



Giving what counts—when it counts

By Nancy McAllister

When Carol Burnett was graduating from UCLA's theater department, the center of the comedy and musical world was New York City. But the grinding poverty she'd known since childhood prevented her from leaving California for the bright lights of Broadway and left her at odds with her career goals.

One night, Burnett and some fellow students were asked to perform a comedy skit at a professor's party. After the performance, an older man and his wife approached her and asked her what she wanted to do with her life. She told them about her dream of acting on Broadway, and they asked why she wasn't doing it already. Burnett explained that she first had to save enough money to get there and establish herself. The man told

her to come see him the following week in his office.

Burnett showed up—guarded and skeptical about why the man wanted to see her. He wrote her a check for \$1,000 with these stipulations: She must always keep his identity a secret; she must move to New York to give herself the best chance for success; she had to pay the loan back in five years; and finally that she would help others get their start once she became successful. Burnett accepted the conditions and moved to New York, where her career in musical comedy took off. After five years passed, Burnett sent a check for \$1,000 to her benefactor on the exact anniversary of the loan, and though she had kept all of her promises thus far, she never heard back from him.

Years later, after Burnett had become a household name, she met the couple for lunch and asked whether the gentleman had received her check. The man answered yes, but didn't say much else. After lunch, the man's wife took Burnett aside and told her that her husband was very proud of what Burnett had done, but was too shy and embarrassed to say so. The wife also said that in all the years that had gone by, her husband had never told one person of his loan to Burnett. He didn't want anyone to think he was trying to take credit for her success, the wife explained. Moved, Burnett took the opportunity to kiss her benefactor good-bye and thank him for giving her that all-important start.

Not long after that lunch meeting, she learned that her benefactor passed away. But Burnett continued his largesse by developing young talent on her variety show. And to this day, though she has often recounted this fairy tale-ish turn of events, Burnett has never revealed the identity of

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the man who launched her career—and her sense of philanthropy.