March Commentary from George Spiro Dibie

Fatigue Kills:
In Memory of Brent Hershman

It seems like only yesterday when we woke up to the shocking news that Brent Hershman was dead. Brent died on March 6, 1997. He lost control of his car while driving home at the end of a 19-hour workday at a Pleasantville location. We subsequently learned that he was anxious to get home to be with a sick child. Brent Hershman was a second assistant cameraman. He was intelligent, ambitious and talented. The possibilities for his future career seemed unlimited. He had a happy marriage and two children he adored. All that was lost in just a few seconds.

They said Brent died instantly because of injuries he sustained in the accident. We believe the real cause of death was fatigue and a callous disregard for his health and safety. There are countless studies that warn us that sleep deprivation is dangerous to our health and well-being. Sleep deprivation is also a major cause of traffic accidents. The Interstate Commerce Committee rigorously monitors the number of hours truckers are allowed to drive without sleep, to protect both the drivers and the public. Camera crewmembers are not immune to the symptoms of sleep deprivation and fatigue.

There was a flurry of outrage within our industry after Brent Hershman died. Many of us signed the "Brent's Rule" petition which called for limiting the number of hours cast and crewmembers could be routinely required to work each day. We set a modest goal of limiting the normal workday to no more than 12 hours. There were frequent meetings with our counterparts in SAG and the DGA seeking common ground and a united stance. We haven't given up.

We are continuing to fight for the health and safety of our members, but I must tell you that people in some other Guilds have accused us of trying to eliminate overtime. This issue has nothing to do with overtime. Our agreements and laws regarding overtime would still be intact if the workday was limited to 12 hours.

However, the Guild's four-year struggle to protect members' health has made a difference. The IATSE's West Coast office has successfully negotiated dozens of agreements requiring producers at their expense to offer housing to crew members who have worked twelve or more hours on a nearby location. East Coast IATSE Locals are working toward implementing a similar policy. We believe these agreements are a huge step toward preventing another member from falling asleep at the wheel after a long workday.
Local 600 also continues to pursue the fight against fatigue caused by long hours in concert with other industry unions and guilds as a member of the Industrywide Safety Committee.

What is at stake is your health, your life and the happiness and security of your family. Think of what Brent Hershman could have accomplished if he had lived. Think about how his death affected his family, other relatives and friends. Make sure you request a hotel room after working long hours. If you need help, call your regional Guild office.

As always, I look forward to your comments and suggestions. Please e-mail them to me.

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National President