

How Penn Grad Abby Wolf Weiss Climbed to Hollywood Success!

Contributed by Jay Kamin

UPenn graduate Abby Wolf-Weiss is a production executive for Universal Pictures. But she didn't always know what she wanted to do. College Living caught up with the mother of two to gain some insight into the fact-paced, hectic lifestyle of a Holly moviemaker.

Could you give me some background about yourself? I grew up in Lower Merion, outside of Philadelphia. I went to UPenn, majoring in psychology. But I was always interested in media entertainment. So I started doing a lot of internships—I worked for KYW's evening magazine, a Philadelphia casting director and at a music promo office for NCI Records. Very few people knew exactly what they wanted to do, and the truth is you can't know things until you try them. Every place you work teaches you something. After graduation, what steps did you take to get into the industry? I was living in New York, and I was certain I wanted to stay there. Then I read about Sherry Lansing, who is currently running 20th Century Fox. She started as a story editor, reading books to see if they would make good movies. I thought, "I could do that, I love books." I did that for awhile, and became quite good at it. I eventually met people who had a company in LA, and they offered to bring me out to LA. That's how I started as a production executive for Warner Brothers. What are some things producers do that the average might not know about? Most of the time, producers are developing and not actually producing. We're always reading articles and stories, meeting writers, finding interesting stories. Then we develop and work on scripts with writers, and work with financiers to put movies together. If we're lucky, we get somebody that says that they're willing to invest \$10-\$100 million to make it. What are some films/shows you've produced? When I was working with a different company, I was involved with Analyze This. I found the book for The Perfect Storm, and worked on a movie that later became For The Love Of The Game. More recently, I produced an ABC TV show called MDs, and produced a pilot for Good vs. Evil, which became a show on the Sci-Fi Network. Were you nervous before your first big interview or presentation? How did you calm your nerves? It was less about [calming my nerves] than it was about connecting. I've always had a good eye for material. It was about people beginning to recognize stories I found interesting—I had the skill that filmmakers wanted to be in business with. It was less about my ability to wow a room than it was to say to a boss, "You've got to read this script or book, it's fantastic." How do you react when a studio considers a movie idea too risky, or not marketable enough? It's tough when they say, "It's really good, but it's not commercial." But if you look at Million Dollar Baby or Brokeback Mountain, they redefined this by telling tough, provocative stories. The first hurdle is that these movies must deal with big ideas. They've got to hit something very human. Movies that have a tougher time are interesting stories that are hard to get people to see. It'd be like Munich without Spielberg—people might think, "I should want to see that, but Wedding Crashers looks like so much more fun." It's all a crapshoot. What qualities are valued most in your industry? What do you look for in potential employees? I look for someone who is hard-working with the right temperament. They have to be easygoing, but also confident and aggressive. I think the people who persevere do the best. There's room for all different kinds of traits and values; it depends what area you choose. Agents are charismatic and sign actors; brainiacs sit in offices all day, they're more erudite folks. All companies have to have a combination. Is there a distinctive Hollywood ego? If so, how do you effectively deal with people like that? Yes, there is a Hollywood ego. You really learn to manage it. I think that people come up with all different ways. It's not even huge egos, it's a lot of crazy people whose crazy behavior is allowed if they're successful enough. I've been really good staying away from crazies. I'll never convince myself that I am the one to tame the wild beast. Any bits of wisdom for those looking to enter the film industry? How about for recent graduates looking for employment in other fields? Read as much as possible, and see movies—good, bad, new and old. In general, be open to experiences and adventures, even if you're not certain what exactly you want to do. The first five or six years out of college, there are no wrong experiences. All people have different paths. I know people who have had the same job for last 25 years, and it's served them well. But always be open.