

MPTD Interview with Peggy Pridemore

Thea Bender: Hello, welcome to another edition of Real Talk with Film DC. I'm Thea Bender, an intern with the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development. Joining us on the show today is Peggy Pridemore, a local location manager. How are you today?

Peggy Pridemore: Oh, thanks for asking. I'm good.

Thea: Good. OK, so we're going to start. How many years have you been working as a location manager?

Peggy: 25 years, actually.

Thea: Oh, wow.

Peggy: Here in the DC area only, also.

Thea: Oh, that's really cool. Can you describe your professional path to becoming a location manager?

Peggy: Well, just like almost everybody in the business, I started out as a production assistant. That's a gofer, that's the entry level position in movies and TV shows, commercials. Production assistants are hired mostly in the production department, helping production produce the project. Basically, you run errands, you make copies, you get snacks and drinks and coffee and things like that. Then, after you've done that for a few years and you've developed all your contacts, you move up, you become a production assistant in a certain department that you're interested in. I was most interested in location, so I was a production assistant in the locations department. Then you're an assistant, I was an assistant for a couple of years and then a location manager. It's like an apprenticeship.

Thea: That's really cool. When you were younger, did you know that you wanted to be involved with the film industry?

Peggy: Yes and no. My father was in broadcasting, so I was around television all my life, but I wanted to be an actress. I studied acting in college. When I came out of school, I tried to become an actress and quickly realized there wasn't enough work in that field and decided that I would try the other side of the camera. It sort of segued, very easily, from acting to production.

Thea: You have worked on some very successful films such as "Forrest Gump" and "Night at the Museum." How did these movies impact your career?

Peggy: Well, "Forrest Gump" is an interesting story. I had been working in the film business for quite a while at that time and I had my first child. My baby was only a month old when they called me. I thought, oh my goodness, I can't take this job, I may never work again. Their producer was very, very helpful and really wanted me to do the job, so he said, "What is it you need?" I said, "Well, gosh, let's see, I'm going to need an assistant every minute I'm working, every day of every

minute." Which is unusual, because mostly location managers work alone for the first few weeks of prep. He said, "OK, you've got it." I had a production assistant with me every minute and my baby, too. The three of us went out scouting, looking around and scouting and photographing. That helped my career because I was able to integrate my family life with my career. Of course, "Forrest Gump" was a huge success. Since it was such a big movie, I was able to become known in Los Angeles more and so I got more calls from Los Angeles after that. I also worked with that producer again on "The American President."

Thea: Oh, really?

Peggy: Yeah.

Thea: That's so cool.

Peggy: That was fun. Now, "Night of the Museum 2" the interesting thing about how that was important in my career is that my husband works at the Smithsonian African Art Museum. For years, for my whole life, I've loved, loved museums, very, very much, and of course, the Smithsonian's the best around and it's the best here in town. It was great to integrate my career with the Smithsonian for the first time. That was really fun to be able to work with the Smithsonian Institution and the Air and Space Museum. My husband was an extra in the movie. [laughter]

Thea: What makes you one of the best location managers in the business?

Peggy: Oh, thank you. I think, having made DC my primary working location, Washington has its own set of rules of how films will be made here. We have to follow the National Park Service rules for the monuments, the federal government rules for the government buildings. We have to fit into those rules. In a lot of movie making, the movies set the rules, and they go in and the location manager gets the location to do it the way the movie wants them to. But mine is opposite. I have to actually help the movie company fit into the government's rules. Over time, I've developed a very stringent process of assisting the movies in figuring out how to get their scenes shot. Because mostly they come in with an idea of the way they want to shoot it and they can't. They can't do it that way. I have developed an integrity through the years and Los Angeles knows that. They know that they may be able to get their scenes done because I'm actually able to get the government entities to do it. Basically, I think that has helped me in my career over time.

Thea: Well, that sounds good, yeah. Since you're so experienced as a location manager, do you think you could walk us through a day in the life of being one?

Peggy: Sure. Well, let's just go with a day of filming. I've already gotten all the permits, I've met with all the different entities, including the government people who give me the permits, and the police. I've talked them all through the process of what we want to do. That takes quite a bit of working back and forth between the movie company and the entity that I'm working with. Location managers are the first ones on location, so that's usually about 5 AM. In DC, the first thing we have to do is tow the cars out of the way, so that our equipment trucks can park near the location where we're filming. We're the first ones on set to get the parking cleared. Then, after we get the parking cleared, we assist the trucks in moving in and parking and setting up. Then the assistant directors arrive and the directors, and we move them through the location. We open the location for them by telling them where everything is and giving them the ground rules of what they can and cannot do

and showing them everything that we've set up for them. Then we step back and we let them do their job as much as possible without interfering. Often, the location manager will go on and prep the next day, they'll leave the set and prep the next day and get it ready for the film company to come into.

Now, in Washington, the location manager has to stay on site at the memorials. We actually run the set in Washington. What we have to do during filming, a lot of times, is ask people to get out of the way of the camera. Sometimes, one thing locations will do is keep things quiet as much as possible. If there's a machine in the background that we can hear over the sound equipment, we'll actually go find whoever's making the noise and ask them if they could stop. That can be very tricky if it's a construction crew. They can't usually stop, so we'll have to work with them to start and stop, start and stop throughout the day.

Things like that. So we help run the set, make sure the set is prepared for the movie company. Then, we're the last ones on the set, because we have to make sure it's left as it was found, or locked up or clean. We have a very, very long day. Always, minimum 12 hours, and usually 14 to 16 hours a day.

Thea: That's cool. In many professions, connections are important to securing work. Is this the case in your career?

Peggy: Yes, I think it has helped. Well, actually, you're talking about getting work, aren't you?

Thea: Yes.

Peggy: Oh, well, yes, actually, connections are everything in the film business in freelance. It's completely everything. It's all word of mouth and connections are exactly how you get your jobs, so yes. You have to really develop, then, in a way that propels you to the next job, and the best way to do that is to do your present job as best you absolutely can and then they'll hire you again. Then, also, another thing we do in DC about connections is we give each other work. When we're busy and we can't take the job, we'll refer one of our competitors, basically. But we all do it, so we're all helping each other all the time.

Thea: Well, that's good. What are the most challenging and rewarding aspects at your job?

Peggy: The most challenging is sometimes it's just purely to get the location, period. That is a big challenge. After getting the location to say yes, and allow us to film, it's juggling everything and making sure it all falls into place perfectly. So the logistics have to be nailed down in a way that makes it all run smoothly. And that's a big, big job. So that's the most challenging part, is making sure it runs smoothly. What was the second part?

Thea: The rewarding aspects of your job.

Peggy: When the filming goes perfectly smoothly, it is extremely rewarding because you know how hard it was to get it done. Last year I filmed at the CIA for the first time, and fitting into their requirements and then having the filming go perfectly smoothly that day, and then the very next day at the State Department. That was on a movie called *Argo*, which comes out soon. Making sure those two locations not only went well, because it was so difficult to get the crew in and out of

them, but then also once we were there to meet all of their requirements inside of their buildings was hugely rewarding that we were able to do it. And also we'll probably be able to go back and film there, too.

Thea: That's good. What was your biggest professional disaster?

Peggy: I have had no disasters. [laughs] No, I'm kidding. Let's see. Well, I actually haven't had any huge disasters. I think what happens for me though a lot, and all Washington DC location managers, is that there are a few things that you cannot do at the memorials. You absolutely cannot do them. The film industry has a difficult time hearing those restrictions, and then after that changing their scripts to meet those restrictions. So some movie companies end up not filming at all because of them, and that's a disaster, but that's not something I caused. I haven't had any real big disasters. Except the only real problem I've had was on "Born Yesterday", which was a long time ago. I didn't get up on time, and I didn't get the parking cleared. When the equipment trucks arrived, they had nowhere to park. So that meant that they couldn't begin filming, because they couldn't open up the trucks. So that was it.

Thea: What was your greatest success?

Peggy: I've had two great successes, I think, that I could point to. I mean, "Forrest Gump" was incredible. It was a wonderful project to work on, and we did some huge scenes where we closed down Pennsylvania Avenue. Before it was closed, it was a thoroughfare and we closed it to film in front of the White House. That was exciting and incredible. On "Deep Impact", I closed the Key Bridge down for the day to do a stunt. That was a huge piece of work, to get that bridge closed during the day. That same movie, we staged a huge traffic jam on a highway out in Virginia, a two-day traffic jam. So we had to find a road that we could block for two days. We successfully found this highway that had just been completed, and we were able to fill it up with cars for two days.

Thea: Where was the highway?

Peggy: It was in Manassas, Virginia. It's Route 234 Bypass. At that time it was brand new, and only part of it was open. Only part of it was finished, so they had not opened the highway yet. It was a completed highway. It looked perfect. Actually it was brand new, a brand new highway, but it wasn't open to traffic yet, so we were able to stage our big traffic jam scene. But last year filming in the CIA and filming in the State Department were probably my two biggest successes ever, because they're very difficult to get permission to film in. We had to fit into many, many, many requirements. Restrictions, timelines, numbers of personnel, amount of equipment, list of equipment. I mean, it goes on and on, what we had to do to get inside there. Even though Mr. Affleck was most instrumental in getting the permission, I had to then follow up to make sure we fit into all the restrictions. And so, I think those are them.

Thea: If you could work with any film director, who would it be and why?

Peggy: I think I would love to work with Bob Zemeckis again because I had such a great time working with him on "Forrest Gump" and "Contact". He is not only a brilliant person, he's extremely kind, very very kind and generous in his work, and made it fun and interesting. So I think Bob Zemeckis, but also Rob Reiner was fun to work with, and I would love to work with him

again, too. But I would work with any director who wants to bring a big, giant movie to DC. That's for sure.

Peggy: That's very interesting. OK, so the next question I have is, if you could give advice to any person who is interested in working in the film industry, what qualities and skills would you recommend that they have?

Thea: Well, I think the first is tenacity. Once you've decided you want to work in the film business, you have to knock on the doors and keep trying over and over and over again. I'm talking about years here, not months or days. As a production assistant, if you want to begin, you find the production manager, who hires people. You just call them consistently. That tenacity will take you into the job and through the job. And the second is reliability. Once you get the work, you must fulfill the task to your ability. Take the task and complete it, and do it full circle so that you've completed the task completely, and then you'll be given another task. But also, we're all freelance. So a major component of getting into the film business as a freelancer is that you have some other source of income for the first year or two. A lot of people live at home or they have roommates or they have a second job that's flexible, like waitressing or something. You have to have that to fall back on the first year until you've built up enough clients, enough people who will hire you, on a consistent basis. So that second source of income is very, very important.

Thea: Well, thanks for joining us today, Peggy, and thank you to all of you who are listening. Follow us on Twitter at DCFilmOffice, like us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/filmdc, or check us out on the web at film.dc.gov. This is Thea for Real Talk with Film DC. Catch you next time.