

# How to cope with a star

In a limo heading for Manhattan, Suzo Barzman is talking on two phones at once. The petite thirty-something completes one call in French then hangs up and handles the second in a more relaxed West Coast drawl.

"That was special services at Charles de Gaulle in Paris," she says with a grin, rolling her eyes. "They better meet Mira off that flight or it's gonna be..." she mimics slitting her throat. Mira is the Oscar-winning actress Mira Sorvino and this is the scene behind celebrity life. Barzman is a new breed of resourceful won't-take-no-for-an-answer personal assistants who co-ordinate every move of the rich and famous. You get the feeling that she could co-ordinate a political campaign. She credits New York Celebrity Assistants (NYCA) as a lifeline for her job.

Bonnie Kramen, 41, had assisted the Oscar-winner Olympia Dukakis (who is starring in *Rose* at the National Theatre) for ten years before becoming a founding member and later president of the NYCA in 1996. She cites her involvement as her way of "giving back" to those following her. "In this job you just wing it," she says. Until now there was no one to ask how to do anything. Membership of the 60-strong NYCA requires applicants to have been personal assistants to a celebrity for at least one year within the past

Celebrity assistants have formed a club to deal with job stress, says **Susan Redstone**

three. For \$100 (£64) a year assistants are invited to monthly meetings to share problems and boost resources.

The meetings are a mixture of innovation and fun but always geared towards imparting information. For example, "Boundaries with your boss" was hosted by a psychologist experienced in dealing with celebs, and it encouraged everyone to talk. Outsiders are never allowed and participants always sign a confidentiality agreement. It is probably the only opportunity celebrity assistants have to discuss sensitive issues, personality gripes, salary and protocol in a job where there is no formal structure. "What do you do if one of you is in a really bad mood?" asks Kramen. "Can you just ask for the afternoon off? I learnt that it's not necessary to shield celeb employers from everything."

British-born John O'Sullivan, 31, the New York-based assistant to the Duchess of York, found the meeting on security "absolutely compelling". "An expert

talked to us about the psychological profile of a stalker, how to spot one (you can't) and how to be security-aware."

"It's like group therapy," says Teresa Sorrentino, former assistant to chat-show host Ricki Lake. "You can't talk at home or in a social environment about your day." But she has another agenda. She is renewing her membership even though she no longer works for Lake. "One hundred dollars is worth it to stay in touch. I'm using the NYCA CV referral service to move into TV production."

The real skills for this job, however, appear more rooted in personality and common sense. Developing the capacity to pull off the near-impossible with panache and a sense of humour is a talent acquired along the way.

"No one realises how exhausting it is to travel all the time," says O'Sullivan, referring to a book tour he organised for the duchess. "We did something reminiscent of a pop tour — a different hotel every night for two weeks. There are fabulous parties but it's always work."

Salaries vary greatly, spanning the \$20,000 to \$80,000 per annum range. The longer you stick with one celeb the better compensated you are likely to be. Clearly you have to love the job, too, because as O'Sullivan says: "You don't become a celebrity assistant for the money."