



WHAT'S IT LIKE

## To Be a Hollywood Movie Producer

*Susan Kerth, Editor, and Jennifer Starkey, BA '98*

When the film “Manchester by the Sea” premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival in January, it garnered rave reviews and Amazon quickly acquired the North American distribution rights to the film for a reported \$10 million. Amazon will release the movie in theaters and then have exclusive streaming rights. “Manchester’s” cast includes well-known stars Casey Affleck, Michelle Williams and Kyle Chandler, and Matt Damon is one of the producers. But there’s a Webster University connection to the film as well. Alumna Kimberly Steward, BA '03, is one of the film’s five producers and she also financed the film through her company K Period Media. Steward graduated from the School of Communications with a degree in broadcast journalism. She began working in jobs at national magazines such as W and Real Simple before branching out and forming her own business, Kess Agency, in 2010. This foray into entrepreneurship inspired Steward to think about where her passions and talents combine; she then formed K Period Media in 2014 to focus on producing movies. Steward attributes her education at Webster with providing a good basis of production knowledge that has been helpful in her career in the film industry.

Not only was [professor] Eileen Solomon an amazing mentor to me, but Webster’s broadcast journalism program really helped prepare me for multiple areas of production, from digital editing to print media. Most schools make you wait a couple of years before getting into the nit and grit of production. The additional time really helps prepare for finding a job post-college or creating one.

One of my favorite sermons that truly inspired a lot of my decision to move forward producing movies was called “Your Passion is Your Purpose,” by Bishop Noel Jones.



Some people naturally love to sing or naturally love to draw. Well, naturally, I love to create, tell stories and create opportunities for others around me. I believe your work should inspire you and others around you. I am truly following my heart.

I am now able to work and leverage my creativity and my connections in order to create strategic relationships with some of the most prolific people in the film industry.

My first meeting in LA was with Tom Rothman who runs Sony. At the time, he was the head of TriStar Entertainment. My business partner Lauren Beck and I sat down and met him. At the end of the meeting, tears came out of our eyes because he gave the best advice on how to get started with the type of capital I have and how to be smart about it.

The film industry is a very small community, honestly. [Prior to getting involved in producing movies] I had done certain types of production. I had been involved in various stages of set design, but for magazines and publications. I had made music videos and been involved in the fashion side from Women's Wear Daily. Now it's like getting the band to all play together.

[As producers] We are usually sourcing material, whether it's from the development stage coming from an idea, or reading a book that we'd like to acquire the rights to and then from there engaging a writer and writing a script. Sometimes we find projects that have scripts already written and engage with the writer and script from that level. Then you move into a different phase of packaging, adding talent to the project, then from there figuring out budgets, schedule, hiring department heads...all of the various things you see when you're watching a film.

Separately from that, I also have a financing company that is financing movies. With my company, K Period Media, under one house there are two different functions -- one as a production company and the other as a financing company.



We were given the script from [producers] Chris Moore and Kevin Walsh. We read it and all fell in love with it. Lauren Beck also became one of the producers on the film, and my creative executive at K Period Media, Josh Godfrey, is an executive producer. We called each other and it was pretty unanimous from there. We ended up getting involved in the project in December and were on the ground [filming] in Massachusetts by February.

November 18 is the release date for "Manchester." It will be a platform release, and there will be a premiere for the film within a week of our release date. (Editor's note: Platforming refers to when a film is opened in a single theatre or a small group of theatres to build an audience before releasing to a wider area.)

[At Sundance] I loved listening to the audience's reaction and hearing the moments when they laughed or the sniffles and rustling of the tissues when they cried. When you are in production you hope once the film is completed that all the moments that made you laugh, or made you emotional when you

read the script, will resonate with the audience as well.

My typical day is checking emails on my phone, attending lots of meetings, sitting down with different creatives. One of the things we are hoping to do is work with a lot of first-time filmmakers and helping new artists coming into the industry. A lot of times I'm either reading a script or meeting with a first-time director.

Lauren and I spend a lot of time really trying to identify types of projects, and what that says about us as women and producers because they are few and far between. We're hoping to send the right kind of messages. So a lot of times we are sitting and pitching to each other, coming up with new ideas we want to create on our own and talking about the scripts we're reading. Josh is reading about 40 to 50 scripts a week. Before you really land on that one, it takes a lot of due diligence from all of us.

We are actually developing two films from the script level right now. Basically, we're working on five or six projects right now, all in various stages. You keep juggling them all in between.

[Looking forward to "Awards season"] I say this humbly, but I feel like everything's been so wonderful, who could ask for anything more? The chitter chatter around "Manchester" has been overwhelming and the response from the critics has been overwhelming and a blessing. I joked and said in an interview with Variety that I kind of feel like a Disney princess and it does!

My advice for Webster students looking to break into the industry is that the best thing to do is to get access early. Take the opportunity during the summer to try to be a production assistant or to somehow involve yourself when you're young and can do it on a certain budget. Make those relationships that can be long-lasting. There are lots of ways to access this industry and lots of ways to use your talent. **G**