

Desert Sun

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Sunday's Ceo: Kim Waltrip

Dennis A. Britton

By Dennis A. Britton

The Desert Sun

Kim Waltrip had parlayed a successful modeling career into an equally promising acting career in Hollywood when friendship called.

It was 10 years ago when Sonny Bono died, and she hurried to Palm Springs to be with Mary Bono.

She never left. When Mary was elected to Sonny's congressional seat, Waltrip became her district director. From that developed a career in music promotion and, now, film and television production.

Recently, the head of Wonderstar Productions sat down with reporter Dennis A. Britton to describe her approach to business.

QUESTION: What is the biggest lesson you've learned in business?

ANSWER: Not to be afraid to take on the learning curve. When I came here to work for Congresswoman Bono, I didn't have a clue what a district director was supposed to do, so I just kind of made it up as I went along, paid attention and realized that I was doing it right. Then I started doing some charitable events, producing those, and I realized all you had to do was pay attention, have passion, have drive, tenacity and you can pretty much do anything.

Who was your mentor, and why?

Since I have been in the desert, Mike Marik has been my mentor for basically 10 years. Mike saw my work ethic and gave me some Tony Robbins tapes and said, "You work so hard, you need to be doing this for yourself." When I finally realized what I wanted to do, he became my partner and backer. The Tony Robbins tapes taught me not to be afraid and to believe in myself.

Describe your business and where you are taking it.

We are a film and television production company. We just finished producing a feature film called "Adopt a Sailor," starring Bebe Neuwirth, Peter Coyote and the grandson of Gregory Peck, who is as magical as his grandfather.

We are about three weeks away from all of our post-production and it has already been submitted to Toronto (Film Festival).

We're really proud of it. It's a really smart film. It started out as a 10-minute film right after the events of Sept. 11. The playwright decided to take that element out and broaden it. It's about the dichotomy of lives that come together when the sailor is invited to the home of a New York family.

My first day of shooting was on the flight deck of the USS Wasp. That was a bit overwhelming, but it was very cool. We had the full backing of the Navy.

We have another film called "Six Bullets from Now," which was in pre-production in New York last year but lost 20 percent of our funding so we've had to regroup.

I also have a musical talent company called Wonderstar Music. I hire musicians to perform at various functions around the valley, such as the Pacific Life Open where I booked all the music.

What is the best advice you've been given?

Have integrity. Integrity is the big one.

What unique role does your business fill in the Coachella Valley?

There is not a lot of film production here, but there is a lot of runaway production in the state of California because there aren't any tax incentives like most other states offer.

But we found in the Coachella Valley that it's a very tight-knit community that looks out for its own and, as a result, we had our own little incentives by getting great deals on hotels and car rentals, for instance.

Mathis Bros. provided all the furniture we needed for "Adopt a Sailor." The set designer couldn't believe it. We saved a lot of money that way and were able to save it to spend on our cast.

There are more and more film production companies in the valley. I am on the board of Palm Springs Women in Film and Television, and it's that "one degree of separation" thing where we all help each other out.

What have been your biggest mistakes?

Not standing up for myself when needed. There are others who don't quite have the integrity that you wish for, and I got bashed around a bit by just trying to be nice and hoping that they'll come to their senses. It is necessary to really take care of yourself.

How did you pick your location?

When I came here 10 years ago to help Mary, she asked me to help her in her run for Congress. I was acting in Los Angeles at the time. Working for her was a great experience. I have not missed Los Angeles at all because I like being on the other side of the camera. I'm kind of like a shark, if I don't move I die. I liked the creative side of acting, but I really don't like the attention that it involves.

How will your business be different a year from now?

We will have a film that is out in the public, hopefully several more in development and who knows where we go from there because the possibilities are endless. I love to tell a story to as many people as possible.

How do you put good customer service into practice?

When you are on a set, my job is to make sure everybody gets along and has what they need. Tensions can really be high. There have been quite a few moments where there was fighting and one wanted to quit and the other needed to be fired and you take care of it and all their other needs.

How do you market your business?

I do sponsorships. For instance, I sponsor the Elli Tourje radio show, Real Life. I have sponsored tables at events. I use the Internet to e-blast everyone about things coming up.

And I belong to groups like PSWIFT. I also have fabulous (logo) T-shirts and hats that I hand out.

How do you cope with the seasonality of the market?

The production side is constant, which is really nice, but the music side pretty much closes down in the summertime. But we make up for it during the season.

Glance: About Wonderstar

Business name: Wonderstar Productions

Type of business: Movie and television production

Owner: Kim Waltrip and Michael Marix

Years in business: 4

Number of employees: 2

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