



When one thinks of the San Diego film industry, Wally Schlotter should immediately come to mind. Schlotter, who is vice president of special projects for UltraStar Cinemas, chairman of the San Diego Film Festival, and executive producer of the iVIE Festival and Awards (among other things), is one of the great minds and mentors for anyone interested in film.

Schlotter, a graduate of San Diego State University's (SDSU) film school, recalls his first film industry "job" with nostalgia. "It was on the set of a commercial filming in Balboa Park," he said. "I was a student and they paid me \$25. I call it my 'raking leaves' story because when people ask, 'I want to be in the business, what should I do?' I tell them, 'Anything that's necessary; anything that's needed.'

"I showed up on the set where they were filming a scene, and the wind blew and leaves went all over the lawn around the set. I overheard the director say that the scenes weren't going to match now that all the leaves were on the ground, so I grabbed a rake and started raking the leaves. There was a guy over in the corner who was very quiet and I didn't know who he was, and he came over to me and said, 'What's your name?' And I said, 'Wally.' And he said, 'Wally, I'm Bob. I'm the producer, and I can guarantee you that you will always have a job in this business.'"

According to Schlotter, he always passes that story on to students who he mentors or anyone who asks him how to break into the business. "You do whatever it takes, no matter what the job is,"

SAN DIEGO'S

Godfather of Film



Wally Schlotter. Photo by Chris Morrow.

he says. "For your first couple of jobs, get it on your resume and do the job no matter what they pay."

For Schlotter, being a mentor is something he loves because he had such great ones himself. "Jared Davis, who produced, wrote and stars in 'Residue,' said recently in an interview, 'Wally not only tells you what to do or how to look at a problem or situation, but he also tells you why,' he says. "That made me feel really good. You don't want someone to just blindly follow you, because they'll never become self-sufficient. And I like to show them that they have potential."

When he was a film commissioner, one thing he says he used to tell people is that nobody can tell you that you can't be in this business. "I don't care what you look like, what your talents are, what your limitations are, there's room for you if you have a passion for it and if you find your niche," says Schlotter, who was the youngest film commissioner in the country at the time. "What I love to do is show people their value and potential, and beat

them up about their shortcomings until they get the idea that they need to beef up that side of them that they don't have. Then they can be successful. People used to come to me and say, 'I want to be an actor, I want to be a model, I want to be a producer.' And I said, 'We're going to start right now with you saying something different, and that is: I AM an actor, I AM a model, I AM a producer — and now, I want to make money at it!'"

As for Schlotter, his mentors are many and include Lee Grissom, who was the youngest head of a major Chamber of Commerce; former Mayor Pete Wilson, who formed the Film Commission and was one of the country's youngest mayors; Bruce Moore; Anne Evans; Stan Kallis, of Columbia Pictures; and John Ellison, owner of UltraStar Cinemas. "On a daily basis, Lee guided me and showed me what to do, how to do it, and how to treat people and be successful," Schlotter says. "Stan Kallis of Columbia Pictures was my mentor in Los Angeles because he was producer of a television show called 'Police Story,' and I kind of became the son Stan never had. When I had the opportunity to be selected for the television academy's internship program, they asked me what I wanted to work on, and I said, 'Police Story.' They asked why, and I said because it's the finest television show on the air. So they called Stan and asked him if he'd take an intern, and he said yes. He's been my Godfather of the Film Industry ever since."

"Since that time and through today, another mentor has been John Ellison. John was district manager of Mann Theaters, and he called me the day he saw my name in the paper because I was made film commissioner and asked if he could come down and see me. He brought me into Variety Club, working with underprivileged children using show business as the angle. Today, John owns UltraStar Cinemas, and he's always been a big brother and mentor to me."

Among many other things this year, Schlotter will be presenting a new annual film award called The Wallys. According to Schlotter, The Wallys was created over a bottle of wine with a filmmaker friend of his named Greg Durban, a professor at the SDSU film school. "A few weeks before, I had the opportunity to go to the awards ceremony and the screening of films at SDSU," Schlotter recalls. "The next night I was invited as a special guest to a Southern California film school, which shall remain nameless, that thinks they're all that and a bag of chips. That unnamed film school has all the money in the world, and SDSU is not so lucky. I was proud that the films at SDSU were not only as good but I thought some were better than that other film school that bragged about being the emerging film school in the country."

While sitting with Durban that night, he commented that he wished he was a billionaire so he could donate whatever it took to help fund the students at SDSU. And Durban's reply was that even a few hundred dollars makes a difference. "I committed to a few thousand dollars right at that moment," Schlotter recalls. "Now friends of mine are donating to this."

Schlotter envisioned the students having an experience that took them from the educational formula to the professional formula, which meant they'd have to pitch their idea to a panel of judges, whether it was a TV show or a feature film, and they would divvy up the money accordingly. "And Greg said, 'Yeah, and we can call it The Wally!'" Schlotter remembers. "I said, 'First there were the Oscars, then the Emmys, now the Wallys!' It was sort of a joke, but when we thought about it more, it sounded good! The students seem to really be excited about it. I've been to the campus a couple of times now, and I'm so impressed with the students and their abilities."

2008 has definitely been a great year for Schlotter, and 2009 looks just as promising — and as busy. "I'm the founding chairman of the iVIE Awards, which takes students who use video in the classroom from kindergarten to twelfth grade; I just joined the board of directors of Best Fest, which is international for students in high school and college; I chair the San Diego Film Festival, which is everything from students to independents, low-budget, high-budget to feature films; and I'm vice president of special projects for UltraStar, which is studio pictures and major releases. So I'm looking around now saying, 'OK, I have that covered; what else should I do?'"

Regardless of where his path takes this EMMY award-winning producer, I think it's safe to say that San Diego and its film industry will never be the same. **SDP**