

## Executive Producers' Assistant

# DONNA GOLDBERG

## Remembers *Falcon Crest*

### **Interview by**

**THOMAS J. PUCHER** (*German FALCON CREST Fan Club*)

When I met story editor Lisa Seidman in December 2016 in Los Angeles, not only did she provide me with a number of *Falcon Crest* production documents for further research, but also suggested putting me in contact with a dear friend of hers — Donna Goldberg, who worked for the series also. I was thrilled with the idea because it is always interesting to talk to as many staff and crew members as possible since everyone has a different perspective on having worked on the show.

It did not take long until Lisa fulfilled her promise, and I received an e-mail from Donna. From the very beginning, I felt it would be a straightforward conversation, and I was not disappointed because it turned out to be a very pleasant and insightful chat.

### Getting to Work at *Lorimar*

"How did you land your job on *Falcon Crest*," I began our interview, "and did you work for *Lorimar Productions* before you came to the show?"

Donna explained: "I moved out to LA in July of 1983 from New York and immediately got a job at the *Agency for Performing Arts*, where I met a woman who is still one of my closest friends. In June of 1985 I was unemployed. Jeff Freilich called my friend looking for a recommendation for someone he was considering hiring as his assistant. My friend told him that person was not right for the job but she knew someone who was — me. So Jeff called me and we spoke for a while and set an appointment to meet at *Lorimar*. I knew immediately that we were a good match."

Donna also referred to the projects Jeff was involved at the time when she started to work for him: "Jeff was in development for a sitcom called *Better Days*. I worked on that with him for about eight months. The show was canceled after about six episodes and Jeff had several things in development but nothing in production. His wife had their second child and Jeff caught chicken pox from their oldest. It was at that time that *Lorimar* approached him about taking over as executive producer on *Falcon Crest*. Around the fall of 1986, Jeff moved to the *Falcon Crest* production offices at the CBS Radford Studio in Studio City. I stayed in the *Lorimar* Culver City office (on the *MGM* lot) as his development assistant but there was really very little for me to do. So Jeff suggested that I start working in the production office of *Falcon Crest* as Joanne Brough's assistant. He hired another person to be his assistant at *Falcon Crest* and Daniel Westcott took over my job at the *Lorimar* office. He also helped out at the Studio City office."

It was interesting that Donna mentioned Daniel Westcott because his name immediately rang a bell with me... It was obviously him whose last name the writers "borrowed" for a guest character in season 7 of *Falcon Crest*: George Westcott, whom — as I recently discovered in Lisa Seidman's old beat sheets — she had originally named Clendenning when developing the storyline. Using staff and crew members' names was not only an inside joke on *Falcon Crest*, but is a very common practice in the TV and movie industry in general.

#### Working with the Executive Producers

Donna's description of her work sounded full of enthusiasm so I wanted to know if she had watched *Falcon Crest* before she joined the staff.

"Yes. I was a big fan of both *Falcon Crest* and *Dallas*," she replied.

"So how was your overall working experience on *Falcon Crest*?" I asked.

"I had a wonderful time," she said. "The people were great and since I loved the show and the cast, it was even more fun. Jeff and Joanne were both terrific people for whom to work."

Old staff and crew lists in our archives indicated that Donna worked as Jeff's assistant until February 11, 1987 (during season 6) and that she became Joanne's assistant afterwards.

When I referred to this date, Donna corrected: "That date is not quite accurate, as I mentioned above. My first contact with the *Falcon Crest* crew was John Perry's enormous Christmas party in 1986. After the holidays I started working for Joanne in January of 1987. I have a photo of myself and a friend sitting on Santa Claus's lap from the party. I apologize for the poor quality."



Donna (left) and her friend with Santa at the 1986 *Falcon Crest* Christmas party hosted by producer John F. Perry.

I wanted to know more details about her work: "Could you please describe your duties as an executive producer's assistant?"

Donna pointed out: "My most important duty while working for both Joanne and Jeff was to read scripts submitted by agents for their clients who were looking for work. In that capacity I read and wrote coverage (synopsis and opinion) on many scripts, one of which was Tim Hunter's *River's Edge*, which was produced as a feature starring Keanu Reeves and Dennis Hopper. I read Lisa Seidman's script for a *Cagney & Lacey* episode (an episode that I had actually seen on television) and knew immediately that she was very good. I remember running into Joanne's office and telling her she simply had to meet Lisa. When Lisa came to the office for her interview, she waited in my office and we got to know each other very quickly. We had an instant connection and have been dear friends for 30 years. Another one of my duties was to co-write (with Daniel Westcott) a synopsis of every episode which was then published in *Soap Opera Digest* magazine."



Season 6 when Jeff and Joanne took over executive producing duties: Jane Wyman and Kim Novak at Jane's welcome party for Kim at the *Regency Club* in Westwood on September 17, 1986.

I also addressed the changes in *Falcon Crest* over the years, particularly since season 6 felt like a new beginning, which was carefully executed though because the concept continued to be true to the original series while, at the same time, the show became faster paced and had a more stylized and very trendy approach in the visual effects as well as the score: "From my interviews with both Jeff and Joanne I got the impression that Jeff was the driving force for this kind of redevelopment and that Joanne was more of a historian and caretaker of continuity to make sure that past storylines and character development were kept intact. Seasons 8 and 9 had new producing staffs respectively. Did any of these frequent changes on the executive side filter down to the everyday work of the producing staff and on the set?" I asked.

"Not really," Donna stated. "Although the atmosphere in the office was not as congenial under Michael Filerman's reign as it was under Jeff's."

Among other members of the producing staff, she remembered the series creator: "Earl Hamner, as you know from your own experience," she referred to my decade-long friendship with him, "was the nicest man in Hollywood — a true Virginia gentleman. I always enjoyed our brief conversations when he called to speak to Joanne. In another strange coincidence, his daughter, Caroline, was a fellow psychotherapy intern at a counseling center when I was in graduate school years later."

I also wanted to know if Donna went along on distant location: "How did you like filming in Northern California?"

"I went to Napa only once and hung out with Lisa most of the time," Donna stated. "It was a beautiful place."

"Are you still in contact with anyone from *Falcon Crest*?" I asked.

"I was in touch with Howard [Lakin] for several years but haven't been for a long time," Donna said. "As I mentioned above, Lisa and I are great friends and in contact several times a week. I am also still close friends with Daniel Westcott."

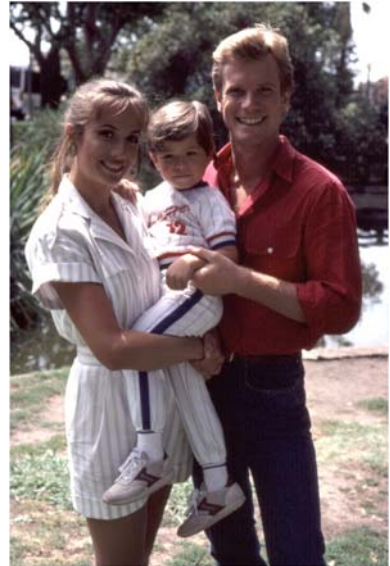
### Experiences with the Cast

From the staff and crew, we made a transition to the actors and actresses.

"Are you related to child actor Jason Goldberg, who played Joseph Gioberti, Ana - Alicia and Billy Moses' on - screen son?" I asked. "Or is the same last name purely coincidental?"

Donna said: "No, I am not related to Jason Goldberg. By the way, he is a producer now."

Ana - Alicia, Jason Goldberg and William R. Moses  
in Sonoma while shooting episode 72 <4.04>.



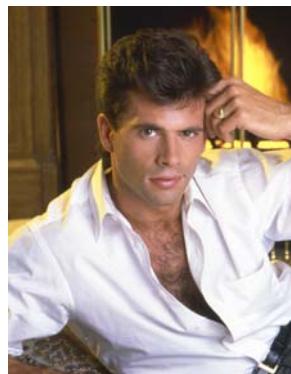
"Among its many outstanding qualities, *Falcon Crest* was famous for the celebrities who made special guest appearances," I introduced my next question. "There were many rumors of big names being considered besides the ones who actually appeared on the show. Do you remember any specifics?"

"No, I don't," Donna said.

However, she recalled a few outstanding special guests: "I was a big fan of Leslie Caron, having loved her since her English film *The L - Shaped Room*, *Gigi*, *Fanny*, et.al. in the 1960s. I remember telling her so."

From the season before, another memory came to her mind: "I remember when Kim Novak came. She waited in my office to meet with Joanne and told me a story about being in the hospital and having some kind of communication with a plant in her room. She was very serious about it. It was a spiritual experience for her."

Donna also shared some great off - screen memories of the main cast: "I remember a table reading from which Lorenzo Lamas was absent. Brett Cullen read Lorenzo's lines and did a perfect imitation of him. He was very funny."



Deep impressions from guest and main cast members:  
Leslie Caron, Kim Novak, Lorenzo Lamas and Brett Cullen.

Speaking of Brett Cullen, Donna recalled that his storyline was based on William Faulkner's *The Long, Hot Summer*: "The movie starred Paul Newman as Ben Quick; Brett's character on *Falcon Crest* was Dan Fixx."

Of course, she also spoke about the Grande Dame of the show: "Jane Wyman was also a lovely person. Totally professional and warm and friendly as well. The only thing she would ever say about her ex-husband, President Ronald Reagan, was that 'he is a very nice man'."

Jane Wyman in her legendary curl-flip wig for season 6.

Among others Donna fondly remembered were David Selby and Susan Sullivan: "David Selby is a lovely man. All the women in the office were thrilled when he would drop by. So handsome!" Donna said. Then she went on: "I had an unusual connection to Susan Sullivan. She is a graduate of *Hofstra University* in New York, as am I. My father was the Chairman of the Psychology Department there and our family often went to see plays put on by *Hofstra's* Drama Department. I saw Susan play the female lead in the musical *Finian's Rainbow* when I was in high school and she was in college."

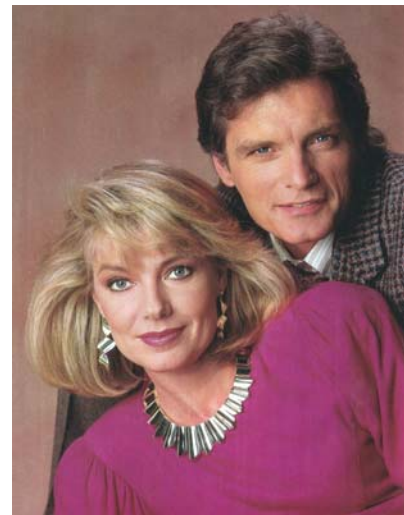


### Great Moments

The actors who brought life to Richard and Maggie brought us to our next topic: Donna's most memorable *Falcon Crest* moments.

"I don't remember much but I did laugh out loud at Maggie and Richard's wedding, which was a chaotic scene, when Angela said 'I knew I should have brought a book.' Howard wrote that script."

Another segment that came to Donna's mind was "a very romantic love scene between Maggie and Richard, set in a room with a burning fireplace. Howard wrote it." I immediately recognized the scene from *False Faces* (episode 176 <7.21>) with Maggie and Richard's sizzling hot and steamy bath in the jacuzzi in their big open bedroom / bathroom at their ranch.



Richard and Maggie's "non-wedding" and their jacuzzi night in their native American/Santa Fe style bedroom suite, an interior set beautifully resembling the design of the filming location, *Saddlerock Ranch*.

"And off screen?" I inevitably referred to other specific anecdotes from the set or from the production office.



"At either a Christmas party or a wrap party, they showed the 'gag reel', consisting of all the bloopers or mistakes the actors made while shooting," Donna recalled. "It was hilarious. Unfortunately, I don't remember any specifics."



Since Donna was on the show between 1987 and 1989, I figured it must have been the one edited under Jeff Freilich's aegis, which Susan Sullivan brought to the *Paley Center* when we celebrated *Falcon Crest: A Look Back* in 2010. It contained lots of bloopers, including Lorenzo falling over a chair in Richard's *New Globe* office in a scene for episode 134 <6.07>; Bob Foxworth and Cindy Morgan kissing over and over again while filming a scene for episode 150 <6.23>; Edward Albert once again playing psychopath Jeff Wainwright just for the crew while filming episode 153 <6.26>; Susan Sullivan and Margaret Ladd laughing hysterically about the odd situation with Emma's wedding gown while filming the same episode; Kim Novak hitting the camera in a distorted imaginary scene for episode 154 <6.27> with Kit killing Roland with the vat spanner; the late Robert Stack horsing around after shooting that distorted scene, almost kissing the camera; and Carl Held falling off the aircraft when opening the door for a scene in the same episode 154; just to name a few segments.



"I remember when Jeff showed us the new opening credits with Mark Snow's new score," Donna continued. "I told him they were thrilling (and they were)."

I also wanted to know if there were any storylines that did not materialize. Donna remembered two highly interesting facts indeed.

"Before season 7 Jeff asked me if I thought the fans would still love the show if Jane weren't on it," and referred to the idea of putting Angela in a coma. "I told him they would hate it. I think at that time Jane wanted to work a little less..." That information was a real shocker because when Jane's character, Angela, was actually sent into a coma by the writing and producing staff in season 9 under the new executive producer's Jerry Thorpe's aegis, it became like a nightmare for the show along with the other drastic changes in the final season. I expressed my total surprise about Jeff having had this idea even earlier, but Donna confirmed: "I remember Jeff asking me if the fans would watch if Angela were gone. I don't know if that is related to the coma in season 9. I have no way of checking that and I don't even remember Jerry Thorpe, so Joanne and I were definitely gone by then. It must have been an idea Jeff was considering but didn't do. But he was definitely thinking about reducing Angela's presence."

Another very interesting tidbit was from season 7 also: "I remembered another storyline that was discussed but never done: they considered killing off Ana - Alicia and Billy Moses' son," Donna said about Joseph, "but Howard said that no children would die on his watch so that idea was scrapped." This was completely new to me, too, but shortly after this conversation with Donna, I finally had a chance to study season 7 development papers I recently got from Lisa Seidman: They confirmed that the writing staff played around with the idea of having Cole and Joseph as guests at Maggie and Richard's wedding ceremony in *The Uncertainty Principle* (episode 170 <7.15>) where Joseph was supposed to faint and be diagnosed with kidney failure, inevitably leading to his death because no organ donor would be found in time — leaving a desperate Melissa behind, wondering if that is the punishment for all the bad things she did in her life.

Before we concluded the *Falcon Crest* topic, I wanted to know if Donna has any memorabilia, documents or photos from the set.

"Just my *Falcon Crest* coffee mug," she said and added: "a Christmas gift from Victoria LaFortune, the associate producer. I use it every morning."

### Life after *Falcon Crest*

Wrapping up the interview, I wanted to know more about Donna's projects after the show and what she was doing nowadays.

"In September of 1991, Joanne left Lee Rich," Donna referred to the former head of *Lorimar*, who had his own production company at *Warner Bros. Studios*. "I was unemployed. I never had any trouble finding a job before but I did then. Finally, it dawned on me that my time in show business was over. I decided to go back to school to get a master's degree in psychology. It was the best thing I've ever done. I met my husband on the first day of school. We are both psychotherapists in private practice."

It was a lot of fun to interview Donna. She delivered a few more pieces to the puzzle of what it must have been like to work on our favorite show.