

## TALENT NURTURER



What do you get when you put a love of teaching and acting and directing together, and mix it with a deep belief in the need for advocacy for young actors' rights?

You get Liz Baldwin-Featherstone and her talent agency for kids and young people; LBF Kids and Teens. Liz runs the business from Auckland, out of her studio with its stunning view of the Manukau Harbour. It's a foul day, but even so, the outlook is lovely; a beautiful moody vista of sky and sea.

Liz is all go. She exclaims at the gorgeous view. She inhales the smell of our freshly brewed coffee with a blissful smile. She excitedly shares the latest success stories involving kids from her agency. She shouts animatedly at an email about an overseas producer trying to swindle people. She whoops with delight at a lovely 'thank you' text from the parent of one of the kids on her books. She swears enthusiastically at some malfunctioning technology. Meanwhile she's also rattling off ideas about how to open up opportunities for her actors, thoughts for the future of her business, and plans for an archaeological dig this summer.

I'm grateful for the coffee; I'll need it to keep up!

It's Liz's ability to multi-task, yet remain emotionally engaged, that makes her the perfect person to run a talent agency like this one, where it's all about the detail.

But first things first. What is a talent agency?

An actors' talent agency is a company with actors on its books who are actively interested in acting on screen for film or camera. Actors are needed for smaller jobs, such as a featured role on a television advertisement, through to much larger roles, for television series or feature films. To find the actors they're looking for (the 'talent'), casting agencies contact talent agencies with a brief of what they need, and the search begins. Talent agencies then make a selection from their books and submit suitable profiles to the client. The client makes a shortlist and selected candidates audition.

All going well, the talent agency's submission is chosen, the actor does the job and has a wonderful experience, everyone gets paid, happy clients, great result, end of story.

That may sound simple, but there's a lot more to it than meets the eye. Especially, if like Liz Baldwin-Featherstone, you've made it your personal mission to fight for the rights of young actors and ensure their rights are respected and their wellbeing is always paramount.

In real terms, that means checking the initial brief to make sure it's fair, (liaising with industry peers when necessary), and negotiating with the client on any problematic issues such as hours or pay rates. It then means checking with parents that kids are available and the family can support them through the process. This support is emotional, but also, practical. It's literally ferrying kids to auditions and then if successful, to call-backs if need be, then wardrobe fittings, and the shoot itself. Some of this process unavoidably takes place during school hours, so for a young actor to have the best hope of success, he or she truly does need a supportive family.

As Liz says, “Some families just really get it. They understand what a wonderful experience it is for their kid, and what an incredible opportunity it is, and that just to get an audition is a really big deal! So they bend over backwards to help make it happen.”

Choosing the candidates is a process in itself. The path of least resistance would be to make a selection based on the specs, and put forward everyone who more or less fitted the brief, but Liz is extremely proud of the fact that LBF doesn't operate like that. Instead, she puts great thought into each submission.

“I only put people forward when they're right. If they're not -that's that. I'd rather put forward nobody, than just anyone, for the sake of it, or someone who isn't in the right place, creatively, for that particular job.”

Liz takes everything into account, including the personality and experience of the actor, and how capable he/she is to deliver the particular performance required for this job. She can gauge this, because she works with them personally. Every actor on her books aged 6 or older does an acting workshop on joining the agency, and even babies and toddlers are assessed during their all-important booking in meetings.

All the actors on the agency's books may also attend the exclusive LBF 'Acting Academy' where, in addition to acting, they learn camera and auditioning skills, and work with Liz and her primo team of professional tutors, casting directors and directors. It's a wonderful opportunity for the kids to work directly with industry professionals, and hone their on-screen acting techniques in a supportive and positive environment.

She says: “I love being able to offer the kids and teens something extraordinary, at the very beginning of their journey!”

Mother hen-like, Liz also keeps tabs on her actors' emotional states and what's going on for them in the rest of their lives. While I'm there, she chooses not to put forward a teen for a (very big and lucrative) job. The teen meets the brief in every way, and seems custom-made for the role. Liz describes how talented he is, and the 'extraordinary vulnerability' this young actor is able to project, on camera. Putting him forward would seem like a no-brainer, to most people. But no. “He *would* be perfect - at another time. But not now. The timing's all wrong. He's going through something at the moment, and he's got exams coming up. He needs to put all his energy into focusing on himself, and his schoolwork. And that's important for his family, too. It's fine. That's just what they need at the moment; I totally respect that.”

She goes on to explain that working with her actors regularly, and making the effort to know their families and what is going on in the wider context of their lives might seem like a simple thing, but it is actually the glue that holds the whole agency together. Liz's open and trusting relationships with her actors and their support people lead to strong and confident acting performances from her actors, happy casting agents who are confident that Liz will only put forward excellent talent, and in turn, contented clients and more bookings.

The proof is in the pudding. Despite launching in the middle of the recession in 2011 (“Nowhere to go but up,” chortles Liz), LBF Teens & Kids grew rapidly from a small operation with a couple of dozen kids on its books, to several hundred actors. Based in Auckland, and with branches in Wellington and Christchurch, it's now a serious player in the market and is regularly approached by big-league international casting agencies, for submissions.

The project board on the wall in the office is a maze of current and upcoming jobs, and recent successes include LBF kids winning roles on new TV series *800 Words*, and upcoming feature film, *The Wonder*. Other current projects featuring LBF actors include *Mahana*, *Shortland Street*, *Westside*, *Mechanic Resurrection 2*, Disney's 'Pete's Dragon', and *The Hillary Series*.

Liz has recently launched a new division of the company; LBF Management, designed to help actors (including former LBF Kids and Teens actors who are now 18+), manage their acting careers. “Our teens are growing up, and we are growing with them”, she says, with immense pride.

I comment that this is a business built on relationships, and she shouts emphatically. ‘Yes! Yes! Absolutely! It's ALL about the relationships!’



We finish off, and I pack up my things. An actor arrives, the emails keep pinging in. I look at Liz, now laughing on the phone with a casting director. I give her a wave as I leave, and get a huge one back, along with a gorgeous smile, and drive home, feeling good.

It *is* all about the relationships.

*Written by Bridget Ellis-Pegler who occasionally works with Liz, as do her daughters, both of whom have had the fabulous experience of being filmed for TV ads recently.*