanne Tan does her level best to get rid of her assistants — so they can become editors themselves. While working on USA's *Mr. Robot* (created by Sam Esmail), Tan pushed Zach Dehm out of the assistant nest. Looking to replace him, her thoughts turned to Caroline Wang.

The two had met a couple of years earlier at a book signing for Lori Coleman, a mentor and friend to many other editors. When the group decamped to someone's home, Wang joined and listened to them chat about the industry. After that, she asked Tan to meet for coffee.

"To be honest, at that time in my life I hadn't seen that many Asian women in the field," Wang says. "So I really wanted to talk to her and get her story, and see how she got in." Over coffee, they learned they'd grown up near each other. They'd also both started out in reality before making the jump to scripted. "We shared a lot of similarities in our background, which was so cool and exciting for me."

Wang emailed periodically after that, congratulating Tan on an episode and on the birth of her first child. "She kept in contact — which I love about her — because out of sight, out of mind," Tan says. So when Dehm moved on, she knew whom to call. "Caroline jumped on a moving train on fire, because it was the middle of season four of *Robot*. She's been my assistant editor ever since." The two worked together most recently on Marvel's *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* for Disney+.

Persistence got Wang in the door, but it was chops that kept her there. "Caroline's very detail-oriented," Tan says. "Any task I give her, she tries to think ahead. That shows her character."

When they have time, Tan passes scenes to Wang to cut, then gives notes for her to cut again. "That has been a great teaching tool," Wang says. "Rosie's a perfectionist; she pushes me to always aim higher. She's a very patient, understanding and generous boss. I feel like she helped me come out of my shell a little bit."

Tan sees herself in Wang, "as far as her willingness, her attitude, her wanting to be an editor one day. She has worked her ass off for me. Somebody gave me a chance back in the day. I want to see her succeed as an editor, and I hope I can be the one to give her that shot."



ROSANNE TAN



CAROLINE WANG

THE IMMEDIATE EMBRACE

CARLA BANKS-WADDLES AND ESTER LOU WEITHERS

When Ester Lou Weithers was hired to write on *Good Girls*, she received an email with the office address, parking instructions and a list of her new coworkers. So, naturally, the first thing she did was Google everyone. "When I discovered Carla Banks-Waddles, I was like, 'I think this is a Black woman!' I was immediately excited to meet Carla, just knowing she was a Black woman who has been in the business longer than I have, someone who could guide me through the writing, but also help me navigate the industry."

Meanwhile, executive producer Banks-Waddles had heard about Weithers from *Good Girls*'s creator-showrunner, Jenna Bans, and couldn't wait to meet her. "Jenna was over the moon, talking about all the stories Ester had to tell, how confident and grounded and fun she was, and how she really got the show."

So when they met in the elevator at the start of season three, "Ester immediately hugged me and said, 'I've heard so much about you — it's so good to be in this room with you,'" Banks-Waddles remembers.

"She was so energetic and focused and warm and sisterly, and we hadn't even walked into the room yet. I thought, 'I'm really going to like her.'"

Weithers laughs at the memory. "Looking back, that's an invasion of her personal space. But I was so excited — I was probably in her office every day."

The two soon realized that they shared remarkably similar backgrounds, having both started in journalism, moved into P.R. and then taken the risk to move to L.A. and pursue their television writing dreams.

Banks-Waddles was impressed by Weithers's openness. "Ester was raised in Houston, the child of Caribbean immigrants, a pastor and a teacher. She brings all of that to the room. She wants to tell stories that are culturally relevant and reflect what it means to be a woman, and a woman of color. She's very honest about who she is."

She predicts that Weithers will not only have a successful career, but

that she will bring others up in her turn. "Those are the kinds of people you want to rise to the top."

Weithers finds Banks-Waddles's presence, in the room and out, both calming and hilarious. "Carla was good about keeping us grounded, keeping it light and reminding us, 'At the end of the day, we're making TV — let's relax and enjoy ourselves.' And I told Carla that no matter what happens, she can't get rid of me. Now that I've met her, I'm never going to let her go."



TAZBAH CHAVEZ



MICHAEL SCHUR

OH, THE PLACES SHE'LL GO! MICHAEL SCHUR AND TAZBAH CHAVEZ

The Peacock comedy *Rutherford Falls* centers on two best friends, Nathan Rutherford (Ed Helms), a descendent of the town's founder, and Reagan Wells (Jana Schmedding), a member of the fictional Native American tribe upon whose land the town was built. Their conflicting historical perspectives frame the show, so cocreators Helms, Michael Schur and Sierra Teller Ornelas thought it stood to reason that half the writing staff should be Native American.

Tazbah Chavez was new to a comedy writers' room, but she had a strong background in storytelling: she started out as a performance poet at age fourteen and learned filmmaking through a summer academy her father cofounded on their Bishop Palute reservation. "Forgetting that she's Native [American], her biography and résumé were perfect for a TV show because she came at writing from twelve different angles," says Schur (*The Good Place*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*).

"The discussion about whether to hire her took about twenty seconds, because that's how long it took for everybody to say yes," he adds. "And she's an extraordinarily pleasant person to be around," which counts for a lot in a writers' room. "She also has an incredible energy, and her observations about

writing are really incisive — she has the ability to identify things that are good and bad about a story idea very quickly."

Chavez was all set to be intimidated on her first day at work. "I was like, 'I don't want to touch anything. I want to sit up straight,'" she recalls. "But as soon as Mike came into the room, he was so down to earth, such a regular guy, really kind and easy to be around." Beyond that, "He encouraged us to tell authentic stories, which my community hasn't had a huge opportunity to do."

Observing Schur gave Chavez insights into how to work in the field as well as the room — "with kindness," she says. "I have never heard him talk badly about anybody. He has integrity at his core."

As soon as *Rutherford Falls* wrapped its first season, Chavez started work on another show, FX's *Reservation Dogs*. Schur wasn't surprised. "Tazbah is like a human stem cell — she has an almost limitless number of paths she could walk down and become a great creative success in any of them. That's exciting to see, though a little annoying actually, now that I say this out loud. No one should have that much potential to pursue any one of a hundred different interests."



TRACEY WIGFIELD

THE INGENUE ALREADY EAGER TO GIVE BACK TRACEY WIGFIELD AND HASKIRI VELAZQUEZ

Peacock's *Saved by the Bell* is that rare reboot that burnishes the luster of a beloved original, adding a cheeky, satirical sensibility and inclusive cast to the show's affluent southern California high-school setting. Much of the credit goes to executive producer Tracey Wigfield (*The Mindy Project*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*), who developed the show.

Wigfield, in turn, brings star Haskiri Velazquez out for a bow. "I think she has this huge career ahead of her," Wigfield declares, "and I want it to be publicly noted that I had a small part in the beginning of that journey for her."

When Velazquez first auditioned for the lead of Daisy Jiménez, a hardworking Latina student being bussed to Bayside High, "She didn't have that much experience," Wigfield recalls, "but she had such authenticity. There are qualities about her that you can't act your way into. She's really winning. Daisy could come off as annoying, but with Haskiri doing it, she doesn't."

With a large number of young cast members new-to-the business, Wigfield set aside time for rehearsals before going on set, so everyone



HASKIRI VELAZQUEZ

could get comfortable. But even with the prep, she felt for her star on the first day of filming. "There were eight executives sitting in video village with me, watching her first scene," Wigfield says. "If it were me, I would crack and drive off the lot. But she handled the pressure in such an impressive way. She just rolled with it and took everybody's notes."

Velazquez is grateful that she gave that impression. "Honestly, I felt like I'd shoved a bunch of cotton balls in my mouth overnight and dehydrated myself. That first day was so terrifying. But everyone on that soundstage was so welcoming, so helpful. They greeted me with smiles and hugs — when hugs were a thing," Wigfield in particular. "From the day I met her, there was an energy to her of positivity and warmth. She's so humble. And so fierce."

The actress found her way into drama through an afterschool nonprofit urban arts partnership during high school. Now she hopes to open a similar program in her old neighborhood, New York City's Washington Heights, so other Latinx girls can immerse themselves in the arts. "I want to help them and be a source of inspiration some way, somehow."



FRIGHTFUL FRIENDS
DAVID KIRSCHNER AND TYLER CHRISTENSEN

My wife is one of those people who just goes to bed and falls asleep, while I'm pretty sure I hear something in the house," David Kirschner confesses. "And she sleeps with her foot sticking out of the covers, which I find highly irresponsible in the world of monsters." Kirschner himself has populated the world with creatures as cowriter of such fare as the 1993 film *Hocus Pocus*, and producer of the robust *Child's Play* horror film series, all of which were written by Don Mancini.

Fortunately, Kirschner found colleagues who share his fervor for things that go bump in the night. Mancini is one; they're working together on the upcoming USA/SYFY series *Chucky*. Tyler Christensen is another. Kirschner first read Christensen's work as a writing sample for *Chucky* and was impressed. Though Christensen wasn't hired for the show, Kirschner invited him to lunch, where they became fast friends as well as collaborators. Kirschner is now on board to produce four of Christensen's projects, each one scarier than the next.

Kirschner has met plenty of capable people across his career. "But this rare kind of talent makes you feel like you're ten years old. You want to make a movie immediately. That's the passion that Tyler brings out in me

with what he has created."

Christensen came out to L.A. from Wisconsin in 2005, hoping to write, but he fell into working on reality shows. He credits his husband with encouraging him to stop taking gigs and instead devote himself fulltime to his creative vision. And he credits Kirschner with helping him realize it. Without his support, he says, "I probably would have given up by now."

At that first lunch, Christensen told Kirschner that as a child, he visited an abandoned mine with his grandfather, who told him to look into a small gap in the rocks and asked, "What do you see?" Young Tyler couldn't see anything. Then his grandfather said, "Now what could you see if you used your imagination?" "It gave me goosebumps when he told me the story," Kirschner recalls.

"That's part of the reason I look up to David so much," Christensen says. "He is absolutely that guy: 'You didn't see anything there? What if you did?'"

Kirschner plays a game with his own grandchildren called "Hide and Go Freak," adding chills and thrills to the usual proceedings. "His grandchildren are either going to grow up to be the most incredible human beings or the most messed up," Christensen jokes. "I'm incredibly jealous of them." ☺