

Dr. Joplin's film class caught up with Gwendolyn Whittle '79, Oscar nominee for her work as sound editor for James Cameron's *Avatar*. Via the class's Facebook page, the following questions were posed by Dr. Joplin, Jenna Desiderio, Madeline Friedman, Maxine Hu, Kathryn Michalek, Corey Schoellkopf, Kelsey Shea, Taylor Smith, and Haley Stearns.

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*Ms. Whittle, thanks so much for doing this. We hope to be a part of your "15 minutes of fame," and from what we've seen of your career, you've been an integral part of our film world for a very long time – the students' entire life, really. So I'd like to begin by going back in time to when you were at Sem. We know you had Mr. Sutton, Mr. Schooley, and Ms. O'Day. Was Mr. Mahoney the English teacher who taught you how to splice film?*

Yes, it was Mr. Mahoney's senior elective. He was a fantastic teacher, an incredibly decent and gentle man. All the teachers at Sem were patient and inspiring. Mrs. Magavern woke me up to reading and a lifelong love of literature. Ms. O'Day was the best biology teacher ever! I remember dressing her skeleton up to amuse ourselves. We dissected fetal pigs; ours was very cute. Mrs. Bodnick managed to make physics interesting. I remember her telling us that a car will hug a curve tighter if you accelerate into it. She told us that with great reservation, as we were all just learning to drive. And Mrs. Johnson was so kind during those long math help sessions! I am one of the few in the film business who is still pretty good at base 16 math: 16 film frames to a foot!

I graduated from Sem the year before the school got computers. Yes. I'm old. You are all the same age as my daughter (she says I'm "Jurassic"! ). There was a dress code: no jeans unless they were designer jeans, and no clogs. There was no swim team, no crew team, no fencing, no squash, no senior internships, no residence hall, and obviously no digital media classes available. There was a smoking room, but I have never smoked, so it wasn't a big deal to me. I always felt safe at Sem, and I was encouraged to think for myself. I credit Sem with laying the groundwork for a lot of my self-confidence, which you need in the film world.

*Do you keep in contact with any girls from Sem who graduated with you?*

I had a very tight group of friends when I was there, and I am still in touch with most of them. I keep in touch with five of them pretty closely, and I am Facebook friends with a few others from my class. It was great for me having such a small class of only 33 – you end up knowing everyone!

*And what about Buffalo itself? Do you still have family here?*

I don't have family in Buffalo anymore. My mom moved to California in 1996, as did my sister. I live in Albany, CA, which is right next to Berkeley. The UC campus is walking distance from my house. I work at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch. It is about a 35-minute commute, one of the most beautiful commutes in the world.

*Was adjusting to California tough coming from Buffalo? A lot of people end up staying in Buffalo their whole lives. How does the fast-paced life of California measure up to Buffalo?*

Buffalo to California is a leap, but it was indirect for me. I left Buffalo for a year in a small town in Germany, three years in Boston, one year in Manhattan, then to San Francisco. SF after NYC was sooooo slow. I felt as if everyone was on Thorazine. So it's really a matter of perspective. I think everyone should move around a bit. How can you know how much you love home if you never leave it? There are so many different places to live, so many different ways to make a living. Look around in the next airport you are in; each person walking by is a showcase of thousands of life decisions, most of them not wrong or right, just decisions. I love the feeling I get when I drive through my neighborhood on the way home after a trip. I know I've chosen the right place for me to raise my family. I may move in the future, but for right now it's perfect. Also my kids have thanked me for having them grow up in northern California. And I work at the coolest place in the sound world!

*It seems that you have always taken chances, and that has led you in the right direction. Have you ever thought about doing something totally different? I'm assuming that you had no idea where you would be when you were a student at Sem... or did you?*

Right after graduation I was an AFS student to Germany for a year. I went speaking a little bit of French, and came home dreaming in German. I learned a lot about how the USA and how I, as one American girl, was viewed in the world. It was humbling, to say the least, and a good lesson for me to learn early. From there I went to four universities in four years. I started as a non-major, then a double film/pre-vet major, then just film, graduating from finally from NYU. Once I graduated, I had no idea how to get a job, so my sister and I decided to move to San Francisco. Why not? I found an organization in San Francisco called the Film Arts Foundation, which advertised jobs and services, as well as classes for the thriving film community in this area. I saw an ad for an independent film (*Smooth Talk*) looking for production assistant – I got the job.

One day in the production office, I heard some people saying they were looking for an assistant editor. I had taken *some* classes on this at NYU, but I think they hired me because I was cheap, not qualified. I was in way over my head. I worked for an editor who must have seen some sort of potential, because he taught me the way a real editing room runs. It was only the two of us, so I learned *everything*. There was no apprentice, assistant, editor hierarchy. It was like grad school, but I was getting paid something at least! A lot of my work has come from luck, being in the right place at the right time, as well as being able to do the job. You've got to keep your ears and eyes open, say "Yes" if you think you can do any part of the job, admit when you don't understand, and never get cocky. There are thousands of people who want my job and can probably do it just as well as I can, but not without my touch!

*You do everything from ADR to overall sound editing – bringing all of different types of sound (score, dialogue, etc.) together. Do you also do any work in composing, sounds effects, or foley?*

I am primarily a production sound and ADR (dialogue) editor. I have cut foley and FX, but I like the word departments best. I love working with the actors and the directors, especially

watching them interact. It is always different and always interesting. On low-budget films and documentaries, I have cut everything because there is not enough money to hire more people. On bigger features I work with some fantastic sound designers: Ben Burtt, Chris Boyes, Gary Rydstrom, Randy Thom, to name a few. As a supervisor, I work with the designer to hire the crew and make sure the schedule is manageable. I am the interface between Skywalker Sound and the production: Fox, Paramount, Blue Sky, Pixar, and a variety of independent studios. I don't have much input into the music.

*Saving Private Ryan was celebrated for its authenticity, and viewers learned that Spielberg took great pains to make costumes, guns, etc. as real as possible—sometimes using real equipment as props. Does this mean that the sounds of, say, many of those old guns, were recorded fresh? That is, they couldn't have been stock sounds from the usual "bank" of sounds filmmakers draw from, right?*

The sound designers and FX editors go to great lengths to find authentic sources to rerecord the FX. You would be amazed at the stashes of WWII weaponry around. The FX editors and designers go to the people who have these things and record them fresh. The sound designers I know have sound FX libraries that span the Amazon, the Sahara, the polar ice caps and every vehicle, gun, bird, insect and language in between. And they always go and get new fresh sound whenever they can.

*For Avatar, how did you get the sound of the spinning lizards? We really like how close to the ear they are – almost in one's ear! And what about the sound of the orange fan flowers in the very beginning? When Jake Sully touches one, it jumps into its hole and makes a sound almost like a PVC pipe or something. Perhaps these are foley questions, but we assume you oversaw how they fit into the overall "soundscape."*

Those are secret sound designer sounds! Chris Boyes did a great job I think, and you're right – a PVC pipe was involved :- ) ...good ears!

*For Titanic people always remember the sound of the icebergs cracking, but I always remember the film as a very large mix of sounds. For instance, there's always the dull roar of the ship moving through the water, then the cocktail parties above or the Irish and dancing below.*

Jim Cameron approached the sound on *Titanic* from a precise historical perspective. When you are with first class, the engine is barely audible. The lower you go down in the boat, and class, the louder and more of a presence the engine becomes. The languages you hear in the life boats and the different parts of the boat are all absolutely accurate. So the mixing of all the sounds sweetens that historical effect.

*Titanic* was a very hard job. The hours were grueling and my kids were wee ones then, which made it doubly hard. On *Titanic* I was a production dialogue editor and on *Avatar* I was one of the supervising sound editors. My involvement on *Avatar* was much thicker. So I would have to say that my impact on *Avatar* was greater. I loved working with the Na'vi language, and the translating of all the extra crowd dialogue in the film with the inventor of the language, Paul Frommer. It was cool to see how he took what we wanted to say and created new sentences, never heard or said before.

*It seems that the general goal of sound in films is to bring the audience into the action of the film. Does it seem to you that there are different challenges, or different goals, integrating sound effects into a 3D film such as Avatar versus one in 2D?*

If you think about it, sound has been 3D for ages now, ever since theaters expanded from stereo mixes to 5.1 or 7.1, and of course IMAX has always had 3D sound. Rarely does the sound mix change when we check the track against the 3D pictures, but every now and then a "pan" past the audience to the rear of the theater will need a little spacial tweaking.

*Do you ever imagine acting in these movies to help produce a better, more fitting soundscape? Do you ever wish you were an actor in any of the movies?*

I have actually never thought about that. I usually have an idea of a performance in my head of what I'd like the actor to sound like, and I've always considered it my job to help them get there, especially if the director is not around at the time. There are reasons the actors are acting and I am not: I stink at acting! But I know how the mood of a scene should feel, and the sound sweetens what is on the screen. I guess you could say I act it in my head.

There was also a very telling moment when I was working with Halle Berry, who is gorgeous. We both took a bathroom break at the same time. While at the sink washing our hands, I unfortunately looked in the mirror. There is definitely a reason *she* is in front of the camera, and I am happily behind it!

*What are the favorites movies you've worked on? Do you ever find it strange to go back and watch movies in which you have been so involved?*

I have been very lucky. Some films I love because I love the directors and producers. One of those is an ultra low budget film about being ethnic in America called *Follow Me Home*. Salma Hayek is in it, from before she became a US starlet. Other films I love because they resonate with me. I *loved* working on *Benjamin Button* and *Fight Club*. Brad is brilliant. He is so decorative. He is friendly, curious, and easy to talk to. He and director David Fincher are like kids together. He is a doll to work with — one of my favorites, for sure. Actors like him make me love my job. My other favorites are *Saving Private Ryan*, *Munich*, *The Matador*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the *Ice Age* movies, and also this documentary I just finished up on called *Hand Held*.

The oddest thing about re-watching films from years ago — I can still mouth a lot of the dialogue right along with the actors. My kids hate it when I do it, too. They become embedded in my consciousness, for better and for worse!

*What advice do you have for students who don't know what paths in life are best to take?*

I understand the fear of "What am I going to do with my life?" I never had a clear vision in high school or even until my last year of college for where I wanted to be in the future. What I did was to keep my eyes open for things to do that interested me and jumped on them. Gradually my path found itself. I took all sorts of oddball classes in college. I worked in theater (the costume department); I took chemistry, writing classes, language classes. I always had a part-time job; it helped keep me looking for a "real" job that I wouldn't hate once I was out of

school. Keep your options open, take chances. It is good to know what doesn't fit as well as what does. I don't think you have to worry so much about deciding for good right now. The fun part of life is about to really start! As Benjamin Button says, "It's never too late, or too early to be whoever you want to be. There's no time limit, start whenever you want, you can change or stay the same. There are no rules to this thing. I hope you live a life you're proud of, and if you find you're not, pick yourself up and start all over again."

I have often thought about going back to school. When my son (now 20 – yikes!) was getting ready for college, it really made me want to go back with him. I'd love to take zoology, animal behavior, writing classes, literature classes, relearn some German maybe. It is very hard for me to sign up for classes because I travel a lot with very little notice and the schedules always change. It is the down side of the freelance life. The upside is I've been able to travel to London, Paris, Tel Aviv, and Sydney, all for work!

*These are really inspiring words! We could not have asked for a better participant. Thank you for your generosity, Ms. Whittle. We will all be rooting for you on Sunday night. No matter what happens at the Oscars, you will be a hero to all of us at Sem for a much longer time than Hollywood's 15 minutes of fame!*

Now I'm blushing. If *Avatar* wins (it is a neck-and-neck race with *Hurt Locker*), you will see me go up there and wish I had taken public speaking classes! Good luck to all of you, too!