

Testimony of Alison Arnglim

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I had a very good experience as a child actor. I had the great luck to be on a wonderful show like *Little House on the Prairie* with wonderful people like Michael Landon and others. But I believe that my successful outcome was not all due to luck, but due to certain structures being in place that were in my case were adhered to religiously.

For starters, I went to school. Every day. And when I worked, I still went for three hours, with a real teacher. Every day. There were other child actors my age who worked on productions that circumvented this rule. At the time they thought it was fantastic that they didn't have to go to school every day. But today, none of them can use the word circumvent in a sentence.

I had regular hours. As much of our show took place outdoors, on location, I sometimes had to be at work as early as 4:30 in the morning. It was very hot where we filmed in California, sometimes 110 degrees or more. And since in my case I was performing in petticoats and a wig, this sometimes meant very physically challenging conditions. But I knew that every day we would break for lunch. And that every day, no matter how hard I worked, when nine hours were up, I would go home to my family's air conditioned apartment.

My child stardom was *not* without drawbacks. One of the complications of being a child on TV, that most people don't think about when they sign their kids up for it, is that it is sometimes a life sentence. The show I was on is still on in 140 countries, and on DVD, cable, You Tube,..everything. Forever and ever and ever. The children who are on TV now, their images will be on the internet, etc. forever and ever and ever.

I was very recognizable. Now, Jon, Paul and I had an advantage. We were very clear about the fact that we were playing fictitious characters - not ourselves. So, if we were judged by strangers, at least we could say, "It wasn't me, it was my character". In my case, this was of particular importance.

I have no idea what today's children of reality TV, who appear in TV with their own names, their own identities, showing their own homes and lives to millions of strangers will go through. I can only attest to what I went through.

As some of you may be aware, my character was shall we say, less than lovable. As much fun as she was to play, it has had its consequences. When I was about 16 years old I was in the Hollywood Christmas parade. This was one of the upside of being famous. Except when the large plastic cup of MacDonald's orange soda came flying out of the crowd and hit me in the face.

A total stranger judged me based on what they saw on television. They were not alone. I have been screamed at, sworn at, hit, spat upon and literally kicked in the butt and knocked to the pavement. Now, I thought this was all an absolute riot, because these people were not really attacking me, they were attacking the character I played. I don't know how I would feel if this was not the case.

I also laughed, because I was laughing all the way to the bank. I was paid decently for my trouble and had both a savings account and a checking account; and was fully self-supporting by the time I was 12. I paid for my own braces; I bought my own bike at 13 and my own car at 16. And when there were employment issues in my family and we were short of money, I went to the store and bought them all food. It was a very good thing that I worked as a child, my family needed the money.

But in addition to this, I had 15% of my check put away until I was 18. So when I grew up, I bought a condominium. And the services of a VERY good psychiatrist.

I have done very well for myself. But I have always been curious as to why I see so many former child stars having such severe problems. Some of them on the 11 o'clock news.

I had the opportunity through Paul to attend a meeting of former child stars at the Screen Actors Guild in Los Angeles. A group of us were being interviewed for the purpose of creating programs at the union to assist the new generation of performers.

At these meetings, I had heard every possible scenario of what it could mean to be a child actor, from the best to the worst. Some of the people in the room shared really terrible stories of drug abuse, depression, homelessness, jail, you name it. Others in the same room, had great success stories – families, new careers – some as actors, others as writers, doctors, bankers, plumbers, - every profession you could imagine.

There seemed to be a very large divide in the room. Eventually my curiosity got the better of me and I asked for a totally unscientific survey. A simple show of hands amongst our small group. I asked how many people had dealt with a major drug or psychiatric problem. It was about half the room. Then I asked how many people got their money: how many people in the room had a trust fund or some sort of access to their earnings. It was the same number of people, but it was the other half of the room.

Down to a man, to a woman...it was unanimous. All of the people who raised their hands when asked if they had a drug problem were the ones who had their money lost or stolen. Everyone who had a trust fund and had something when it was over had remained reasonably unscathed by comparison.

What was it? Was it a sense of insult to injury? Some of them reminded me of people I've seen on the news who worked their whole lives and found out that their pensions had been stolen. In the same sense, for these people, to work for years believing they were building something and then be left with absolutely nothing to show for their trouble, seemed to have a terrible effect on the mind.

But the ones who had trust funds, didn't seem to have this issue. And even if things HAD gone badly in their career or home life, they had the resources to go back to school, move to a new town, start a small business or pay for that really good psychiatrist. There was no escaping the radical difference between these two populations.

The moral of this story, that I have taken from my experience and the experience of others I have known, is this: To put it bluntly, If you're going to take your childhood, which only comes once, which you will never have again- if you're going to take this and sell it, you should make sure to get a *very good price*. I certainly did.

These rules that are being suggested in this bill were all in effect when Paul, Jon and I were on TV. They have been used for decades in California *because they work*. They save lives. You do not need to perform a social experiment on your performing children here in Pennsylvania. The experiment has already been performed in California, the results are in and THIS is the prescription.

As I said, I have done very well for myself. And I will be eternally grateful that someone had the good sense to put these rules in place to protect me when I was a child.

I ask that the same kindness be extended to the performing children of this state.