

MPTD Interview with Melissa Houghton

Leslie Green: Welcome to Reel Talk with Film DC. This is your host, Leslie Green, Senior Communications Manager at the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the DC Film Office. This month, we're sitting down with Melissa Houghton, Executive Director of Women in Film & Video of Washington, DC, also known as WIFV DC. They're one of our great local partners here.

We're so excited to have you here and the support that you give to the many talented professionals that we have working here in the media industry. Thank you for being here. We're so happy to have you here.

Melissa Houghton: No, thank you, very excited. We really enjoy the relationship with the DC Film Office. You bring so many resources to the independent filmmakers here, that it's always a pleasure to see what's up your sleeve and see what we can do together.

Leslie: Yes, definitely. Let's start by telling our listeners a little bit about WIFV DC. They may not know who you are. What's your mission, and what do you do?

Melissa: Women in Film & Video of Washington, DC was started about 35 years ago, when 10 women gathered in a living room because they couldn't get the resources they needed. They couldn't get someone to look at their work critically and give them the advice they needed to move their career to the next level. We started as this very supportive community around independent filmmakers.

Over time, we've dealt with issues with how do we get more women in leadership positions, how do we start to stop the sexual harassment in the workplace, how do we bring resources to independent film production. Then, as much as individual...How do I help you make your film? Is it watching your rough cut? Is it hosting a fundraising party? Is it reading your grant proposals?

WIFV does that on a regular basis. We deliver about 70 professional development programs per year. It runs the gamut from "So, you think you want to be a filmmaker," to "I am a filmmaker. How do I do my payroll taxes for my employees"? or "Who's going to IDFA in Amsterdam this weekend? Can we run into something"?

We're actually part of a global network of 40 chapters around the world. It's quite rare that you would be at a major film festival, a major film market, or even a conference and not run into someone from one of the other chapters.

A couple of things set our chapter apart. We actually do have men and women as members. Close to 20 percent of our membership is men. We like to think they're some of the smartest men in the film industry in the region. We also reach out, quite often, to the student population. We have amazing schools here which discuss communications across a wide range of disciplines.

Not every chapter does that. Many don't admit men because they're in a very different market than we are. Many don't admit students because they really want to concentrate on established professionals.

This city changes so rapidly from year to year. There's such deep talent. We want anyone who says, "I'm a filmmaker based in Washington, DC," to have the resources they need for us to be proud of their work. We're very open.

Leslie: That's really interesting, that you do include men. Do you think that the title itself though makes it difficult? I'll ask this question. Do you actually promote it to men, or is it just, "You can come in if you see an opportunity for yourself"?

Melissa: I would stress that it's "Women in Film & Video," so they're included right in the title.

All of our programs are open to the public, whether you're a member or not. The word gets out among the independent community. Our board and our small but dedicated staff try and be at a lot of film events across town. We really are probably one of the most accessible film career organizations in the region. We have good relationships with our producing partners in town. As I said, we love working with the Film Office.

We're really trying to be out there. Anybody who's going to have a career in independent media has to take that first step and ask the question, "Can I go to that event"? Then we greet them and find out what they need to do. If they're not going to ask that first question, they're probably not going to be a success in their career anyway.

Leslie: That's very true. Tell me a little bit about your journey to Executive Director of Women in Film & Video. How did you get your start in the industry?

Melissa: I came to Women in Film, now, in August of 2005. I've been there longer than any of us expected me to be. I still have a few things I really want to accomplish, so they're going to be stuck with me for a little bit longer. I came to it through the nonprofit industry. Women in Film & Video wouldn't have existed for 35 years unless we were really paying attention to how we need to do business.

I came from the American Architectural Foundation, where part of my job had been national outreach. I don't know. I was the one who put up my hand one day. I ended up shepherding four one-hour PBS-format documentaries to national broadcast. Using those films, we actually generated about 200 community events across the country, over about a five-year period.

While we were creating those films...Let me tell you, we had no expertise in doing that...I met and worked with a lot of people from Women in Film and was so incredibly impressed by the expertise and the ideas they brought to what we were trying to accomplish.

They really made us a better client, and they really forced a better product out of us. Then I had the great, good fortune of working with a couple people for several years, really shepherding it through community development projects. The films are actually, scarily, still being seen on occasion. I'll get a call. I don't even know how they find me.

I realized, by meeting those people and going to a few events...I went to a couple Women of Vision events. I went to some of their public development programming. Then the position opened up. It was me calling some of them, saying, "Hmm. What do you think about this"? and them calling me, saying, "Hmm. We really want someone who has the nonprofit experience. It's great you have some film experience."

What I really bring to it though is I have a lot of experience getting things out, getting things made, and getting things financed. I'm not consumed by a story I need to tell. I can fully bring my resources, advocates, and connections to your project and really getting to know..."Oh, that's what you're working on. Have you thought of looking at it this way? Have you thought of this group as a partner? Are you looking at this incentive package"?

I can really leave my ego way outside the door and really devote myself to the very hard work independent media-makers are doing. There's very little support for what they're doing. Distribution is fractured tremendously. It's both owned by a few groups, but fractured at the same time, which makes it even more difficult to get your word in.

At the same time, technology has also advanced the kind of equipment you can use. There's no excuse not having a good image anymore. There's no excuse not having good sound, if you know what you're doing. We really love being there to say, "Let's bring in some of the best sound editors and see what they're doing. Who are the music editors"?

In my former life with an organization that had nothing to do with media, I am probably one of those people that should be a member of WIFV, because of what I brought as the client side of it as well and how I could have done my job even better, as a nonprofit. It wasn't my job to make media. That was a method we were using right then. I could have done a better job if I'd had that experience before.

We reach out a lot to nonprofits, in a variety of ways, to make sure if they're creating media, they know they've got backup that can help them do a better job.

Leslie: Can you point to any specific examples of how you took a filmmaker or a media professional and you really nurtured them? You took what was already a talented person, and you helped them to put their project out there or create this final product that not just that person could be proud of, but the whole community could be proud of as well.

Melissa: WIFV, a couple years ago, established a fiscal sponsorship program, where we bring the resources of our organization to the benefit of independent filmmakers. It gives them access to grant funding. If an individual wants to make a contribution to their project, the contribution actually comes to Women in Film to benefit that project so we can also extend a tax deductible contribution to that donor.

We've had a couple projects, now, within the system. The one that's definitely the furthest along...They're actually in Amsterdam this week, at the IDFA market...is a film that's now called "The Last Song Before the War."

We worked with three very talented young filmmakers, Kiley Kraskouskas, Leola Calzolai-Stewart, and Andrea Papitto, from Thinking Forward Media. Their film is about the

Festival in the Desert that takes place beyond Timbuktu in Mali. It's the most remote music festival in the world. They got in and shot great footage, amazing stuff. They worked with the Malian Air Force.

They got someone to donate vaccinations so they could go in-country. They got someone to donate lodging so they could be there. They did their homework with the festival coordinators. The only electricity at the festival that year was on the main stage and in a tent they were using to back up their footage every night. Those were the only two places with electricity on it because it's in the middle of the desert. It's beyond the middle of the desert.

We worked with them, as did a lot of other groups. They did Docs in Progress screenings. We did screenings with members. We really worked it through. Working with us, they were able to secure a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, very unusual for first-time filmmakers. Not the amount they requested, but money that let them get it really to the next step, push it forward, and get some outreach done.

They've done very well at festivals. We're hoping that they'll get some television distribution deals that come out of ITFA. They've really become a very strong, compelling resource to our community. Kylie lectures regularly about crown funding. Andrea talks regularly about the importance of culture in terms of tourism and economic development in places like Mali.

But to be honest, in places like Washington, DC, we truly don't embrace the culture that happens here as much as we could. It is a huge economic driver. That's everything from plays, live music, movie screenings and actually the creation of the media. I would say "Last Song Before the War" is a great one.

But then we also work with high school students in our Image Makers program where we put together teams of Women in Film member-professionals, high school students, typically juniors and seniors. Then we also reach out to the nonprofit community. Nonprofits become their clients and over the course of 8 to 10 Saturdays they create public service announcements for these nonprofits.

We're really demonstrating for those high school students one, that there's a career in media that might not be acting, although it might be. But that you can actually craft the message. How do they become better storytellers? How do they critically think how an audience is going to receive their message?

Then they're working with professionals, so they're really getting some hands-on management skills. They may not run the camera, but they direct the DP. We're really giving them a powerful role in that process.

They craft story. They pitch it to the nonprofit client. They get the approval. They work with people to set it up. It's both ranges there. We've now had, the program's been running now about eight years and we've recently heard from one of our early Image Makers students that's now working professionally in media. Not in Washington, unfortunately. But working professionally in media, and a few that have majored in media in school and are very excited. A couple have come back to be interns in the office. It's really a cool process.

But for all of our members, every one of our members is in some sort of transition. The way media is created has changed dramatically in the last eight years since I've been at Women in Film. It's going to continue to change dramatically over the next eight months. How do we make sure that people have the tools they need and the facility with those tools to tell the really important stories they're telling?

Leslie: That was actually the next question I was going to ask you is, how has the media industry here in the District evolved over the last eight years? I know it's evolved even in the last year. But since you became executive director, how do you think the opportunities have changed between now and then? Are they better?

Melissa: The opportunities are different. One of the constants in media production is a lot of people who come to media have wonderful stories and they're very introverted. That's what allows them to really focus in on their stories and concentrate on them and dig deeply to tell really compelling stories. That can make it difficult for them to create partnerships or find distribution or share that story at the right time with other people. That hasn't changed.

What has changed in a major way is the technology. That now somebody who's really an introvert really can do start-to-finish, soup-to-nuts on their entire project and never talk to anybody else. That may not benefit their project.

We really try and create that kind of safe, nurturing environment where you can come to a program, get the information you need. You may not have to ask the questions, but there's good information there. You will undoubtedly meet someone who gets interested in your project and wants to help you. That's a good thing.

The fact that, as I said before, there's no excuse for a bad picture. There's no excuse for bad sound, unless you don't have the skills you need to use the technology well. And I don't. I'm a total technophobe.

The other thing that's changed, and not for the better, is the business model in the District of Columbia. We have great, great production facilities here, and they're doing an amazing job, and the post-production facilities here are some of the best in the country. They're on cutting edge of delivery mechanism and how do we get you to look the best as you possibly can. You see their work all the time. They don't get recognized because you have to wait and watch to the credits.

But then within some of the creation pieces it's really changing. Staffs are changing dramatically. A lot more is being pushed out to independent producers and smaller production companies. Rather than as much of it happening as in-house production and facilities, it really is becoming a business model of I'll give you a 16 episode strand. How do you do it? Then you're bidding for the next 16 episodes. You're not necessarily getting a three month or a three year or a longer strand.

Now the upside of that? It's giving more people access to actually being content creators on a major level. I can think of several newer production companies in town that basically were staff at companies, were doing a great job. People loved their work and said, oh, but we'd really like to work with you as an independent, setting up their own company. That's a whole other set of skills that they may not have wanted to have.

The other thing that's changing dramatically, not necessarily for the better, is budgets. The kind of work that an audience really wants to see doesn't get made, necessarily, for \$10,000. An hour of television that captures you has a much, much, much larger budget attached to it. But those funding streams are really changing and drying up. Everybody's looking to, how can we do it better, faster, less expensive?

Sometimes that works to the advantage of the project, not always. Again, I think what I'm seeing a lot is a transition from very established major award-winning producers who would get \$300,000 budgets, \$500,000 budgets, months to work on a project are now being asked to deliver the same level of project in half the time and half the budget. That's a race to the bottom that I don't think is actually going to work to the advantage of a creative, informed civilization.

What are we doing to do about it? Is Kickstarter the answer? Again, a great invention that didn't exist a few years ago that does give unknown people access to capital from people they may or may not know. To be honest, they know 80 percent of the people who are funding to them. It's just a different way to get their money. But the IRS is starting to pay attention to that, so who knows what that's going to be in another six months?

There is access to small pieces of funding. There are ways to duplicate your material. YouTube is not the worst distribution mechanism ever if you can drive people to your site. You could conceivably have more people see your work on YouTube than a major cable network.

It really forces the filmmaker to think much more strategically about distribution in a way I don't think they had to five or eight years ago. The smart ones did, but a lot didn't. You have to really be thinking downstream where it's going to go. Is there a podcast mechanism to it? Does it have to be all visual? Is there still a print mechanism to it? How am I distributing it? Is it all a digital download? If it's a digital download I'm more open to piracy.

Is the worst thing that could happen to your film, it's pirated in China and it's a film on sweatshops. And 15,000 Chinese see it who couldn't see it any other way. Is that really the worst thing that could happen? For some people it is. For others it's not.

It's really that globalization of media opens up incredible partnerships and stories. I love some of the growth in storytelling that's happening. People are becoming much more sophisticated with the way they're telling their stories. It's a lot more fun. It's a lot more informative. It's a lot more work.

WIFV, we're constantly changing as well. Oh, I don't know about that latest thing either. Let's do a program on it. We need to understand that. What do we think the IRS is really going to do about crowdsourcing, crowdfunding? How can we get ahead of that to make sure you've got the best information to make sure you're doing it legally?

We're working on some projects thanks to the leadership of our board on really looking at internships. Media internships are getting a very bad reputation and the people who sued should have sued and they should have won. That was not a situation that was a good situation. And they weren't in the District of Columbia, they were in other localities.

But media is one of those places where there's very little opportunity for journeymen or apprenticeship opportunities anymore. There aren't that many assistant editors anymore, but you need that. You need that time. You need that mentorship to figure it out. So how can you make internships work that benefit the company, but also benefit the person doing the internship?

Great if they could all be paid. If they're going to be unpaid internships, what is that intern truly getting out of it? Is it putting them to a different level of their workplace? If you're just replacing someone you should have hired, that's not a good internship. In fact it's illegal.

We're really looking to draft a statement of best policies and best practices. Make sure that our members understand what their opportunities are and then really take full advantage of them. And have it work to the benefit of people in transition as well students. We're not there yet. We're really working on it.

But we've got some great partnerships with people like the employment law institute and we're working with a couple employment lawyers. And we're working with some of our members who do an excellent job, amazing job, providing really in depth, thought provoking internships for their students or their transitioning professionals. It really does get them ready for their next job. A recommendation from those people goes a long way because they know the level of work that they're getting.

It's things like that, but it's constantly changing. We could have this interview next week and there'd be another issue that we'd have to talk about because it's cutting edge.

Leslie: I'm going to shift gears a little bit. Can you talk a little bit about what makes DC such an interesting or unique place to film?

Melissa: Smart people. People who, even though they may be consumed with their subject matter, actually have a world view of what the implications are, people who get a broad range of input into their projects.

Washington, DC, if you're interested in movie, there's almost nothing that's been made that won't come through here at some point. Whether it's in an actual theater, at a university, at an embassy, at a "Women in Film" screening, a "Docs in Progress" screening, a producer's guild screening, the cinema club.

People here really like to watch stuff. Sometimes it's pure escapism, sometimes it's I really need to understand that better. The other thing that's very unusual here happens some in New York, but not to the same level. Is the incredible wealth of non-profits and government agencies and non-government agencies that are here? Many of whom have to communicate their message on a variety of platforms.

It pushes people in a lot of different ways, and we get to watch them. A lot of places look to digital distribution to pornography. Which does tend to pull the things along. But we also have the Red Cross. We also have women's organizations.

We also have population organizations. We have the Smithsonian. We have a lot of things that are other ways where they're communicating with a broad audience, digitally and in person, that are really testaments to us.

We get to, we tap those people regularly and say will you do a program on this? Will you do a program on that? And not all of our members may be ready for that information, but we encourage them to come anyway, because you're going to need it. That makes Washington very different. The downside of that that makes Washington very different, we're somewhat restricted in funding opportunities here. We're not a state, we're not a city.

When our film makers go up against people in New York or people in Silver Spring...in Silver Spring, you've got the Silver Spring Business Improvement District, The Montgomery County Arts districts. Maryland state arts agencies, lots of family foundations in Maryland.

When you come to the district of Columbia, we have the amazing DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, The Washington Council on Humanities. And a few individuals who really are dedicated to what are the next edge.

But then a lot of it is what can we do on our own? It's great that we have the resources of the NEA and the NEH right here, but they have to fund the District of Columbia and 50 other places and Guam. So they're really restricted, but we can pull on that expertise. A lot of places don't have the expertise that we have here that we can pull on, and we try and use that to our advantage.

It's also just, I don't know about you, but when I'm coming back from not being in the district, if I'm coming from Virginia I go over Memorial Bridge. There's something amazing about driving over that bridge, seeing the vista, seeing it open ahead of you, getting that sweep of history.

But then there are just amazing neighborhoods here. It's so much fun to live in a place that everybody in the country will visit at some point and they will see what everybody else has seen. But I love directing those tourists in town to the, oh, you should really get off on this Metro stop instead.

Or "Oh, this is the restaurant you need to go to." And the culture here is just so rich and deep. And I think that informs a lot of the media that's being produced here too. For a documentary film maker, it's a treasure trove. You've got the National Archives. You've got the Library of Congress.

Better than that, any expert on your subject matter, will come through Washington, DC. They'll be speaking somewhere. They'll be testifying. They'll be coming in, they've gotten a National Science Foundation grant and are coming in to report.

You can sit here and it's like being a spider in a web. You can sit here and wait for that expert to come to your project that you might not have the funding or the time to get to Belgium or Beloit, Wisconsin or where ever else. That's huge. And I think that's one of the reasons this is such a hotbed for non-fiction documentary production.

The resources are here and you can always find a smart person, just you go out to dinner and you talk to the person at the next table...I don't know about you, but I actually know rocket scientists. [laughs] It's cool.

Leslie: Yeah, you can certainly meet them here.

Melissa: I know people on Nobel Prize winning teams. I've met people who have invented things that have changed our world. I don't even have to look that far to meet them. So when you want to tell those documentary stories, you have so many more resources here than you do in a lot of other places.

We're finding a lot of people. We're a great resource for film makers who visit from out of town to really connect them up with crews, to connect them up with locations. And to really say we'll work around this schedule of your experts and we'll make it work. It's really fun in that way we really are the center of the universe. So we don't have as much funding, OK. But we've got more smarts. I think we're going to get pretty far that way.

Leslie: Yeah, I would agree with that. And I just recently went to, for the first time...I didn't really know that this existed, but the kids film festival, that you host and you've been hosting since when?

Melissa: Since 2002.

Leslie: 2002? So it's been around for a while now.

Melissa: Several of our board members, led by Deborah Redman, who was the president at that point. September 11, 2001 was quite traumatic for a lot of us. I actually at that point worked a block from the White House and had a direct view to watching the Pentagon burning and knew we couldn't leave. We were in place for a while.

The Kids World Film Festival was started as a response to that because what WIFV saw in the media that a lot of media was becoming us and them. We were really segmenting stories and we were really isolating people in their experience. And women in film identified pretty rapidly that media was a way to actually broaden that story.

The films that we choose, it's a two part program. But the films we choose for the festival, this year that was managed by a board member, Amy Johanson and several others. But she took a great leadership role and just did a great job with it.

We identify short films formed around the world, genre doesn't necessarily matter. It could be animation. It could be live action, that really present conflict resolution, tolerance and diversity in interesting ways that are not an easy story so that the kids have to think about what they're watching.

Hopefully see themselves in it and then we promote discussion afterwards. But what we do before we bring, this year, 165 fifth graders into one place. "Woohoo"! We actually go into their classrooms and do about an hour on media literacy and really talk to them about thinking about what they're watching.

If you think about how you consumed media as a fifth grader, when you were a fifth grader and then how fifth graders are consuming it today. It's dramatically different. When I was a fifth grader there were a lot of programs my whole family watched together at the television. To be honest, when I was a fifth grader, there were only four real networks. There was no such thing as cable.

PBS was still the new kid on the block and was doing amazing things and thankfully still is. But they were viewing events. So if something came up I didn't quite understand, there was someone there I could ask about it. Or a lot of other people saw the program, the next day you could talk about it.

Kids today are as likely to view it on their mobile device. I don't want to call it a phone even or on their laptop or in their room. And they may see a lot of things that they don't understand. Or start to develop a, oh, this must be the way that works, because they haven't seen something else.

We really want to give them an opportunity to have a safe forum where they can really start to talk about it. What did you see about that? What did that make you think about? What aren't they telling you?

Sometimes it's as much fun to look at media and say OK, well I'm hearing this, but what aren't I hearing? And with the fracturing of media, you can hear exactly what you want to hear pretty easily. You can find what you don't want to hear pretty easily too, but which one are you going to watch?

We really go in and try and get these kids to work with it. And several of the schools, we work with schools across the region. They're DC, Virginia and Maryland. Several schools have participated year after year. We had a couple assistant principals this year because they'd been hearing about the program and wanted to see it in action, very excited about that. And the students love it.

We give them a chance to talk. And we're actually going back into some of the schools this year after the festival. So it's a fun program. But it really was meant to show them that we're probably more alike everybody else than we are different than everybody else. And sometimes it's OK to be angry, but it's how you resolve that anger.

Why is the bully being the bully? Why do some kids use this kind of language? How are you going to deal with horrible incidents happening in your life? Are you going to turn to violence or are you going to turn to art? All those kinds of things.

We want to put models out there for children to think differently about how they're going to behave and also differently about how they're going to grow up. There's a recent study with all this interest in science, technology, engineering and math. Why aren't there more girls, young women, following all the way through college in science professions?

A very interesting but scary study just came out. The number of women graduating with degrees in forensic science has increased over time. When asked why, all of them said, "I saw that I could do it. I watched 'NCIS'. I watched 'CSI'. I watched 'Bones.' I saw women who were using

science, who were respected by their team members, and who were solving crime. I was empowered by that. I want to do it."

We need to get a lot more of those powerful role models out there, and for young men as well. I'm sorry, not every boy has a six pack set of abs, is going to be on the football team. That boy who writes, and writes well, should also be a role model. That boy who actually listens to someone and doesn't just go storming off and drive in a car or sleep with the first girl he finds or whatever.

Isn't it exciting to be in an industry where you can put a variety of role models out there for people to find their own path? That's something else that gets talked a lot about in Washington. Are we doing a good job here? Again, that's another resource I think we have here.

The Gina Davis Institute on Gender in Media is doing great work. We love working with them. We've been very lucky to have Ms. Davis do a couple of programs with us. I'm very interested in bringing her back and really looking at the work they're doing.

Then, again, working with the Film Office, the projects you bring to town are good projects. Typically with women in good roles in front of and behind the camera come to Washington, DC. That's really nice. That's not true in every location. It's good that they're trying to depict smart women here. We have a lot of them. It's not that hard, but it's good to see them on film every now and again.

Leslie: I know you mentioned this before, that you all are into your 35th anniversary with DC. Can you tell us a little bit about what you have planned to celebrate that and what new initiatives that you have?

Melissa: I want you to invite me back in about six to eight months for a full reveal on that. We will turn 35 in 2014. In March of 2014, as I alluded to before, 10 women gathered in Jenny Duran's living room. They had films they wanted people to see, and they looked at it.

Then they started talking. How do we communicate better? How do we share resources? How do we do this? We've grown now to about 1000 members, men and women across the region. We will be continuing our fiscal sponsorship program, our Image Makers program, our Kids' World Film Festival.

We have, for several years, given a Women of Vision award. We've done it one night and brought three or four women together for the awards. Over the next several months, we're breaking them down into smaller pieces.

It's often difficult to get the exact women you want all in one place on the same night, but we still really want to acknowledge their career. We work with the Library of Congress every year to make nominations to their national film registry.

Finally last year they accepted "A League of Their Own" into the National Film Registry which recognizes films for their historic, social, and cultural importance to the American experience. Don't get me started on why "A League of Their Own" wasn't in there before and why it took three years of nominations to get it in.

We were so excited to be able to have Penny Marshall here this summer for a screening of "A League of Their Own." We actually had two women who played professional baseball in that time period. We were so lucky to have it moderated by Christine Brennan, who is one of the leading sports columnists in the country.

Penny Marshall is an amazing film director. "A League of Their Own" is an outstanding ensemble film which does capture this period of American history which was largely going to be lost without that film. To be able to bring Ms. Marshall here, it was so much fun to watch a film with 400 people who ranged in age from about 9 to 85.

You don't get to see films with 400 people very often. Half the audience was there because of the filming and the film maker. Half of the audience was there because they loved baseball. It was just such a fun time.

We hadn't been able to get Ms. Marshall here for years, so it was great to be able to put her in a comfortable place where she could talk about making the film, where she could meet some of these women who had played baseball. That's why she made the movie. She was captured by their stories. She had seen a quick documentary and really wanted to retell it.

Over the next several months we will have other, let's call them pop-up award programs where a very important woman who has really changed the way we look at media or the way we make media is available and able to be in town.

We will do an evening with program or a breakfast program and, hopefully, also involve them in master classes, so 10 or 12 people can really study with that person and really learn what they're doing. It was a way for us to celebrate these creative and technical issues but also get some of that expertise left behind. We're really excited by some of the people who will be coming soon.

We will be announcing a few new programs. Another program we do regularly is Script DC where we bring established writing teachers, established producers, established directors, together to the benefit of the writers in Washington, DC to bring their storytelling skills up to par, to really think about, "If I'm telling the story this way, how am I actually going to make it? Is this a 300 million dollar movie or a 30 million dollar movie or a 3 million dollar movie"?

You can make small tweaks in your script and make that. If you don't 900 million zombies rolling over a wall and 600 cars for your 300 million dollar movie, can you tell the same story with 2 or 3 characters, 2 or 3 cars? Then it's a 3 million dollar movie. You can fund that.

It's a weekend. Among other things they get to make pitches and get their pitches critiqued. They get part of their screen plays read and critiqued by active producers. We're actually going to expand that program a little bit in the next year. We're very excited.

We'll be making that announcement probably in early spring to really work with more producers to get locally written scripts in front of the people who are actually getting decisions to get them green lit. That's going to be an interesting project to bring forward.

A lot of the other programs I'm excited about are those opportunities we're going to take as a community to really get together as a community as well. Nothing would have happened at

Women in Film. A lot of films that have been made over the last 35 years wouldn't have been made without that support system.

It's really easy to forget about it. It's really important to recognize it. The fact that we exist 35 years later, that many of our founders are still involved and actively producing films, that we actually have staff on a fulltime basis that's available to film makers and to potential partners, it's pretty amazing as a nonprofit.

We're not that nonprofit at the top of everybody's list. We're not curing, fill in the blank here. We're not fixing that. I do think, through the media that's produced by the people who are here, we are starting to cure those things. We are starting to fix those things, because people can have a more in depth discussion. They understand there's something to fix. In that respect, I do think we're right in the trenches, and probably earlier on, than a lot of other people. When you look at what we do and how we do it, 35 years is pretty exciting.

Leslie: It is. It's something to be proud of, for sure.

Melissa: So many of our founding members are very involved in the programming that's going to roll out in the next year. We'll be creating a new group, a new advisory group for ourselves, with a lot of those early leaders in the industry. We can't wait to work with them on a very different level. Stay tuned, there's going to be some fun stuff happening.

Leslie: Awesome, I'm looking forward to it. As we wrap up here with my last question, I just want to honor those women who we recognized as our film makers of the month that are part of Women in Film and Video, Ada Babino, Robin Smith, Jenny Duran. You all have a wealth of information as far as filmmaking is concerned, not just for women, but the industry in general.

Can you just leave us with a few words of wisdom for aspiring filmmakers, those who are just getting their start in the industry? What advice would you give them?

Melissa: Don't even pretend you're going to do it by yourself. Don't, for a second, hesitate to ask somebody else for their opinion about what you're doing. There are so many amazing resources in this city for media makers. Women in Film, obviously, Docks in Progress, DC Shorts, film festivals that often have conference pieces with them, universities.

The local public access channels in this region do great workshops. You don't have an excuse for not understanding what you're doing. That's number one. Number two, do it. Start with your iPhone, whatever your phone is, if you have to. There are some great films, actually, that have been made on phones lately. They're just phenomenal in their storytelling and depiction.

Don't think you're going to do it on your own. Don't make it harder on yourself than you have to. I would say that works for somebody who has been in the industry for 35 years as well. That group, in some ways, is so exciting to me, because they're bringing 35 years of expertise forward, but they're still actively making work and figuring out new ways to do it.

It's the new technology. It's things like cameras getting smaller that are allowing them to interview people on a much more intimate way than they were ever able to do before, because you truly do forget the camera is there.

They can interview people for a longer period of time than they were able to. That's not always a good thing. I really believe in preplanning and getting your interview right. I think there are those resources here.

Watch it. Again, there are close to 85 film festivals in this immediate region. You need to see as much film as you can. You need to understand there are other ways of telling that story. You need to find, by watching things. "That's what I want it to look like. That's who I want to work with," or "I never thought of it that way."

We're in a hotbed for those kinds of resources. Anyone who is not taking advantage of that is really doing a disservice to their subsequent obviously. Here's the last one. If you're working on something, tell people about it.

Don't keep it to yourself. If you're really only making it for your mother...not that she's not going to love it, but you have to bigger than that. You have to own what you're making in terms of, "I want to tell you about what I'm making. It's this really great film. I want you to be excited about my project."

You need that person at some point, either buying a ticket to watch it at the other end or lending you their house for a location or "I have this connection to that expert." I think it's really important for all of us to be very proud of what we're doing, very honest about what we're doing, and very open about what we're doing. Then buy tickets. See the stuff. Let people know that there's an audience here. Make those connections for people. You're going to benefit by doing that.

Leslie: Absolutely, really, really great advice. Thank you, again, Melissa, for joining us. Thank you all for tuning into "Real Talk with Film DC." This is your host, Leslie Green, signing off. Don't forget to check us on the web at Film.dc.gov. Like us on Facebook at Facebook.com/filmdc, and follow us on Twitter@dcfilmoffice. Catch you next time.

Transcription by CastingWords