

‘Honda Girl’ Ashley Blair finds career outside car ads

By Bonny C. Millard

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Blair

-- Submitted Photograph Courtesy Of Jaopro

Ten-year-old actress Ashley Blair takes her job seriously. She's like many other actors in the region working to improve her craft and looking for the next project. The Knoxville area has a thriving community of actors, writers, directors, and producers, all trying to showcase their best work, both locally and nationally.

The six-degrees of separation quest of linking actors certainly applies to East Tennessee's performers, agencies and others in the business.

Ashley may be more familiar to some as Lucy Williams, the young promoter who steals hearts in the Greater Knoxville Honda Dealers commercials. For those on-camera appearances, she usually has her long brown hair pulled into a back or side ponytail, and her precocious attitude is endearing.

This young Maryville actress has her sights set on the footlights of Hollywood.

"I want to be an actress when I grow up," she says, and if that's not possible then a dancer, but she also has a vision of becoming a director, something she does at home in her spare time with the app Video Star.

Ashley's already been a featured extra in a film starring fellow Tennessean Reese Witherspoon, "Devil's Knot." She has a reoccurring role in a web series by local filmmaker, actor, writer Mitch Moore. She's competed successfully in national acting and modeling competitions, appeared in several commercials and print ads, and acted in local theatrical productions.

Her parents, David and Robyn Blair, say Ashley has shown interest in performing since she was much younger. They've been pleased to discover that the acting community in this area is supportive and encouraging.

"It's kind of a neat inner circle of community talent around here," says David. "Everybody likes to support each other."

The Blairs are appreciative of advice from others who are in the business, particularly David Dwyer, a Maryville resident and full-time actor. Dwyer, whose acting career started in the late 1980s, has been in 91 films including last year's "Selma" as Police Chief Wilson Baker.

"Ashley really has the ability to be herself on camera," Dwyer explains. "That's really what she's got going for her. She's generally just fun and vivacious, and she has that ability to be herself on the camera, and that is a gift. If you can do that, there's work for that person."



Scene from one of Blair's Greater Knoxville Honda Dealers ads.
-- Submitted Photograph Courtesy Of Jaopro

Three years ago, the Blair family went to Los Angeles for an international competition and met with Wes Murphy, another Maryville native who is pursuing an acting career. Murphy, Dwyer and Moore were all in the locally produced film, "Boys of Summerville."

"We had dinner with Wes," Robyn says. "He was super nice. It is really nice to have that network."

David Blair says it shows how the community pulls together, even someone living across the country.

"Once again, it was another example – he doesn't even know us – and he took the time to come have dinner with us and talk about the industry," David Blair adds.

Knoxville actress Tyra Haag, who has a career in public relations while still making time to pursue her love of acting, agrees and says that's what makes this area special.

“It’s fun to see and support friends here locally who are doing great work,” Haag says. “It’s a really supportive community of actors.”

Haag has been in regional and national commercials as well as in local independent films that have won awards at the Knoxville Film Festival. She had a bit part as a receptionist in “Something, Anything,” a movie written and directed by independent filmmaker Paul Harrill and filmed in Knoxville.

Dwyer played the father of the story’s protagonist. Haag is hopeful that the Knoxville community will support even more projects in the future.

“We all want even bigger and better things for our area in regards to a theater district and making this place a filmmaking hub,” Haag points out. “You don’t really have to move out to LA anymore.

“I mean there’s so much incredible work going on in the southeast right now. I’ve got so many friends who are auditioning for great shows and movies that are being made around here. It’s an exciting time for the industry.”

The theatrical stage also provides budding actors opportunities to improve their skills. The Foothills Community Players and the Oak Ridge Playhouse offer impressive productions with regional actors. The Clarence Brown Theatre at the University of Tennessee serves as both a venue for professional theater and as a training ground for the university’s undergraduate and graduate students.

Terry Silver-Alford, a faculty member and musical theater specialist, says the theatre does four professional shows a year, and guest artists from all over the United States are brought into act, direct and design productions.



Ashley has become a fixture on East Tennessee airwaves, already appearing in nine Honda commercials.
-- Chase Malone | The Ledger

Some shows, like the annual production of “A Christmas Carol,” offer opportunities for community actors. In the summer, the theatre holds a two-week intensive workshop for high school students who are interested in learning more advanced acting skills.

Ashley got her start in acting with a local group for kids, Maryville Youth Theater, which is no longer around. Her first role was as the Mayor of Munchkin City in “The Wizard of Oz.”

In just three years, she has added commercials to her repertoire. Ashley, who’s represented by Talent Trek Agency, has pitched Honda vehicles in character as “Lucy Williams” as a television reporter getting the scoop, a spokesman in a mock press conference, an unexpected rider in a test drive, a Honda official making a check list and as George Washington.

In addition to the television spots, Ashley also does Honda radio commercials and voiceovers. Most 10-year-olds don’t even know what a voiceover is, but Ashley understands the importance of not only getting the words right but the timing aspect too.

“We had to go do a voiceover. It was like a bunch of words,” she explains. “You have to say this in six seconds so we were in the car on the way, timing it.”

Brian McNew, vice president, creative team of JAOPRO, the creative agency that developed the commercials, says that the young actress is a natural at what she does.

“Ashley’s fantastic to work with. She is very reception to direction, and she’s easily coached,” McNew adds. “We’re still working on some ranges with her, but she continues to work to get better at her craft as well, and she’s multi-talented. She’s a dancer. She sings really well. She has a lot of other talents that we haven’t been able to tap into.”

The agency’s team was working with Greater Knoxville Honda Dealers to develop a promotion, and Ashley’s role of “Lucy” evolved through the creative process.

“For us everything starts with creative,” McNew says. “So when we’re concepting ideas we’re not necessarily thinking about what actors in particular to put into those situations.”

The idea to feature a young girl in a commercial eventually led to the series of Lucy commercials that are released every couple of months.



David, Ashley, Katie and Robyn Blair
-- Bonny C. Millard | The Ledger

“We’d met Ashley on the first shoot we had completed for Greater Knoxville Honda Dealers,” he says. “It’s called ‘Southern Hospitality’ where she played a little girl that was slighted by the Tooth Fairy. We met her on that set, and she did a really good job for us in that role. She’d followed direction really well, and she had a bit of a speaking role in that.”

After that first commercial, JAOPRO saw the possibilities and continued to work with Ashley.

“It was a collaborative effort between us and the client, but the client was asking for something specific. We kind of took it and twisted it, and said, ‘Okay, let’s take Ashley and put her in this role and see how she performs. She’s been knocking it out of the park for them. She’s been great to work with.’”

McNew says the client loves Ashley’s work and has had positive response to her from the public. A commercial character offers the opportunity to build a promotion, and JAOPRO saw Ashley’s potential.

“A lot of that relies on the actor’s ability to carry the role,” McNew says. “She’s done such a great job with whatever we’ve thrown at her, and that’s why we continue coming back to it.”

Ashley’s father, who was a founding member of the now-defunct but once popular regional band The Moonshine Cherrys, says she doesn’t get stage fright or camera shy when performing.

“She doesn’t seem to get nervous like most kids do,” he says.

Her parents, particularly her mom, help Ashley memorize her lines.

“I’d just practice with my parents,” Ashley says. “My mom will read a sentence, and I say it back. She’ll read another sentence, and I’ll say those two sentences together. She says another sentence, and I’ll put them together. And another sentence.”

Robyn says that most of the time, Ashley doesn’t get her script until the night before, but she is able to learn her lines. One night, she was preparing for both a commercial and a segment in a video for a

Maryville City Schools Foundation fundraiser. In that piece, she played a school reporter and had extended lines to deliver.

“I don’t know how she memorizes the way she does,” Robyn says. “She’s got a unique way, I think, of memorizing things.”

Some of the commercials require more time to produce, and Ashley has to deliver her lines over and over again.

Robyn says the George Washington commercial took about eight hours to shoot, getting all the right shots. In the commercial, Ashley portrays George Washington in a boat with other “revolutionaries,” rowing through a “river” of Honda vehicles.

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“She was at the front of that boat. She’s short so they put sandbags down, and she had to stand on the sandbags. When you stand that long, you’re un-level, and they had to do things over and over,” Robyn recalls. “She just stood up there. It’s not like she was talking to a buddy. It was so unique for a 10-year-old to be able to stand there and do that for that long.

“I thought for sure when she got done, she’d come down and talk about how long it was. You’d think that was exhausting. She got down, and what did you say to me?”

Ashley picks up the story, “That was the best thing ever, and I want to do it every day.”

Robyn added that Ashley had a request: “‘That’s why I need to be homeschooled and do that every day.’ When she said it, I was like ‘I don’t think so.’”

Although acting fulltime might be fun to think about, Ashley, a straight-A student, is involved in school activities at her intermediate school in Maryville, including serving on the School Council last year and participating in the choir’s Spring Sing.

When she’s not acting or participating in school activities, she’s honing her competitive dance skills in jazz, hip-hop and tap at Artistic Dance Unlimited.

With nine Honda commercials under her belt, Ashley is becoming recognizable when she’s out in public.

During a visit to Dollywood, a woman approached her, and after determining Ashley was indeed the young actress, the stranger asked for a hug. Diners in restaurants will ask if she is the “Honda girl” when she’s out eating with her family. And she’s started getting autograph requests.

Older sister Katie tells a funny story about Ashley’s character Lucy.

“JAOPRO got a call. A lady asked them where they could get a blue Honda shirt like Ashley as Lucy Williams because her daughter wanted to be Lucy Williams for Halloween,” Katie says, adding, “It’s pretty cool though...like being a real life Superman, everybody wants to be you.”

All the extra attention doesn’t seem to faze Ashley. She shrugs her shoulders and takes it in stride. Her parents help keep her grounded so she doesn’t take herself or what she’s doing too seriously, and they also want to ensure that this is something that continues to be her choice.

“We just support both of them in whatever they’re interest in,” says David about both Ashley and Katie, who was a competitive gymnast for six years and now is a junior high cheerleader.

“She can be famous,” Katie says matter-of-factly. “I can be in the background. I can be her manager.”

It was during Katie’s gymnastics days that Ashley and her mother heard radio commercials for an audition.

“Ashley and I used to sit in the parking lot in the car and wait for her,” Robyn says. “We heard those on the radio, and Ashley kept going, ‘I want to do that.’ Well one of them was at the Airport Hilton.

“Talent Trek was there. So they signed her,” Robyn said. “That’s how she got signed up with Talent Trek.”

The film, “Devil’s Knot,” released in May 2013, gave Ashley experience in a feature film and allowed her to see Academy Award-winning actress Reese Witherspoon, who grew up in Nashville, at work.

While Ashley was there, Witherspoon kept mostly to herself between scenes, without making eye contact with others, staying in character of a mother whose son has been murdered. The movie is rated R so Ashley hasn’t seen it yet.

Robyn said auditions such as the one for “Devil’s Knot” are blind without any information about the film or the character. Filming in Atlanta or other regional cities is much more doable than flying to Los Angeles.

“It is kind of unreasonable to go out to LA just for an audition when you’re got a ton of other people auditioning for it,” Robyn says. “It costs a lot and that’s on your own dime to be able to do those things.”

But if the right opportunity came along, and it was something that Ashley wanted to be involved with, David and Robyn say they would try to find a way to make it work.

“It would probably depend on the circumstances,” David says.