

WIL Highlights for Aug. 24, 2018

What a powerful panel – three women leaders who are helping make Georgia the #1 filming location in the world!! Each shared a little of her personal background and experience, career progression, as well as her unique perspective on what we as citizens need to know about the current and future state of this growing industry.

Lee Thomas is the Deputy Commissioner of the Georgia Film, Music and Digital Entertainment Office, a division of the GA Department of Economic Development. A native Atlantan, she has an undergrad degree in Radio – TV – Film from UGA; a masters from GSU, and she attended the Tisch School of the Arts Doctoral Program in Cinema Studios at NYU. Returning to ATL in 1996 in time for the Olympics, she's held many significant positions since then in the industry including finding locations for and working on top-rated films like *The Blind Side* and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*.

Beth Talbert, a NC native, is currently the VP Studio Operations at Eagle Rock Studios here in ATL. She holds a B.A. degree from Lenoir-Rhyne University. Twenty three years ago she left N.C. for California and not too surprisingly, ended up in the entertainment industry. Like Lee, Beth also has years of experience in the film industry including her work with the Sunset Bronson Studios in L.A. Her day to day business now is somewhat like a landlord as she oversees her clients' filming and related needs in Eagle Rock's facility.

The third panelist of this trio of "stars" was Misty Holcomb, SVP Government Relations – State with McGuireWoods Consulting LLC. Misty focuses on both the entertainment and healthcare industries and heads up McGuireWoods Strategic Communications and PR practice in Georgia. As you might guess, hers is a different background from Beth and Lee as she's spent considerable time with the Georgia General Assembly; served as the legislative liaison for the Department of Corrections; and as communications specialist in the Senate Press Office. In addition Misty's also been a TV reporter, anchor and talk show host and is a regular cast member for *Sketchworks*, Atlanta's premier sketch comedy troupe.

Key take-aways from the panel:

- Lee pointed out that we must credit Jimmy Carter when he was governor for creating the department that has become what her organization is today (started in 1972.)
- “Don’t call Atlanta or GA the Hollywood of the South! We are our own industry and are doing things our way here.”
- The impact on the city of ATL and the entire state is much more than just the companies and studios that make the films, etc. The economic impact extends far and wide across and within various communities (e.g., housing, jobs of all kinds, small businesses, infrastructure, etc.) You might call these “backroom benefits” to GA and its citizens. Just one example of the impact film making or a TV show can have: think zombies, The Walking Dead. It has totally changed the small town of Senoia!
- 85% of people involved in film making in GA are from here; the rest are from external places. This is a misnomer in some people’s minds but it’s a good example of the information – the facts - that need to be shared. Another fact: there are 92,000 people right now employed in the industry in GA.
- A good resource for entrepreneurs / small business owners and for other crafts / talent etc. to connect with the industry and to find out what opportunities may exist is to go to the website, www.gafilm.org.

Make no mistake: the incentives the state legislature provides to this industry are absolutely critical to the growth of the industry and to competing with other states. Misty talked about how important it is to be at the table during the legislative process. When politicians are faced with making decisions or discussing bills, they rely on input from lobbyists like her and others to know how the legislation might impact the companies they represent.

- Beth and others also discussed how bills like the so-called “bathroom bill” in N.C. can and do have a negative impact on whether a state is considered a good place to make a film.
- Asked about how their careers and work were and are affected by their gender, all agreed that there was and still is somewhat of a “boys club” in the industry. Beth pointed out immediately that “it’s a tough business and can be brutal.” One thing she learned early on was to try and “think like a man” if you’re dealing with men. Lee pointed out that things have certainly gotten better in the last 20 years and most people are much more cognizant (of diversity and inclusion.)
- Misty said she always reminds herself (lightheartedly), “If things don’t work out, I can always go home!” More seriously, she also said she has tried throughout her career to “toughen up” and not take everything too personally. She tries to get over small slights and not be offended.
- Looking to the future, and what the state and we as citizens need to know and do to support the industry: Lee pointed out that a lot is being done in terms of recognizing this industry on a list of “high demand careers.” Georgia has established a Film Academy to help train and develop people in various fields. A number of colleges and institutions of higher learning have added degrees that relate to the film and entertainment industries. Actually, the “film and entertainment industry” momentum is even starting in elementary, middle and high school to get kids to think about new careers