

## Interview: Grace McPhillips, Founder of Chicago Acting in Film Meetup Group

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CHICAGO – Chicago is naturally a community town, based on their neighborhoods and Midwestern roots. So it was natural that Grace McPhillips, an actor in the Windy City, would found a community group for actors. The Chicago Acting in Film Meetup Group is having their annual Holiday Fundraiser and Networking Night on December 13th.

McPhillips founded the organization as a way to connect with other working actors in Chicago film, in a town not particularly known for it's culture of acting beyond the theater. She desired to create a haven for an exchange of ideas, information and support for its membership, now up to over 200 people.



Grace McPhillips on the set of the film 'Jesse James'  
*Photo credit: Grace McPhillips*

HollywoodChicago.com caught up to Ms. McPhillips on the week before one of the group's biggest events, the annual Holiday Fundraiser and Networking Night. The event will take place at Chief O'Neill's Pub, 3471 N. Elston, 7pm to midnight. Tickets are \$20 and includes drink specials and hor d'oeuvres.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** As someone who is distinctly involved in the actor's world here in Chicago, how difficult is it to make a living as a working actor here?

**Grace McPhillips:** It depends on where you are in your career. It's extremely easy to be a working actor in Chicago if you have the right agents, you've built a reputation for yourself and you're being constantly called in. The work is here, just getting the audition is the hard part. If you're a beginning actor and building your career, you probably still need the day job.

I've never had a day job. I committed myself to be a working actor. Even if it means I'm singing on a boat. [laughs] I lived on faith in American Express for many years.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What in your opinion is characteristic of the midwestern actor that is different from any other part of the country?

**McPhillips:** I think the Midwestern actor doesn't have walls up. All the Midwestern actors I've worked with are so community oriented and thoughtful, and they want to know what you're up to, and not because they can get involved in it and get something for themselves, but a genuine interest. That is what is special and unique about the Chicago actor, we're not so concerned about stardom, but just working. And because of that, we don't build those protective walls, we just want to be a part of it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You began the Chicago Acting in Film Meetup Group. What has been the most satisfying element of the success and gather power of the group?

**McPhillips:** Getting back from it as much as I have given. It wasn't so altruistic when I started the group, [laughs] I wanted to find more people who were working like me, and also trying to figure out how to get to the next step. If there was someone who was a step up from me, maybe they could tell me to try something else. Every single time that I go to the meeting, there will either be a new revelation or a reminder about my career path.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The independent/student film scene is bursting at the seams, with technology giving newly minted filmmakers more access to actually making films. What in your opinion is the good news on that and the bad news?

**McPhillips:** The good news is that you're right about the technology, I have access to the Red Camera, with some grad students from DePaul University, to create a scene for my demo. That is awesome. The problem with making the technology so accessible, making feature length films for ten grand, is the people making them often aren't prepared professionally. So they don't have that professional etiquette yet, and haven't necessarily paid their professional dues. There tends to be a false ego with filmmakers who get their hands on this amazing technology so affordable. They can produce great looking things, but if they don't have the experience professionally it shows in the end.

They put out notices that say 'no pay, non-union only.' Well, that's just stupid. You can get SAG actors for free, you just can't work them for 18 hours a day. And who wants to work 18 hours a day?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is the best tip somebody ever gave you on how to act in a film, and what particular on-screen moment, in what film, did you practice that advice?

**McPhillips:** I'm going to back to a workshop I was involved in recently, and the technique of 'seamlessness' was brought up. At first I thought, we're all seamless, but when you start acting you change a little, you put a beginning and end to every scene. There should be no starting point, you should just continue to live and breath in it.

When it completely clicked, I got up and did a scene that I had a minute to look at, and it was probably the best on-camera scene I'd ever done. And I'd only prepared three minutes for it. But that concept of seamlessness, it started immediately, so when the camera was rolling, it was already happening.



Grace McPhillips, Founder, Chicago Acting in Film Group  
*Photo credit: Grace McPhillips*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** When in your life was that moment when you knew that despite all counter advice and circumstance against it, that you were going to relentlessly pursue, to the best of your ability, the profession of acting?

**McPhillips:** You probably have that moment again and again in life as an actor. It's very easy to talk yourself out of this profession all the time. Actors are generally their own worst enemies in that aspect.

I started performing as a child, and when I was in eighth grade we had our first career day project. And I decided I wanted to be a professional actor. And the thing we had to do was interview someone in that profession. Being in Montgomery, Alabama, we had the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. So I call up, and say can I talk to an actor?

I talked to Ray, who had just played MacBeth and was one of the leading performers in the company. He takes my call and says, "don't do it kid, it sucks, you're never going to make living. You're going to have no family, no happiness." I was like oh my god.



Then when I was a junior in high school, I got cast for the lead in the school musical. It was 42nd Street, and I was cast as Peggy Sawyer. The lead actor, the guy playing Julian Marsh, fails English two weeks before. It's high school, so you can't replace the lead in two weeks. So they brought in a professional actor from the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. And he was going over the scenes with me and said, "hey, you're good at this, are you going to do it?" And I asked him what he meant and he asked me if I was going on to college to study acting. I was like, you think I could? And he said that he'd been all around, to New York, and was married and happy. I thought, oh my god, there's another side of the coin.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So let's talk about sacrifice and family. Since you are married, what adjustments need to in place to make a acting career work?

**McPhillips:** Very irregular schedules, and sometimes you're cast on Thursday and you have to fly to Los Angeles on Friday. You might have plans, so your family has to really flexible. I've been blessed that I have a husband who had worked in the performing arts, he was a musician for eight years professionally, so he understands that.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is your opinion regarding the fame aspect of being an actor suddenly being a celebrity that sells commerce such as magazines, web and gossip, being a brand as much as actor. Is that something than anyone can truly prepare for?

**McPhillips:** I think you can prepare for it as much as you can prepare to be an honest human being. It's something you learn growing up and how your parents raise you to interact with the world. Where it goes horribly wrong is with kid actors or young stars who miss that crucial part of their upbringing. Being in a normal world before the fame and celebrity. When that becomes your reality you never learn the lessons on how to be polite, normally.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally, Chicago is a vibrant, talented town. Is the respect level rising for this area, and what would it take in your opinion to establish a true filmmaking industry here?

**McPhillips:** I think there is a great respect for Chicago in the film industry. Everyone loves Chicago because we're hard-working, 'City of the Big Shoulders,' that is for real. People do love to make movies here, but there are roadblocks. The tax incentive could be better. It was great that we were one of the first states to offer it, but you can't let go, we have to be persistent and press on. I think Illinois forgets that sometimes. We don't know how to promote our brand, and it's tough when we have roadblocks, like politicians I don't have to name because everyone knows who they are. [laughs] Those frustrations are really annoying.

We hear the positives and we have the resources. You can bring your film in with three big star names so your investors are happy, and cast all the other roles with Chicago actors, and it would be amazing.

*The Chicago Acting in Film Meetup Group Networking Night and Holiday Fundraiser is Monday, December 13th, from 7pm to midnight at Chief O'Neill's Pub, 3471 N. Elston, Chicago. Admission is \$20. For more information regarding the group, [click here](#). [11] For Grace McPhillips, [click here](#). [12]*



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [14]  
Senior Staff Writer  
HollywoodChicago.com  
[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [13]

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