

Barbara Bain's New Mission

By Michael J. Bandler

Every Tuesday afternoon at three, Barbara Bain strides across the playground of the Grape Street Elementary School in the Watts district of Los Angeles as a crowd of kindergartners and first graders rush to meet her. "Barbara's here! Barbara's here!" they cry, hugging the actress and ganging on to her.

It's been 30 years since Bain was cast as the seductive espionage agent Cinnamon Carter on TV's *Mission Impossible*. (The popular adventure series, which still airs in syndication, has inspired a new movie starring Tom Cruise.) Now Bain, 62, has chosen to accept a less glamorous, if more satisfying, mission: introducing inner-city youngsters to the pleasures of books and reading.

"There are kids who don't even know there are libraries," says Bain. "Those are the ones I figured I had to get to."

In the summer of 1992, Bain volunteered as a reader at a Santa Monica day camp near where she lives. When that stint ended, she came up with the idea for BookPALS (Performing Artists for Literacy in Schools), a program that would use, as readers, her often underemployed colleagues in the Screen Actors Guild.

In just a few weeks, Bain had signed some 200 actor-volunteers and linked up with a citywide after-school program, L.A.'s BEST. Rapidly expanding, BookPALS is now in 52 Los Angeles schools, most in poor areas, and is scheduled to debut in Phoenix this fall. A parallel program in New York City already boasts more than 100 schools.

"To me, a kid who's never been to a museum or taken a walk by the ocean is going to have limited choices," says Bain. "He's not going to know there are things to reach for other than what's obvious in his neighborhood." But books, she believes,

can open up new worlds: "When I read to kids, a lot of wonderful things happen."

The first children Bain read to were her daughters, Juliet, now 25 and an actress, and Susan, 35, a writer/producer/director. (Their father is actor Martin Landau, Bain's *Mission: Impossible* costar, from whom she is divorced.) For her new listeners, Bain initially used her daughters' books, "which were still in the attic." Among them were classics by Maurice Sendak and Dr. Seuss, as well as a little volume called *Robert the Rose Horse*, which Juliet had especially liked because "it was about an allergic horse, and she had allergies as a child."

Now, Bain often seeks out material with special meaning for her young audience – African folktales, for example, and *Cinderella*, an urban retelling of the classic story in which the "prince" is a star basketball player and the "ball" is the big game. She also reads books about loss, which a number of her charges have already experienced. "A lot of stuff has happened to them that you wouldn't believe," she says. "They carry burdens." Not long ago, a 7-year-old in her group was shot to death by a 9-year-old. At the funeral, she says, "what was unbearable were the kids from school wailing in grief and looking at us adults like what the hell good were we."

But Bain, who had a featured role in the TV series *My So-Called Life* and often appears on the Los Angeles stage, is optimistic about BookPALS and what it can accomplish. She remembers one boy who was "a ball of hostility" when he first came to the group. "He said, 'I don't wanna hear no story.' But he sat there, and kind of got engaged. Afterward, he sidled up to me – he didn't want anyone to see him – and asked, 'You got any stories about a whale?' He was interested. I got him!"