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Office of University
Communications

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Dr. Jim Lawrence Shares Industry Experiences with his Students

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.-While teaching
Gardner-Webb students the basics of video

and film editing, Dr. Jim Lawrence gives them advice they won't find in a textbook. The life lesson comes from his own years working in the Los Angeles film and television industries.

"I try to impress upon students that you have to cultivate relationships," he asserted. "I realize the importance of being open to people helping you. There are key periods in my life when someone came along and was able to help me out at the very moment I needed it most. You have to cultivate these relationships. This is a business where you can't burn bridges. You can't afford to alienate anyone, because the industry is small and people work in the same circles."

Lawrence was reminded of that truth recently when he stumbled across a Facebook fan page dedicated to a film he wrote for Walt Disney Productions nearly 40 years ago. Called "Child of Glass," the made-for-television movie was his first big break into writing for network television. He got the job because of a connection he had made in the business.

The movie was first broadcast in 1977 and a few years ago Disney released it on DVD as part of the "Generations Collection." Until Lawrence found the Facebook page, he had no idea that the movie had such a following. "The gratifying thing is that after all these years so many people have found the film to be so enjoyable, and that folks who saw it as children are now sharing it with their children," Lawrence observed. "It was exciting to discover this and to realize that something I worked on so many years ago is still bringing people pleasure."

The person who helped Lawrence get the job was Earl Hamner Jr., creator and narrator of the multiple Emmy Award-winning TV series, "The Waltons." The two had previously met while presenting a project to CBS's Hallmark Hall of Fame. The meeting ended on friendly terms, so Lawrence decided to ask Hamner for an opinion on a different spec script. He liked the script and suggested that Lawrence send it to one of the agents who represented writers on "The Waltons" and worked at Twentieth Century Artists. She said the script read like Disney material, so she sent it to Walt Disney Productions.

A few weeks later, Tom Leech, a producer at Disney, asked Lawrence to come in for a meeting. After reading that one spec script, Leech offered Lawrence the chance to work on a film based on a novel Disney had bought the rights to—“The Ghost Belongs to Me” by Richard Peck. The two-hour movie would be

Courtesy Disney Generations
Collection

Because the last half of the book involved disinterring the bones of a 13-year-old girl to return them to a family crypt, Leech asked Lawrence to write a different ending. The story is about Alexander Armsworth, whose family moves to an authentic antebellum mansion once owned by a river pirate. Alexander is drawn into a century-old mystery when he sees the ghost of a little girl, and she asks him to help find the “child of glass” by reciting a riddle. Blossom Culp, Alexander’s new neighbor, decides to join the quest. Lawrence’s changes to the original story include the doll, mysterious riddle and treasure hunt.

Like the truth Lawrence has discovered in his own life about accepting help, he believes the appeal of the movie is about the value of friendship. “It’s the relationship of these two kids as they try to solve the mystery as they help out someone in need, who, in this case, just happens to be the ghost of a young girl,” he reflected. “It’s about supporting each other and caring for each other — friendship, loyalty and all of those qualities.”

Working on the project allowed Lawrence to be considered a full-time professional screenwriter, which also meant that he could join the Writers Guild of America. He is still a member of both the Writers and Directors guilds. He wrote one other movie for NBC and Disney, called “The Sky Trap.” It was released in the United Kingdom. Lawrence also wrote a movie for Warner Brothers/CBS: “Missing Children: A Mother’s Story,” based on a real Tennessee adoption scandal in the 1940s. Lawrence did a number of other freelance projects, but in the mid-1980s, he hit a prolonged dry spell.

“I decided to go back to school for a masters and Ph.D. when I determined that I could no longer take the extreme highs and lows of freelance work and needed something a little more stable,” he assessed. “I had always been interested in teaching, but I really felt that I didn’t want to teach out of a book, rather I would like to bring some real-world experience into the classroom.”

He earned his master’s degree at California State University, Northridge, Calif., and his doctorate at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Fla. His ninth year on the faculty of California State University, Northridge, he began to seriously think about moving back to the southeast. Then, a position opened up at Pfeiffer University in Misenheimer, N.C., where Lawrence went to undergraduate school. At Pfeiffer, he was the only theater instructor — teaching all the classes, directing the shows, building the sets, hanging lights and acting in two of the shows.

“I just couldn’t keep doing all that,” he offered. “That is when the position opened up at Gardner-Webb, and I started in August 2001.”

Because he believes students learn best by doing, Lawrence gives his classes many opportunities to work on projects. In 2006, a

movie students wrote, filmed and edited,

Courtesy Disney Generations Collection

“The Legacy: A Ghost Story,” won a top

award in an international film festival. Students have also made a promotional DVD for Eaton Corp. in Forest City, N.C., a documentary about a local big-foot legend, and recently produced a film to inform and educate GWU students about sexual assaults on college campuses.

His students appreciate the real-world experience Lawrence brings to the classroom. Jen Guberman, a student in Lawrence’s Intermediate Digital/Nonlinear Editing class, believes Lawrence’s film and television experience is invaluable. “He knows what employers in the field look for, the skills needed to be successful in the industry, and has incredible stories to share,” she asserted.

Another student, Daniel Napier is already gaining career experience by working as a student assistant in the GWU Sports Information Office. He helps with livestream production of sporting events and is the media relations contact for the men’s and women’s golf and swimming teams.

“To have an instructor who has worked at the highest level in any area of study is a big deal, but when it is someone who can tell you stories of being on Hollywood lots working closely with other people on the biggest stage, there is something special in that opportunity,” Napier observed. “Dr. Lawrence is a true educator. He has always been willing to help me, whether it’s for a project idea or just a simple question about an editing program. He truly cares for his students, and the one-on-one attention he gives his students is simply not something you’d experience anywhere but Gardner-Webb University.”

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University offers a comprehensive academic experience that introduces students to the diverse world of ideas and to the people who think them, preparing them for professional success and for productive citizenship.