



COMPANY TOWN

THE BUSINESS BEHIND THE SHOW

On Location

Union Rescue Mission gets a helping hand from Hollywood

Hope Gardens Family Center, which serves homeless families and battered women, expects to make \$200,000 this year from TV and movie shoots at its 71-acre site.



Scott Johnson, right, vice president of the Union Rescue Mission's Hope Gardens Family Center in Sylmar, said filming is crucial for the shelter. "Every penny goes right back to our programs to help our women and children," he says. (Kirk McCoy, Los Angeles Times / January 15, 2013)

By Richard Verrier, Los Angeles Times

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One of the newest hot spots for filming in the San Fernando Valley is a 71-acre former retirement community featuring lodge-style residences and medical buildings, surrounded by oaks, redwoods and pines, on the edge of the Angeles National Forest — owned and operated by the Union Rescue Mission.

On a chilly Tuesday morning, operations manager Scott Johnson was barreling a red golf cart through the sprawling hillside facility, known as Hope Gardens Family Center, his two-way radio crackling.

An actor was lost. Someone wanted to rent equipment for the film shoot. And an elderly resident asked him to fix her broken toaster.

"Come call time at 10 a.m., it will be jammed," said Johnson, who was making arrangements to accommodate the crew of "Max Rose," an indie movie starring Hollywood legend Jerry Lewis, which was about to begin nine days of filming at Hope Gardens. The filming will generate about \$20,000 in revenue for the center, providing much needed supplemental revenue for the charity.

Hope Gardens relies on private donations and foundation grants to finance an annual budget of \$4.2 million a year to pay for food, transitional housing, clothing, classes and counseling and other services for homeless families and battered women, about 130 of whom live at the center.

"Every penny goes right back to our programs to help our women and children," said Johnson, who hopes to raise \$200,000 this year by leasing the property to filmmakers. "The financial benefits to us are huge."

Until recently, few location scouts had even heard of Hope Gardens, which is nestled in a wooded area off the 210 Freeway in Lopez Canyon in Sylmar. But the center, operated by the same charity that runs the better-known Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles, has emerged as an unlikely hot spot for filming because of its remote and varied geography — which includes forests of pine trees and redwoods, rolling hills and a creek — along with 14 lodge-style buildings, complete with a cafeteria, recreation hall, former skilled-nursing facility and apartments.

In the last six months, the center has been featured in such productions as the CBS crime drama "Criminal Minds," Comedy Central's "Workaholics" and the Steve Carell and Jim Carrey comedy "The Incredible Burt Wonderstone," in which Carell plays a magician. Hope Gardens has already booked two new shoots this month, including "Max Rose."

"I've been a location manager for 20 years, and I never knew it existed," said Kristin Dewey, location manager for "Max Rose." "We saw the pictures, and it was like Yosemite — it was beautiful."

Union Rescue Mission acquired the property in 2006 to provide transitional housing and other services to its clients. The area is so remote it was once used to treat tuberculosis patients. In the 1960s, the property was developed as a retirement community. The diversity of the buildings and the fact that many are unoccupied and preserved make them ideal for filming.

"It's an amazing property — it can play for the Northwest, it can play for Texas, the East Coast," said Jeffrey Spellman, location manager for "Criminal Minds," which recently used the buildings to represent a college dorm in Texas.

This spring, the program will film a hospital scene in a former nursing home known as the Sequoia Lodge.

"Not only can we do our hospital scenes out there, but we can pick up so many other shots," Spellman said. "It's a treasure trove."

Most of the activity at Hope Gardens picked up after Johnson reached out last fall to Van Nuys location firm Real to Reel Inc. to help drum up business as way to raise more revenue for the center's programs.

"We knew the multiple different looks and expanse of the property would be useful to filmmakers. We just didn't know it would catch on so quickly," said Gary Onyshko, chief executive of Real to Reel. "It's sort of a diamond in the rough."

Johnson said he schedules film shoots in a way that minimizes disruption to the residents. Most welcome the film crews, and some have been invited to appear as extras, he said.

Marian Gallagher, one of 25 elderly residents in the Sequoia Lodge, had to eat her breakfast in a makeshift cafeteria Tuesday morning to accommodate Jerry Lewis and company. But Gallagher, who appeared as an extra in "The Incredible Burt Wonderstone," didn't seem put out by the inconvenience.

"I'm not really a movie buff, but it was something to do," she said of her stint on "Wonderstone." "I was in a wheelchair watching Steve Carell's magic act. I couldn't believe it. We were getting paid just to sit there."

Then she reminded Johnson that he still needed to fix the toaster.

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