

GIVING BACK

Paramount's Melanie Valera Is 2024's Al Shapiro Distinguished Service Award Winner

BY REBECCA PAHLE



The Al Shapiro Distinguished Directors: Service Award is awarded annually to someone whose dedication to helping the cinema community exemplifies the industry's generous spirit. It's hard to think of a better candidate than this year's honoree, Melanie Valera, SVP general sales manager at Paramount Pictures. Starting with her early years as a sales clerk at then-new DreamWorks, Valera has been a tireless supporter of a number of institutions that give back to the industry, including the Will Rogers Motion Picture Pioneers Foundation (WRMPPF) and the New York-based Motion Picture Club, serving as a board member at both. In 2019, Valera became the founding president of Film Row, a division of WRMPPF that cultivates the next generation of cinema industry leaders through mentorship and educational and networking opportunities. Valera spoke with BOXOFFICE PRO about the importance of immersing oneself in the history and community of the cinema world.

You started working at DreamWorks as a sales agent, then moved to Miramax as sales coordinator before moving to Paramount, where you've been for twenty years. How did you come to work in the cinema industry in the first place?

I fell into this industry. If you talk to most people, they don't even know that this part of the business exists. I was one of those people. I was fresh out of college, and the only thing I could come up with was that I really liked movies. I thought, "Well, what can I do with that?" I was temping right out of college at an insurance company. My boss there knew someone in the industry and said, "I have no idea what this person does, but I'm happy to send your résumé over." And the person that they ended up sending my résumé over to was Lew O'Neil. Sadly, Lew recently passed away. He was beloved in this industry; just a wonderful guy. He was working at Fox at the time [as senior vice president of domestic theatrical distribution], and he was hiring for the position of gross clerk. He said, "I want to offer you the job, but before I do that, I have a colleague who just started at a brand new company. The principals are Katzenberg, Spielberg,

and Geffen, and they're looking for some great people over there. If you're OK with it, I would like to send your resume over to a man named Jim Smith at this company called DreamWorks." I jumped at the chance. It was a fresh, exciting new company.

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That's really how I got into the business. [I later transitioned to] Miramax and moved to New York early in my career. I spent 10 years in New York; it was a wonderful time in the industry. Then I came back in 2011 to Paramount. Everything happens for a reason. Ironically, Jim Smith was my very first boss in this business and a great mentor, and he was actually my *last* boss in this industry before he retired in December and I stepped into his role as general sales manager. So it came full circle.

It's so fascinating to talk to some of those veteran cinema executives. This is an industry that has a real respect for its history.

Absolutely. The thing that attracted me most to this business is the community within it. I certainly grew up in this business in L.A. during the first

three years of my career [working] with a lot of young up-and-comers over at DreamWorks. When I moved to New York, I only knew a handful of people—if that—and I was embraced by everyone. That's when I got very involved with the Motion Picture Club, because a lot of colleagues were part of it. It was something I knew I wanted to be a part of. It was a really exciting and fun time to be in New York and to be a part of that organization and everything that they do, giving back to the industry and fundraising for other charities, [plus] the social aspect of it. I'm glad I got the exposure that I did.

A key part of that community today is Film Row, a division of the Will Rogers Motion Picture Pioneers Foundation that cultivates a new generation of leadership in the industry. Can you talk a bit about how you came to be involved in its creation?

[Will Rogers' then-Director of Operations] Christina Blumer and [then-Executive Director] Todd Vradenburg came to me and a few others and said, "I know you were part of the Motion Picture Club"—and I'm still on the board, because it's something I'm so dedicated to—"How do we do something to spotlight education and give to the younger generation [as] a spinoff of Will Rogers?" Me and a couple of other colleagues, including Jeff Wilk over at Warner Bros., came together and said, "There's a lot that we can do here." Todd and Christina gave us free [rein] to put something together. We really wanted to be mindful of aligning our goals. There are so many great things that Will Rogers does. I currently serve on the Will Rogers Motion Picture Pioneers Foundation board, and I'm thrilled to be a part of that. But, going back to Film Row, it was such a great opportunity to bridge the gap between the veterans in the business and the younger generation. That's something that was lacking. [In March 2019,] I became the first president of Film Row. We worked really hard to stay engaged with with the film industry, and it's really blossomed into something amazing. Jeff Wilk was vice president when I was president. He became president, and Frank Martinez [of A24] was his vice president. Now Frank Martinez is the new president. I'm really

proud of everything that they’ve accomplished and everything that we’ve put into it.

We always try and have that educational component, which is really important. We also highlight the importance of networking and philanthropy. The social aspect is always there, because we all like to have a good time, but that’s secondary to all the other items. With the mentorship program that we launched, we’ve had such great success. So many people have said, after the [mentorship officially ended], “I still keep in touch with my mentee”—or my mentor. It’s really built relationships, and it’s such a great networking opportunity. I’m a huge fan of that program. In addition to that, we’ve got the trivia night, which is a great fundraising event that’s a lot of fun. It’s one of our most well-attended events. And then the Lunch & Learns. We launched LEAD [Leadership, Education, Advancement, Diversity] , which is the diversity and inclusion branch of Film Row, and they’ve done tremendous things with their speaker series. We’ve really engaged the veterans and the younger generation. It’s really exciting.

What’s your overall impression of the younger generation in this industry?

The younger generation is very hungry. There’s a long history of how this business has evolved, and that’s one thing that I’ve always tried to instill within our Film Row board members and within the groups that I’m involved with, because you can’t really know where you’re going until you know where you came from. There’s a lot of interest in how things were done back then. That’s part of these programs that we put together, like the Lunch & Learns or the speaker series: talking about the history [of this industry] and how it’s evolved. There’s a huge curiosity for that.

It’s very different from when I started in this business nearly 30 years ago. First off, there weren’t formal programs like these, where you had mentorship opportunities. The engagement [these groups] get from the younger generation who are eager to sign up, eager to come to these events, eager to connect with these top-level executives, says a lot about the younger generation. They’re trying to further themselves and their careers. I’m

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glad we can provide that opportunity to connect everybody, because when I grew up in this business, it was a very different landscape, and the opportunities were certainly more scarce than they are today.

What was your childhood cinema?

I went to a few different theaters. The UA Warner Center [in Woodland Hills, California] was a theater with a sloped floor that I used to go to all the time, and there was also the Mann Valley West in Tarzana. I distinctly remember when AMC opened the Promenade in Woodland Hills. I was a teenager by then. That was the most mind-blowing experience, because there was stadium seating and everything was beautiful and brand new. That became my go-to theater. I distinctly remember that was the place to be. It was the best place to watch a movie. Sadly, they closed down that theater not too long ago. They’ve since built the the AMC Topanga over at the Topanga Mall. But the Promenade has a special place in my heart, because there was nothing like it that I had experienced up to that point. The

stadium seating was so cutting edge!

I still love going to the movies. I love being in the auditorium as a shared experience and talking about the movie with my friends and family afterwards. There’s really nothing like it.

What’s your day-to-day like as the general sales manager at Paramount?

In my current role as general sales manager, I’m overseeing the sales department. It’s such a different landscape compared to what it used to be, because there are so many different formats. We release [films] in 3D, in Imax, in 4DX, in Dolby. It’s having those discussions with all of the theater chains and getting aligned with them. A lot of it is managing the team, making sure we’re setting up our movies for success. There’s a lot of build-up to the release, but how do we take care of those movies and make sure that we’re servicing them properly beyond opening week? You have to capitalize in a very crowded space. It’s trying to maximize the box office in every way possible and making sure I’m communicating with the team and that we’re communicating with each other.

A very relationship-heavy role in a very relationship-heavy industry.

Absolutely. The other thing that’s great is the ability to work with other [Paramount] departments. We work closely with with marketing, and we’re all connected to each other’s operations, like the home entertainment portion of the company. The lifespan of a movie doesn’t end when it comes out in movie theaters. There’s a lot of interactive communication within departments, too. I work closely with [President of Domestic Distribution] Chris Aronson, who has such vast knowledge of both exhibition and distribution. He’s such a great advocate for our team, and I’m thrilled he’s at the helm.

Aside from the Motion Picture Club and Will Rogers, are there any other industry nonprofits that you’ve been involved with?

I don’t currently serve on other boards, but I’m fully supportive of all of these other groups within the industry, [like Variety - the Children’s Charity, Young Variety, and the Lollipop Theater Network]. I try to attend all the events.

Donating is always important, but by that same token, it’s important to donate your time. That’s the other thing that I try to be mindful of, as well.

The reason I’m so immersed in Will Rogers specifically is that they give back to the industry. There are a lot of people who are falling on hard times. It’s important to support Will Rogers, because [they treat the industry like] a family, and they take care of their family. We’re all related to each other. We have to work to get that message out there to the younger generation, because they might not be fully aware of what Will Rogers does and how they can serve each and everyone in this industry.

Going back to what you said earlier: Networking is such a huge part of this industry. If you do fall on hard times, it’s critical to have a network, and groups like Will Rogers and the Motion Picture Club can help you cultivate that.

I lived in New York from 2001 to 2011, and I was asked to be a part of the Motion

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Picture Club right away. I did not hesitate for a second, because of the community and the people involved. Everyone cares. Everything kind of gets squeezed as time goes on; budgets are tight, and it’s a little more difficult to get approvals. But it’s a very important part of our business. I feel the need to continue to support the Motion Picture Club, whether I’m in New York or L.A., and to make people aware of what the Motion Picture Club is. Their fundraising efforts have been tremendous in helping the film community, and all the different [charitable initiatives] they support are amazing. They bring together everyone in the industry. I just recently went to their annual golf outing, and it’s just so nice to be around the community. People make the effort to go out to New York, because these are iconic events that really bring the community together, whether you’re in L.A. or Dallas or New York or even Canada. People are eager to be together and support one another and support the Motion Picture Club. I’m glad I can be a part of that. ♥

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