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Ariz. women build careers in TV, film

Creative outlets available both in front of, behind camera

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 Arizona Woman
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It's not quite Tinseltown Southwest, but film programs are on the rise, producers are getting help from state government and the Valley is taking on a touch of Hollywood.

When Connie Hoy emerged from the movie theater after watching *Star Wars* in 1977 as a student, she knew what she wanted to do with her life: make movies.

"The movie made me feel as if I could go anywhere, and I wanted to make other people feel that way," says Hoy, 41, a film producer and director who owns Phoenix-based Main Diner Films and Music.

Hoy began by pitching TV-series script ideas to Hollywood, which fueled her desire to study film at Scottsdale Community College. One of just a handful of women in her film program, Hoy took advantage of every internship opportunity she could find, including many low-level production gigs until she worked her way up to major films.

Like several other Valley women who are finding success on the big and small screens, Hoy is piling up film credits. Her recent work includes assistant director credits on this year's *Wild Seven* and last year's *Big River*; this summer, she wrapped up work on *The Savages*, filmed in Phoenix and starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and Laura Linney. Several other projects are in the pipeline, and through her company, Hoy hopes to direct a film soon.

Undaunted by the fact that directing is traditionally a male-dominated field, she says: "I don't want to be a good female director. I want to be a good director."

Laura Durant, 45, is another Valley resident who has turned a lifelong passion for entertainment into a career in the film business. She got her first taste of moviemaking as a film extra in the late 1970s. Since then, her career has been a smorgasbord of projects, including writing and producing TV shows and short films, co-hosting the local TV series *Screen Wars*, conducting "Actors Toolbox" seminars, promoting local film and stage events through her company, Durant Communications, and acting in films. Durant's most recent role was co-starring with Robert Wagner in last year's short film *Little Victim*.

It's not Durant's nature to allow for gender bias.

"I think of the advancements of women in any area as a natural sign in overall social evolution," she said. "I hope those that have sought me out have done so simply based on my abilities and without regard to gender."

Robin Sewell, a former newscaster at Channel 15 in Phoenix, tapped into her fascination with what goes on behind the camera to become a successful TV producer.

"I've always had a curiosity about everything going on around me; I'm naturally nosy," she said. Three years ago, Sewell decided to leave the TV station and form Robin Sewell Productions.

Eager to produce something specifically about Arizona, Sewell thought it was

intriguing that *Arizona Highways* had been around for 82 years without a TV component. She found financial backers, got the magazine interested in the idea and put it on the air. Now, Sewell's *Arizona Highways Television* is the only locally produced tourism show in the state.

Getting a foothold in big-screen or small-screen entertainment is getting easier for those in the Valley, thanks to expansion of filmmaking programs at Valley universities and community colleges.

Scottsdale Community College introduced a film-studies program in the 1980s that continues to grow. Penelope Price, a documentary filmmaker and a faculty member in the motion picture and television department, says enrollment in the program is 15 percent female.

At Arizona State University's Herberger College of Fine Arts, the curriculum is expanding with its newly minted School of Theatre and Film. The school will award its first bachelor's degree in film with a concentration in film and media production in spring 2008, says Linda Essig, 42, the program's director.

Twenty students are now enrolled as film majors; Essig expects that number will hit 160 by the time the first degrees are awarded. Essig says about half the students majoring in film are women.

Lisa Thompson, 33, producer of Phoenix's "48 Hour Film Project," encourages aspiring filmmakers to make short films to "get their names and their work out there." Once you have a short film, Thompson suggests using local contests and festivals as avenues to get exposure for it. Winning a contest often qualifies a film for entry into a festival, with each level introducing it to a wider audience. Thompson acknowledges the importance of getting to know others in the industry.

"Have a product to show and go to networking events. It's all about who you know," she said.

Filmmaking has been known to bring as much as \$200 million a year to Arizona, but skyrocketing production costs have driven many moviemakers to cheaper locations offshore. Arizonans want to change that.

Last year, Gov. Janet Napolitano announced the formation of the Arizona Film & Television Commission, comprising a couple of dozen business and entertainment executives who meet regularly to devise marketing and promotion strategies to encourage the development of films and TV programs.

The Arizona Department of Commerce also maintains a Web site for the Arizona Film Commission with information about eliminating hassles when setting up film locations and getting permits and help in lining up production services.

Looking for a gig? The Film Commission offers a hotline and Web link announcing entertainment production needs including auditions and opportunities for extras to act in films and on TV.

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