

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Today's guest is Emelyn Stuart, owner of Stuart Cinema and Café. She's a real trailblazer in the film business. She's the first Black Latina to own a movie theater, producer of multiple indie film projects, and more! Welcome, Emelyn. Thanks for joining us.

ES: Thank you, thank you for having me.

VC: Let's start from the beginning, Emelyn. Can you tell us how you got started as a film producer, and how did that lead to your owning a movie theater?

ES: So, I really had no background in filmmaking. I was at the time doing real estate and I was helping investors to get properties and flip them. I would manage them and then flip the properties for them and an investor said, "look, my nephew wants to make a movie but I don't trust him because he's never made a movie before and I'm afraid I'm going to lose my money." And this guy was all about making money, that was his thing. And he was like, "I don't know, I don't think this is a good idea. Do you mind talking to him, or reading the script, and let me know what you think?" Because we had already established a relationship where I was the person who made him money. So, he was like, "if you think it's a good idea then maybe I'll do it." So, I got the script from the filmmaker. I happened to be sitting in a Starbucks and I said you know what, let me read this script while I'm sitting here waiting for my client and I was reading it and laughing, and I was like, this is so funny! I thought wow, I thought this was good based on what I know which is nothing. I'm a moviegoer but I don't really know anything. I just know this thing was funny. It was a short, and so I contacted him and I said, what do you need? And he said "everything." I had no idea what "everything" meant at the time. I just wanted to help. And I had some money and I thought, okay, why not? This seemed like a good investment. It was a short so I knew we weren't going to make money but I could help this guy and who knows, maybe it'll help propel his career. And so I went back to his uncle and I said, "Look, I think this is a good idea. And he said, "You know what? I'm not doing it, it's not a good idea. And at that point I was faced with a decision, like whether I have to do it alone or walk away. And I was already sort of emotionally committed to helping because I felt like here was someone who had a talent that just because he didn't have access and didn't have resources. So, I helped him and I paid for everything. I had to hire all kinds of people, some that I didn't even need, and so I did the short, and then the short won a couple of awards. And then I thought, if I could figure out how to make

money, do you know how many filmmakers I could help? I could help them to live their dream, to tell their stories, to have an opportunity, and so that really started the bug. And I did a second short after that, and after that I did Twelve Steps to Recovery, we did 22 episodes and it got picked up by BET and all this stuff, so after that it was like “OK, if I could figure out how to make money, I’m onto something here. I’m a businesswoman, I come from Wall Street originally. So, I’m a business person who uses the arts as a product, right? And so, for me, it was just trying to figure out how do we make it so that these things that we’re creating make money so the artist can continue to create, the filmmakers can continue. There’s this idea that Filmmakers are supposed to be struggling and now I really believe, now that I’m part of NATO and all these organizations I really understand that that was something that was created by Hollywood, right, and it was a perception that was created to separate the dreamers from the doers. And it was a way to kind of keep people out who were not proven, didn’t have a track record, who didn’t come from the right places. And so, I thought OK, if I can figure this out, I’m onto something. And so that really started my producing, career. And then I had another problem. And so, the other problem I had was, I was a single woman, alone, going to all these film festivals. I went to a film festival where I couldn’t even find the theater I was supposed to be at, I missed my screening after I flew all the way there because there’s no one trying to help you and then they want you to network by throwing you in a room with people you’ve never met before and they expect you to make that work. And there’s no one facilitating that. And I’m very social, I’m an extrovert, so I’m OK, because I’m walking up to people, hello, I’m Emelyn Stuart, who are you, what do you do, let me tell you what I do, right, but I have that background from being in a corporate environment where this is how you interact. But I saw so many filmmakers standing in the corner just looking around. And the other thing that happened really forced me to start my own film festival. So I went to a film festival, I won’t name the festival, but I screened with three other short films and honestly, my short film was horrible compared to these other three filmmakers. But I had been someone who had donated money to the festival, I was someone who was investing in films, right, and that is why my film was in the festival, which was unfair, and so guess what happens. It’s award night. Who do you think wins?

KK: No.

ES: Yes!

ES: But they had given it to me because of who I was, because there was a potential to do more. And I thought, I want to have a film festival that’s not about that. If the film is good, we’re going to make sure that you have a platform and an opportunity to show it. And if you come to a film festival there should be people there and they should know your name, they should know your film. They should be helping you to network,

not just throwing you in a room and having all these parties (VC Right) hoping you're gonna get a deal. That is why I started the Oktober film festival.

KK: You are truly amazing. I love the fact that you were even objective about your own (ES Yes!) short. One has to be creative but you have to be realistic.

VC: You've got the film festival but let's go back to the theatre. How did that come about?

ES: Oh, my goodness. So, I have the film festival, we are now, we're going into year 11 this year. And we're really a teaching festival so everybody who leaves here learns something, makes connections. Most of our alumni make movies together, right, because we're facilitating that. But I was having issues with the festival because the venues, that I was paying a ton of money for, and at the time Mercedes Benz was one of our sponsors, right, and all of that money was going to the venue. And the venue did not care about filmmakers, independent filmmakers. The last film festival that I had at a location, they actually turned the lights off and we had to carry the step and repeat out in the dark outside because we were taking too long and the filmmakers during the Q and A were talking too long. And I said to her, why would you do that? She said, "the staff wanted to go home." You would not do that if Steven Spielberg was here. (VC: Exactly.) What happens is, you're thinking, these are nobodies. And because these are nobodies, we are not going to go out of our way. And then you have a room filled with minority filmmakers, so that's even more of an issue. And I remember thinking, this cannot happen again. And the other thing that happened was, I had a film called The Turnaround that I produced and I try not to get emotionally attached to my projects because then I cannot think wisely (laughter). When I'm emotionally attached, right, I try to stay on the business side of things. And so, I was emotionally attached to this film because it was my first faith-based film. It's about Jesus, who doesn't want to know about Jesus? That's what I'm thinking in my ignorant mind. This is a moneymaker I went out and pitched it, I tried to sell it, I tried to get it on all these platforms. Nobody wanted it. They didn't see an audience. And I remember thinking like, so you, mister, you get to decide that there's no audience for this film and now I must go home and the game is over? I want to make this decision. How do we make this so I get to decide what people watch in movie theaters. Somebody said to me, "You've gotta open your own movie theater." And she said it sort of like, "you're not going to be able to do that." But that's what you've gotta do.

KK: Emelyn, how long once you decided, because it sounds like once you decide something it's happening. (ES: for sure, for sure.) How long did it take you to find the theater, why Brooklyn?

ES: So, I started looking around. I didn't know anything about movie theaters, honestly. I mean I go to the movies all the time but I don't really understand how it works. And so, I was looking for something that I could build from scratch, because I had a vision in my head and thought, if I open a movie theater, I want it to have empanadas and tres leches, and I want it to be quaint, and I want it to feel like you're at home but with people. I wanted to have a café, I wanted to have a stage so we could have Q and As and music performances, I wanted multiple sound systems. So, I had this vision and I could not find it already existing. Most of the theaters at the time were for sale were traditional movie theaters that were already going under, right so if you have a movie theater that's already going under people have already decided they're not going there to watch movies no matter what. And so, I said OK, I'm going to have to build it from scratch. So, I thought OK, so let me start small, let me find a location and then I'll just build it. So, I was looking in all these areas and I had been to a couple of meetings in Greenpoint and I knew that New Amsterdam, Billions, so many shows were being filmed here in this neighborhood, specifically in this alley. So, I went to the landlord and I said, what are you doing with that space? And he said "Well, we're going to make storefronts," you know, all this stuff. And I said, you know, I want this whole corner piece that opens out to the alley where everybody films movies and I would like to rent this space and build a movie theater. And he's like, "Here?" He's like, "Do you have a movie theater already?" And I said no, it's in my head. And he said like, "That's a big investment." And I was like, yeah, I'm gonna do it. I would like to do a one screen theater just to see how it goes. And if it does well then, I'll build a multi-plex. Let me start and learn with this one space. And he was like, "Look, if you're willing to pay the rent, and you're willing to build it from scratch, because there's no power, there's nothing (VC: Oh wow). And I said you know what, I'll do it. And so, I got the space and I hired contractors and I was like, I want a wall built right here to separate this space from this space. I need this space to have a place to fry empanadas. I need to have seats—I don't want recliners but they got to be able to rock so I need like three feet between each seat. And I'm gonna need a room that's gonna be my booth and this is where the projector's gonna go and all the technology. And I need to have 16-foot ceilings because the screen has to go up X amount of feet. And here's what's interesting, and this is what everybody wants to know. How do you finance this, right? So, I went to the bank. Now I have had investors for movies for years, right? Because I have been producing. So, I went to some of the investors who had done business with me and you would not believe that for this particular project. They wouldn't give me any money. But for a movie that nobody would ever see they thought that was a good investment. Because in my business plan I was focused on helping filmmakers and artists and you know what they said? 'You're not going to make money. You're catering to people who have no money.'" And I said to them, that's only one part of it. I had built multiple streams of income into the business plan. So, we have a café. I'm the only food place for ten blocks (VC: Oh wow!). I'm also gonna do catering for movie sets, independent sets, because most of independent filmmakers cannot afford craft services. As a producer I knew

that this was a big expense and always an issue. And so I thought, well, I could solve that problem by catering from here, from the café. So, we have the catering. And then I'm going to be renting out the space to filmmakers who needed to do premieres. I also knew that if I could get mainstream movies, if I could get the studios to give me new releases then I could qualify the theater for Oscar runs for independent films (VC Yes!). And I thought OK, but I knew all of this and I was trying to explain it to them but they couldn't see it. So, then I went to the bank and I figured, let me just go the traditional route and let me just see if I could get a loan. The bank says, oh no, movie theaters are too risky. We don't see this working. So, at that point I was like OK, I don't understand this, this is like a real place, it has walls, and people, but for something abstract like movie investors are not writing checks. And I was like, this doesn't make sense to me. So, I liquidated all of my assets. I sold my house, my car. (VC Wow) I cashed everything in, and I built the place cash. Which at the time was so emotionally stressful for me. But then it was a blessing—guess why?

KK: What year was that, Emelyn?

ES: 2018.

KK: You just did this only a couple of years ago?

ES: Right before Covid. (VC Wow) (KK: Oh, my goodness!)

ES: Right, so I liquidated all my assets. Now I built this place, I have no partners, no investors, and no debt. Guess who can stay open because I have no debt? Guess who can give away the space for different things, me! Guess who can stay open? Me!! Because I don't have a committee of people, I'm not a nonprofit, I don't have to go through a board, so one of the things I did during Covid, I became cinema safe certified which meant that I could have up to 15 people in the theater at once. So, I used the theater for people to come and watch their loved ones be buried around the country. (VC, KK Ohhh...) And so I was like, whatever you can afford, so some people gave us \$10,000 because they were like, if I have to fly ten people to Peru... some people only could afford \$200 because they had no idea their mother was going to die in Puerto Rico, right, so they didn't have any savings. The other thing we did was we had laptops that we would sanitize and people could come in and apply for unemployment and they could buy a cup of coffee, sit in the theater and we would help them. We also had a program, because seniors are really, really difficult to get to the movie theater because of their limited income and their fixed income. So, we created a program where Access-A-Ride would pick up our neighborhood seniors every day and bring them to the theater. And for \$10 they got to watch movies. So, we just created screening times during the day just for them. So, when Covid happened I got a sponsor to donate

DVD players and we went to their homes, plugged them in and we would drop off DVDs in front of their doors to keep them connected to the movies. At 4:00 I would give away all the food, so people would line up outside, and we became essential. And so, I was the only movie theater in New York City that was able to stay open. And so now, fast forward to 2023 and I am maxed out on the space, because we have, sometimes a church meets here on Sundays because they got displaced. Community boards have meetings. Billions had their wrap party here. (KK: Oh really?). Yeah, and (KK: How big is the theater, how many seats? I have a 50-seater, so we do premieres, we do meditation, people are renting it for all kinds of stuff and we have back-to back, so now there's like a three-month waiting period to use the space and I also have to play studio movies. Now we're showing Ant Man, and even though I have one screen we host the most amount of film festivals in all of New York.

VC: That's terrific, that is awesome. So, in addition to yours, other film festivals also rent out your space.

ES: Yes, Greenpoint, DUMBO, New York, all kinds of film festivals screen here, we just had the New York Children's Film Festival (VC: Oh yes!) which was a lot of fun. But the reason we have so many film festivals is because I owned a film festival and I know what they need. And I know the pricing they can afford, right, and I understand that a filmmaker does a Q and A and he may need an extra five minutes because people are asking questions and that's the whole point. And I make sure the films are playing, testing them three times. I am in the back because some filmmakers don't have a sound mix, right, because they couldn't afford it so they took a short cut. So, we're in the back putting the volume up and down. when this person speaks you gotta go down, and when this person speaks you gotta go up, you're riding the levels... because I'm not going to have that filmmaker look bad because I'm a filmmaker and I know, and afterwards we'll say look, you need a sound mix if you're going to send this to a festival. And the other reason I also did 50 seats because I had an option to take next door, and do a bigger theater was because after having the film festival for a number of years I understood that filmmakers have a really hard time filling anything over 50.

KK: You know, I was going to ask you, but I think now I know why, you are opening up another theater. Tell us about that theater.

ES: The new location is going to have three screens, each will have 50 seats, so it's a multi-plex, we're going to have a full restaurant, sit-down, a mini bookstore because I still love books and love authors, we have book signings here all the time That's the plan.

VC: Oh, that's wonderful. When do you think that might be open for business?

ES: This summer is what we are hoping, it's our target, but I'm also building it from scratch so I have to bring in electric, gas, HVAC, I have to get permits from the Buildings Department so it's a nightmare.

VC: So, tell us, you have your cinema distribution, Stuart Cinema Distribution Series. So, tell us about that.

ES: Yeah, I started that when I opened the theater and I thought that filmmakers could submit their films and that we could select films and give them a free one week run and they would get all the money from the run. We haven't done it in the last two years, one because of Covid but also because what we're finding is that the filmmakers who submitted are not prepared. And so, while we gave them a one-week run they didn't know how to advertise, they didn't know how to market. So, I do have a movie theater and your film is showing at the same time as Avatar, Black Panther and all this stuff in a movie and your screenings are empty. So, we are rethinking how to best do that. And maybe, my next sort of thing to do is to start a business school for filmmakers. I think that's the part that's lacking. I have the space so I'm thinking in the mornings we would hire some people who really know the game and who understand how to do this stuff to come in and teach filmmakers how to do it.

VC: I think that's a terrific idea. I think it's fantastic.

KK: You are amazing, I can't stop saying amazing. And you are a true entrepreneur. Opening it up in 2018, and I know Covid destroyed so many things, but it was an opportunity for you in the theater to go in a different direction that you would not have thought of, like the restaurants and all of that.

ES: Absolutely, absolutely. It was an opportunity. And since I opened the theater, I am now the co-chair of ITOC which is the organization that represents all the small theaters around the country. And so, I'm also a lobbyist for NATO. So, my job is to go to DC and lobby on behalf of movie theaters. So, nobody understands the issues.

VC: So, what is that organization, NATO?

ES: The National Association of Theater Owners. I'm also on the board of the Art House Convergence which is smaller theaters around the country who do specialty screenings. They are suffering right now because

if people are not coming out to see Top Gun, they're probably not going to go out to see some small film they never heard of, right? And so, we're trying to figure out, how do we fix that? I had an issue where, I'm very involved in the community and I've got my ear to the ground, I'm listening all the time. So, I went to a community board meeting and this woman who was there, a very lovely lady, and she said listen, I have three kids, I'm a single mom, I'm not getting any child support. My children will never see movies in the theaters because that \$100 that it costs me to take them to the movies, that's my grocery money for the week. So, I went home that night and I was like, what the heck is the point of having a movie theater if people can't go? So, I created \$8.00 Wednesdays. So now everybody can watch brand new films, Ant Man, Black Panther, whatever, Avatar, for \$8.00. (KK: That's unheard of) And the popcorn is \$3.00. (VC: Wow!) And if you can't afford that we have sponsors lined up that will pay for it. The festival, all the tickets are free for the Oktober film festival because I can't get people to watch and support independent filmmakers if they have to pay.

KK: A lot of these festivals you do have to pay, to get tickets... when you do the film festival, Oktoberfest, is it all features or are shorts included in that.

ES: It's everything, documentaries, animation, shorts, features, web series. We even have music videos. (VC: Oh, wow) Right, which then we can play in the café, they get a two month play where are customers are like, I already know the song by heart! (laughter) But it gives them exposure because that's what they need.

VC: Yes, that's fantastic. Talk a little bit about, I know you've touched on some of this. What would you say is the most challenging part of this wonderful work that you're doing and what's the most rewarding?

ES: The most challenging is definitely the financing. So, when I went to the bank again to get money for the second spot, I'm thinking, OK, I have a business that's generating money, right? And now I want to borrow so I can scale it up. And I have no debt. I'm a perfect candidate for lots of money, that's what I was thinking. I get to the bank and what do they say? I'm sorry, you have no debt. So, we can't give you money. (laughter) We can't give you money unless we know you can pay it back. I was looking at that lady like I wanted to just tackle her to the ground. So, I now have to take a line of credit and force myself to pay it slowly to prove... and it's like a... I don't know, an \$8,000 line of credit so that I could show that I could pay it. I was only looking for 20% because I have 80% in the bank. And the fact that I've been able to make money during Covid when no one else could... so I think that has a lot to do with I'm a woman, I think it has a lot to do with a lot of issues that nobody talks about when it comes to financing women. I think it's a big problem. And we're going to figure

that out because that can't continue to be the case, but financing for sure. Even when you've proven yourself. It is still a problem because if there isn't a white male... this is where we are today.

VC: It's still very sad that there are so few women in key positions in so many aspects of the film business. Now what do you see as the most rewarding part?

ES: I have to tell you when I see, videos and photos of the filmmakers and the theater's packed with people, everybody's watching the screen or when I'm watching a video of Q and A that lasted 30 minutes because everybody wanted to know more about the story. Is there a feature coming behind this short? What can I do to help? Right, that is rewarding. When a church that gets displaced gets to have a home on Sunday mornings at my place that's rewarding. When there are people hungry that I can feed that's rewarding, right? When people have special occasions like their birthday, we've had wedding proposals, we just had a baby reveal here not too long ago and that was exciting and so it's a place where people feel like, if I'm going to do something special, I want it to be at that location.

KK: I love it, I love it. Now I want to ask you one more question. What is your advice to indie filmmakers?

ES: I will say make the best possible project with whatever you have now. Because this waiting, if I wanted, if I was going to wait, I would not be here talking to you about this, right? And sometimes we think, I can't make a movie unless I have a million dollars. I can't make a film unless I get Denzel in it. That's not true. And I appreciate the big dreams. And that's great. But if all you can do is a short, the shorts are going to the Oscars. I've had shorts that have been on Fox. Shorts are making money. Shorts are truly, in every sense of the word your calling card. It is your portfolio. And so, if all you can do is a five-minute short, do a five-minute short. Because guess what five-minute shorts have a better likelihood of getting into festivals than a 35-minute short because they're easier to program. (VC: Absolutely) Don't drive yourself insane saying well, I have to have \$50,000. And you know, every time filmmakers are pitching me a project and they start with on, the cars are going to blow up and we're going to be in the middle of the ocean my brain is going ka-ching, ka-ching (Laughter. VC: Exactly). Whereas if they come to me with a story, and if you have great writing, if you have a great script that's a great base to start with. If you're just going to sit there and wait, time will pass you by.

VC: Absolutely, that is the best advice.

KK: You're an inspiration.

VC: Yes, you are an inspiration, you're a real trailblazer and your passion is infectious. It's catching! I mean...So now if folks want to learn more about Stuart Cinema and Café and you and your projects, where can they go?

ES: stuartcinema dot com. Everything they need to know is there. I'm on LinkedIn, Emelyn Stuart, we're on Instagram, we recently went viral on TikTok. Let me tell you what I learned. So I was on the news, I've been on like ABC did a special on me, all of these networks have done specials on me, I'm very grateful, and that's exciting. But nothing moves the needle like TikTok. (KK: TikTok?) And I don't even like TikTok. So, for me it's a struggle. But that is where the audience is.

KK: Yes, you're right. What did you do on TikTok?

ES: So, I just did a video talking about being the first Black Latina to own a movie theater (VC: Ok, OK!) and I gave a little tour. I put the thing up and it got almost half a million views and suddenly the news came out and all these people were like—and I was like hey, you're kidding me. I spent money on marketing, advertising, thousands of dollars on Facebook ads and all it took was TikTok.

VC: Wow, lesson learned. (KK: A lesson to be learned) Lesson learned.

ES: So, if you're not on TikTok, you gotta get with the program.

KK: Get with the program, right, Oh, Thank you so much for this today. It was just so great speaking to you and we got all this incredible information.

ES: Thank you for doing this, people need places to get information, to be inspired and to hear stories of people who are doing this. I am a firm believer that podcasts are super important, they're easy, you listen to them in your car, on the way, while you're working, I love that you guys are doing this.

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