



DRAMA MAMA RACHAEL HARRELL

ACTRESS AND FORMER INDEPENDENT FILM DEVELOPER LEFT THE THE WEST COAST TO INSPIRE LOCAL KIDS IN THEATER

BY [AL PARKER \(/NEWS/AUTHORS/AL-PARKER/\)](#) | JAN. 27, 2018

A Michigan native who spent a decade in Los Angeles while working on successful TV shows Survivor and The Apprentice has returned to The Mitten. Her mission: to launch a program that develops confidence and creativity among youngsters in grades one through eight.

“We give kids practical skills like literacy and public speaking,” said Rachael Harrell, director of Drama Kids International of Northern Michigan. “Most of our students won’t be professional actors, maybe they won’t even be in plays or performances in high school, but they’ll get great experiences with us and a chance to practice their skills. They’re doing things together, having fun, and it’s not scary at all. It’s very gratifying to see them as their skills improve.”

Harrell grew up in the small town of Okemos, near Lansing. It was there that she got bit by the entertainment bug. “Okemos had very good chorale, drama, and sports programs,” said Harrell. “I was always in choir, did the senior play, and other productions.”

When not performing on a stage, Harrell was performing on a tennis, basketball, or volleyball court. After high school, Harrell opted to leave the shadow of Michigan State University, where her father taught marketing, and head to Ann Arbor to attend the University of Michigan.

Following graduation, she moved to Chicago, where she earned a Masters of Fine Arts Degree in Theater Performance at Roosevelt University. She spent five years in Chicago, honing her acting skills with commercial work and in suburban theaters.

“I was pretty successful,” she said. “I knew I wanted to be in the entertainment industry, so I decided to go to L.A., pretty much cold turkey.”

She got her brother to drive the rental truck as the siblings headed west. When they arrived in L.A., Harrell contacted the only person she remotely knew — a woman who was the daughter of a friend of her mother.

The woman happened to work on Survivor and Harrell landed a gig in the show’s mailroom. “It was the second season, the Australian Outback edition,” said Harrell.

It wasn’t long before Survivor’s award-winning producer Mark Burnett was looking for an assistant. Harrell applied and got the job, eventually becoming his executive assistant.

So what was it like working for the top honcho on one of the most popular TV shows of the decade?

“He’s really inspirational,” said Harrell. “He looks at the super big picture and is a great motivator. I learned a lot from watching him. He was a great mentor.”

After a few years, she was looking for new challenges and developed some scripted sitcom and drama pilots in partnership with Warner Brothers Studio. She later developed and produced independent films with another company, Perfect Weekend.

“I’ve work closely with talented producers, directors, casting directors, and actors,” she recalled. “I know firsthand that these experiences stick with us and that positive dramatic education makes all the difference in developing confidence and life skills.”

After a decade in southern California, Harrell grew a bit restless and moved to Denver, where she became an event manager for the American Red Cross. It was there that she learned about a franchise opportunity — Drama Kids International — in the Traverse City, Petoskey, and Charlevoix area. She saw it as a chance to return to her native state.

“It was a really good way to get back to Michigan,” she said. “I had spent summers in Charlevoix when I was young and always loved the area. And Traverse City is such a cool place. The arts are really valued here. We have the Film Festival, the Opera House, the Old Town Playhouse.”

Harrell and a staff of four part-time teachers run the local Drama Kids program, which is generally held after school for students in the first through eighth grades but also offers summer and holiday camps. Each one-hour class uses Drama Kids’ copyrighted original curriculum and features up to six different activities that involve speech development,

creative movement, improvisations, scene starters, and whole class plays. But no class ever repeats a lesson — even if a kid is enrolled from age 4 to 17.

“We take great pride in our program and are committed to making sure your child receives an excellent experience,” says Harrell. “In order to grow, they need to gain independence and self-esteem, yet work as a team. They want to be challenged, but still feel supported and praised for their efforts.”

Harrell’s program is currently taking admissions for its spring semester and summer camp programs. To learn more, call 231 432-8764 or visit www.dramakids.com/traverse-city-petosky-mi (<http://www.dramakids.com/traverse-city-petosky-mi>).

