

WALKING THE LINE

Don't worry. I'm not one of those annoying, pretentious people who's going to preach about my expertise as a production label executive after being one for two months. I hope I'm not that foolish. However, what I can say with credibility is that I'm a bit of an expert in the art of resilience. In a competitive landscape that's constantly shifting, I think resilience is more important than ever. Ultimately, there are ways to succeed even when it seems that everything in the industry has changed forever.

Some of you reading might have heard my stories about growing up constantly on the move. I may have compared it at the time to a Johnny Cash song – "I've been everywhere, man." By the age of 19, I'd lived in 11 different homes in very different parts of the country. I consider Pittsburgh my home town, but when we moved there, my mother couldn't afford to buy a house in the township that she felt had the best public education system. And so, with education as Queen in our household, she found ways to rent five homes in six years on her teacher's salary and generous alimony from our father. It allowed my sisters and I to graduate high school with rigorous academic standards. Once my younger sister graduated, Mother bought a house in the town down the road.

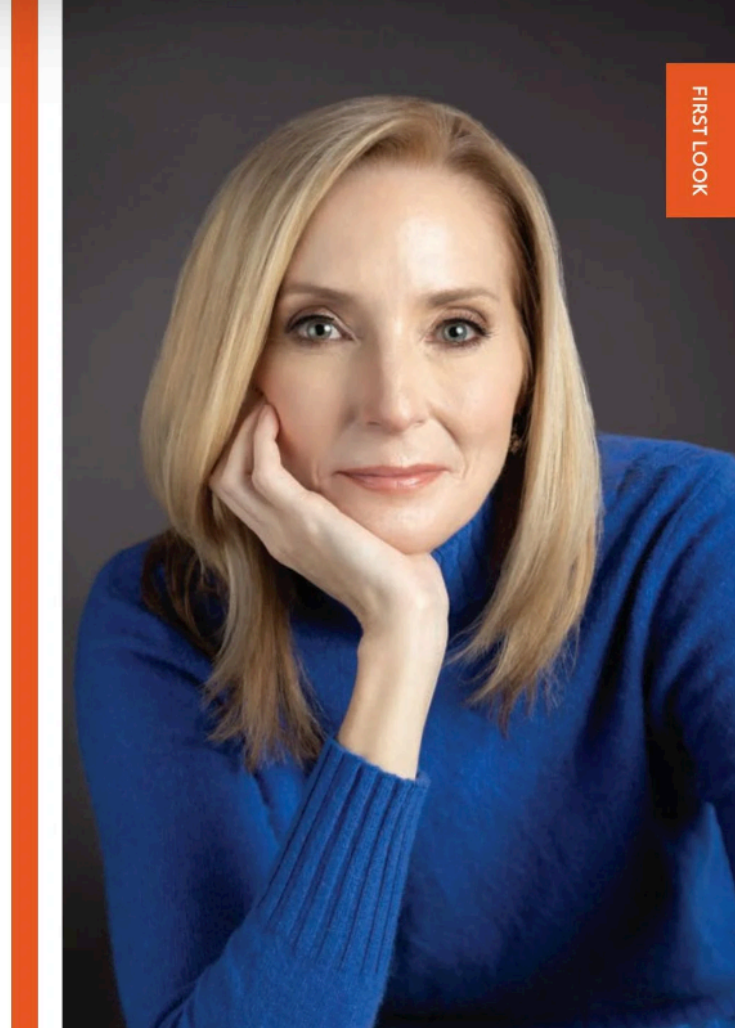
While it was tough in many ways, in retrospect, that experience gave us one of the greatest gifts of all – resilience. (It may also have spawned my love of

By Gena McCarthy

relationship, home and survival content – that's just dawned on me now!) It probably helped that resilience was also taught at home. Several years ago, I attended an informal lunch for female execs where we were asked if we had a personal mantra. When it was my turn, I said that my self-generated mantra used to be "suck it up, focus, and execute." That successfully got me through many sports meets and matches, public speaking events and first days of new jobs – all things that can generate terror.

But then I shared that my mantra had shifted recently to one that my mother taught us: "Be like the graceful willow tree, who bends when the harsh winds blow, but never, ever breaks." This advice would come with interpretive dance moves miming being blown to the left and right, then standing firmly upright once more. I performed this for the group at lunch. I think they were amused.

I share this now because I know how painful the ongoing process of industry change is to people on both sides of the buyer and seller line. The truth is, budgets are smaller, audiences are shrinking, jobs are being eliminated, and delivering real performance and financial success is mind-numbingly scary.



Sometimes producers can become bitter about a perceived lack of buying power from platforms. And they're not altogether wrong. But I always say, from my own experience, that people in development and programming roles are excited and eager to buy, create and launch shows with us. They're learning the new rules of the game in real time with us, while having budget parameters anchored in radically shifting business realities. It's not fun to constantly tell people "no." At times, I felt like the Grim Reaper, or the Ghost of Christmas Future in the creepy 1951 version of *A Christmas Carol* – scythe in hand and bony fingers extended, bestowing "passes" on projects I loved to people I loved. But nothing felt better than giving a "yes" to a strong new concept.

I also know that despite leaner budgets, condensed buying portfolios and an often confusing landscape, everyone still needs great content. And good people will buy great content. I see amazing, smart creators like my production colleagues at Sony Pictures Television's non-fiction division, Eli Holzman and Aaron Saidman, and all their team – Rachel Dax, Erin Gamble and Devon Graham Hammonds are relentlessly positive, talented people – who collectively find new ways of doing business and moving forward together.

You have to adapt. Be like the supple willow and lean into resilience. It works.

Gena McCarthy is the president and founder of Unconventional Entertainment, a part of Sony Pictures Television.