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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 118: BRADFORD DOWNS – THE CONQUEROR

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. The Conqueror, it's an inspirational documentary film about Jerome Conquest of Philadelphia. The death of his friend at the age of 17 inspired Conquest to stop fighting in the streets and instead fight in the boxing ring. The documentary follows Conquest between his day job as a maintenance worker and his evenings as a boxer. Bradford Downs is the producer of the award-winning documentary, but he is not like most producers. While production was taking place, he was pursuing his MBA full time at William & Mary. He graduated in May. Downs joins us on the podcast today to talk about The Conqueror, documentary filmmaking, and the commonalities between business and telling great stories. Here's our conversation with BradfordDowns, the producer of The Conqueror.

Ken White

Well, Bradford, this is a first. We've recorded over one hundred and twenty podcasts, and we've never had one of our own students on. So welcome. This is great, thank you.

Bradford Downs

Well, thank you, Dean White. This is truly an honor to be on your platform part of these tribe podcasts and to be the lucky 121st.

Ken White

There it is. Yeah, but there's a reason right there. There is a reason you've just done phenomenal work. It's been so exciting to watch the documentary and see you take it around the country. You know I'm not sure there's a usual path to becoming a documentary filmmaker. But how did you, how'd you get here? What did you do?

Bradford Downs

Yeah yeah, well, it's certainly is far from usual, but it's been a tremendously exciting and rewarding experience. And that is right. I had no experience at all. You know not only

filmmaking but particularly documentary filmmaking funny enough as William & Mary undergrad here I studied environmental science and postgrad. I was working as a tour guide down on the Outer Banks, and you know I saw myself as a storyteller. But you know I was essentially working in customer service. However, while I was down there I befriended this incredible seasoned filmmaker who became a dear friend of mine and colleague Tim Blackwood, and in fact, I actually hired him as a seasonal tour guide, and after each season he would go off and make his documentary films, and you know he would screen them at Cannes. He'd be in France and all these premieres and always come back for a season of tours, and I always thought you know wow that's really cool.

Ken White

Yeah.

Bradford Downs

So he came to me with kind of his next project idea. He was starting to shape up and was throwing these ideas and pitches at me, and it was actually much more than his next project. He was committed to come on this mission and venture and to produce these films through it. He'd actually started a company called Montague Cervantes and kind of the founding grounding mission of that was to find heroes and stories of people really on the margins. People you know real-life heroes, real-life stories of redemption that otherwise you know really wouldn't be told. And that was that kind of tremendous vision that he had there. And I was sold. So I joined forces with him and said you know what, however, this next documentary film will shape up I'm on board with you.

Ken White

So what attracted you to that the idea you can tell stories that weren't told the type of people the industry what got you excited.

Bradford Downs

Oh well initially, you know it was you know wow that's really cool when to get into the entertainment industry. But it all came down to that mission to finding those real heroes out there. Those kind of raw redemptive elements. And you know I've always you know always had kind of a sense of exploration. I said, so let's go out there, and you know, let's find them and make it happen.

Ken White

What's interesting you know in your MBA program you learn about businesses, and you better have a mission and a vision. It's all about that. And that's exactly what happened. You know, in this industry for you then.

Bradford Downs

A 100 percent.

Ken White

Yeah.

Bradford Downs

That was there was the calling card.

Ken White

How did you learn? How did this is there's a lot to learn.

Bradford Downs

Of course. Yeah well, it's a good thing I'm a fast learner. You're right. I had no experience prior, but like I said, you know I was committed to joining, you know my friend and now colleague to this mission and this venture to tell these stories. So I was given that call I was given that opportunity. So you know I'm a very hands-on person instead of you know wanting to get transition into the industry and through documentary filmmaking instead of going to film school I said let's just go do it. You know fast learner hands-on. And what I did have you know the entertainment industry in general and, more specifically, physically making a documentary film. It's a human being business. You know you're dealing with creatives, you're dealing with storytellers, you dealing with these stories in these subjects. It's all about the people and coming in from tour guiding and that customer experience I had that in balance. You know dealing and working and loving to work with people. So that was my number one asset.

Ken White

And in terms of the technical pieces and how to do it all, you just did it as you went along.

Bradford Downs

You just do it on the fly. Yeah, you just learn on the job.

Ken White

How did you decide to make the film about Jerome? Where did he come from, and how did you how do you get connected?

Bradford Downs

Oh, it was I mean the day I met Jerome Conquest. It truly changed my life forever. You know we had this grounding mission you know with Montague Cervantes to go out and find these stories, and we found ourselves in an electric boxing gym in Philadelphia

actually the iconic Joe Hand boxing gym, and there's these boxers around their sweating, their training. It's all too intimidating and then on his daily routine and grind Jerome Conquest walks in, and he allowed us to follow him around and learn about what made him tick. And his story and his community and friends and where he came from and we knew once with that window there and learning all of that that that struck the chord you know that aligned with that mission to go out there and find these kind of heroes. And we knew we had to do, and we're committed to whatever it would take to shine a light on Jerome Conquest. So literally the next day, we have our cinematographer flying in from L.A. and our sound designer flying in from Denmark, and it was kind of off to the races.

Ken White

Very difficult to convince him to partner with him. How did that go?

Bradford Downs

Initially, it was you may call it fate, but it was pretty organic. Initially, you know we approached him with kind of that mission that humility with what we were about to find those heroes. And he is a real-life hero. He said if you're willing, you know to come into my world and show my world; then I'm absolutely on board. Whatever it would take. And throughout the whole process and still, even to this day, he always has this quote with us because you guys are stuck with me for life now, I guess.

Ken White

Yeah. You know I worked in local television way back when. And when you do that, I would see everything through a viewfinder. It was all if this isn't video-friendly. I don't want to do it. It was sort of the idea, and I. Are you the same when you walked into that gym? Were you saying ah this is this looks good? You know this is gonna be visually exciting.

Bradford Downs

Oh absolutely. Knowing the electricity in the gym but just just just visually aesthetically the gym and the greater Philly area. And Jerome and his neighborhood is just it's just all so raw. You know we're walking around with our cinematographers from Los Angeles, and he's just lit up, you know he's so excited to be on this project and getting this kind of content telling this kind of story saying you know you can't production design this at all.

Ken White

Right.

Bradford Downs

This is all so amazing and captivating.

Ken White

And then the audio I mean the sound of a gym a boxing there's gonna be great audio going on at the same time.

Bradford Downs

Oh, bells and whistles punches and bags and sweat. It's I mean that that production values there even before you turn the camera on.

Ken White

Yeah. How exciting. So how about let's talk about funding. I mean we I think almost everybody knows somebody who knows a documentarian, but they don't understand the business. How does that happen? Where does the funding come from?

Bradford Downs

Of course. Yeah. I mean there's all kinds of exciting ways to finance a documentary you know you can partner with a brand, you can partner with a you know a Foundation a nonprofit all of which we look forward to approaching in the future, or you do kind of the entrepreneur route like we did. Timothy and then when I jumped on board helping him with it set up this venture Montague Cervantes we have this vehicle with that mission. You know let's run it all through a company go out there produce a film you know have it, own it, get it to film festivals.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Bradford Downs of Montague Cervantes in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary's School of Business. In order to retain top employees, the best companies and organizations invest in their people by offering high-quality professional development, and some of those top companies and organizations turned to William & Mary and our Center for Corporate Education for their needs. The Center for Corporate Education offers professional development programs for all levels of employees, from executives to managers to emerging leaders to new hires. The programs are taught by William & Mary's MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Bradford Downs producer of the documentary film The Conqueror.

Ken White

How do you where does the role of audience play? So you see Jerome and you and you've got all the visuals, and the audio say this looks good. When do you think who's gonna like this? Who's gonna watch this? Where does that come into play?

Bradford Downs

Well, well, of course, you know it's one thing we always say, and I've learned throughout the process. It's one thing to just great make a great film find that great character and story, but if you don't know how to market it at all and you have no one to market it to, then it's just it's going to go on untold and unseen. We felt throughout the process, which is why we initially joined forces with Jerome to tell his story that everything visually aside Philadelphia, the sport of boxing it cut to that core of being Jerome of that relatable, real-life character, and hero. We saw that in that just intrinsically, it transcended everything surrounding him. You know the inner city of Philadelphia, the boxing, and we knew that there was kind of that inherent value thereof him as a character and a hero that we truly believe in and is and as proved to be now you know can relate to anybody.

Ken White

We see with Netflix and Hulu there's so many places and TV is just so many outlets and distribution channels. Television is exploding. Documentaries is that can you make a living in the documentary space?

Bradford Downs

Oh sure. And we feel and have seen you know it's getting bigger and more exciting than ever. You know you see with these streaming services all that Netflix is putting in into their original documentary series, and they're all absolutely amazing series and films and with us being in these film festivals now with The Conqueror with the plethora of other documentary films that we've seen and are very high caliber and have very great stories. We see that there is a very big and growing demand for this kind of content. You know these real-life stories about real-life people in real-life situations you know all told as a documentary in the most captivating compelling ways possible. So we see it as being you know in a very exciting edge of you more and more potential out there for these documentary these kind of films.

Ken White

People like to learn about other people, don't they?

Bradford Downs

Exactly. Yeah.

Ken White

Whatever it's human nature, I guess. Yeah. What do you like about filmmaking?

Bradford Downs

Well, growing up, you know you always love movies and films. I mean, I mean everybody does. But you know giving that opportunity I had that call you know to jump in and join forces you know with Timothy and his adventure in this mission we're about, and you know fortunate enough to find Jerome and tell the story but contextualizing all of it. I love filmmaking. It's the vehicle and opportunity and kind of the overall ability to be able to connect with and inspire people. I mean, you can awaken audience members and transcend them into that world and that way of life, and to those characters and heroes that you know, they otherwise would never have thought of or even knew existed out there. You know I did this through tour guiding, and you know now with my dear friend Tim a partner through the mission and work of this venture and through our flagship project, The Conqueror.

Ken White

Now you're a musician, and in fact, some of your music is in the movie. How did that how did that happen? What was the what's the story behind that?

Bradford Downs

Yes, I most certainly am. I mean right up there now with documentary filmmaking I love playing the guitar and making music probably more than anything in the world. And scoring an original song for the film had to have been one of the coolest experience I've ever had and plan to have much more of. I mean, when it was all, it was another exciting part of this whole kind of creative process working on the film. I mean, when we couldn't afford the licensing for any more music, Tim and I both looked at each and said, hey, why don't I come up with something. So I sat down and wrote a piece went in the recording studio with Tim and a music producer who actually happens to be his brother, and we went to work, and now I'm just honored and sort of speechless to be on the film soundtrack with famous Spanish composer Jordi Cervello and one of my all-time favorite bands Explosions in the Sky.

Ken White

That's that's great. You're doing a lot of film festivals, and every time I bump into, it seems like you're going somewhere else. What's the role of the film festival in the documentary world? Why are they important?

Bradford Downs

Oh absolutely, and yes, I'm always on the go leaving Miller here. It's an amazing opportunity to showcase that work. I mean to people to cities and places that otherwise would probably never see it. We had our world premiere this last summer in Indianapolis and the people in the audience in the theater they would otherwise never be exposed

these kind of characters and these kind of stories, and it's also an immense opportunity to meet all these other filmmakers from all over the world. We're in Indianapolis

Ken White

Yeah.

Bradford Downs

And there's filmmakers from in from Ireland from England and Australia and learn about what they're doing as storytellers as filmmakers you know what is their mission and what are they out there creating so what is out there in the marketplace for films and what is relevant now you'll learn all of this through the filmmaking process. And for Jerome and for him and his community, you know to be able to come from the inner city of Philadelphia and go to these international film festivals you know all over the world we're coming up. This May well we're lined up for three International Filmfests in England. So to get The Conqueror over to London, you know that's an opportunity. He wouldn't; you wouldn't otherwise be afforded.

Ken White

Absolutely. It sounds like you've learned so much. It's probably an unfair question, but what have you learned through this exciting experience?

Bradford Downs

Oh, it's you know again been one of the most definitely most exciting rewarding you know periods of my life and I'm more excited about you know the future you know with his success of The Conqueror and the other films that we're working on, and we'll continue to pursue with the projects we have in our pipeline. You know practically I learned so much about filmmaking you know the technicality of it what it takes you know me as a producer of this project being on the ground in Philly running around coordinating get getting everything just kind of lined up and cleared all the way through the post-production part of it you know to scoring a film what does it take a license these songs and everything to the film festival part of it that's a whole other kind of stage of the creative process and getting there and doing your good PR and your marketing and bringing Jerome to these stories and about the venture as well. You know this is all done through Montague Cervantes, this story and the other ones we're working on. You know that kind of entrepreneurial component which I've you know been able to leverage in and transition into so much I've learned in this MBA program at William & Mary and then of course you know meeting Jerome the day I met him that that changed my life and he's from an area I would have never seen otherwise you know met people otherwise and just to have and be a part of that that powerful story is it's just it continues to leave me speechless.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Bradford Downs producer of The Conqueror. And that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the William & Mary School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with business and leadership development programs taught by the William & Mary MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. If you're interested in learning more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Finally, we'd love to hear from you regarding the podcast. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest Bradford Downs and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Till next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.