

CLC Way Forward Leader Lunch Break
Patrick Shepherd, Cleveland International Film Festival
Wednesday, April 10, 2024

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

As executive director Marcy Goodman shared, he's everyone's go-to guy for everything. He is my partner in all things Cleveland International Film Festival. He is my moral compass. He is an extraordinary human being. At the Cleveland International Film Festival, all our lives are made better because of Patrick. You may see him dashing about the many theaters in use, but he is never too busy to offer his trademark huge smile and a warm greeting. During Patrick's tenure, attendance more than tripled, the budget quadrupled, and the festival found a magnificent new home in Playhouse Square.

And we cannot forget that the Cleveland International Film Festival was the first large-scale Cleveland event impacted by the pandemic in March of 2020. True to form, they were determined to deliver and offered the streaming that has now become a staple for those far from Cleveland to enjoy all that the film festival has to offer. Patrick is also a leader in political circles as co-founder of the Cleveland Stonewall Democrats, where he was president from 2000 to 2007, and working with the Ohio Democratic Party Chair to form one of our country's first statewide LGBT democratic caucuses.

He is a lover of the arts, Ohio City, all of Ohio's 88 counties, which he likes to visit, and off-roading Jeeps, in addition to numerous honors and awards, he serves as co-president of LC 2020 and is an alumnus of CBB 2003. Welcome, Patrick. Well, thank you, Angela.

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

I appreciate that kind introduction. And welcome to the Mimi Ohio Theater at Playhouse Square. I'm in one of the green rooms that was built over 100 years ago. For this space and it's just a privilege to share time with all of you this afternoon. Our team at the Cleveland International Film Festival work to ... Thought I had an internet issue there, so I was just checking. Exhibition and education are at the core of what we do. 60 countries are being represented at CIFF48. We are known for our documentaries and our shorts programs across the country.

We are an Academy Award qualifying festival as the winners of three juried short film awards automatically qualify for consideration in those categories for the Academy Awards. We have an educational program for students in grades five through 12 that we call film slam, and we have a community engagement program that enables us to connect with over 130 area nonprofit organizations that have films. Matching the content of their mission and work. For example, with the Leadership Center, they're partnering with a documentary film called Nine to Five, the Story of a Movement.

It's directed by Academy Award winners, Stephen Bogner and Julia Reichert. It chronicles women working in the workplace to obtain equal rights in the 1970s and 1980s. There's a fair amount of Cleveland represented in the film. So, it truly is about Cleveland leadership. And again, the documentary is called Nine to Five, The Story of a Movement. We're in the middle of day eight of our in-person Playhouse Square Festival where 263 screenings are taking place in five Playhouse Square venues, the Conner Palace, the Key Bank State Theater, the Ohio Theatre, the Allen Theatre, and the Upper Allen. A typical festival day will have at least 25 screenings of international and independent films. Screenings start around noon on weekdays and in the 9 a.m. Hour on weekends. More than 300 filmmakers and

guests are here to engage our audiences again this year. Filmmaker engagement is important to us as film festivals across the United States are struggling with the societal change in our culture's viewing habits of films.

Many people need a more compelling reason to watch a movie in a downtown theater as opposed to watching it from the comfort of their living room. And having filmmakers here for screenings to engage Cleveland audiences is an important part of what we do. And while you will not see filmmakers at every screening, we bring in as many as our nonprofit budget allows. And we do have local filmmakers. There's one of the featured filmmakers this year is Leadership Cleveland class of 2007 alumnus Deborah Plummer.

She directed a documentary film about her bridging and building conversations about race relations and that film is called Trust in Black and White that saw a very well attended screening last night. There's another one this afternoon. And then we even have a private Leadership Cleveland program with that film tonight at six o'clock. So, in addition to the Playhouse Square Festival, as Angela referenced, we do have a streaming festival. ClIFF48 streams will run starting this Sunday, April 14th.

And it'll run for eight days until Sunday, April 21st. Something to remember about that though, is that not every film in our festival is on the streaming platform. Almost all of the short films are, and about half of the feature films are. And of course, we ask for all of them to be part of the streaming festival, but for a variety of different reasons, sometimes distributors or filmmakers opt out of that because perhaps they're working on a theatrical run, and they don't want to impact the potential ticket sales down the road.

I thought I might talk a little bit about our location history in our 48 years and our journey to Playhouse Square. I rarely have time to share these types of stories, but I thought this might be a great space to do it. Our original home was the Cedar Lee Theater in Cleveland Heights from 1977 to 1990. And the festival moved to the new Tower City Center in 1991 and broadened our access to the region at a downtown location for 29 years. And tower city was an incredible home and its owners at that time for city enterprises could not have been more generous hosts, and even when Dan Gilbert's bedrock.

Companies purchased the complex in were so 2016, friendly and supportive. But it became increasingly apparent that more and more movie theaters were closing their doors across the country throughout the 2010s. And our board of directors constituted a location task force to identify a third and hopefully permanent home. And we literally visited dozens of venues across Cuyahoga County with a focus on keeping the festival inside the city of Cleveland borders. And we bought ourselves some extra time when we borrowed half a million dollars from the George Gunn Foundation to purchase digital projectors and keep Tower City Cinemas open in 2014.

Because in those years, many independent film places were closing because you had to have new equipment. Otherwise, you could not present new content. The industry had pivoted from 35-millimeter equipment that had dominated industry for the 20th century and they were moving to digital. And while we used that equipment just two weeks out of the year and leased it out for the other 50 weeks, it secured our home for the time being. And then a few years later, the ESPN 30 for 30 documentary film Believe Land about Cleveland and our sports teams came around and it was lightning in a bottle in so many ways.

It chronicled the drive, the fumble, the shot, the decision. All in 80 action packed minutes. And we knew that it was too big for the theaters at Tower City. So, we made the move to hold a festival screening at Playhouse Square for the first time in decades. And our guests about enthusiasm for the film and our ability to draw and attract new audiences was right on target as the screening at the Conner Palace was the largest in our history, even to this day with over 2000 people in attendance.

And more importantly, that screening was a test drive of what could be our new home. And the following year, we started hosting our opening night events there in 2017, 2018, and in 2019. And then there was a meeting between our executive director, Marcy Goodman, and Playhouse Square CEO, Gina Vernaci about potentially moving the festival to Playhouse Square. And Guhan and her team could not have been more welcoming. And Chris Blake, who is on this call with us today, has been our board president and continues to be our board president since 2019.

He convened a meeting in December of 2019, and the board unanimously voted to move the festival to Playhouse Square. Well, the original plan was 2021 that we were going to celebrate our 30th and final festival at Tower City cinemas in 2020 and then move to 2021 and I won't belabor. Much of the details of the COVID shutdown, but I will share the headlines in that we were, Chris Blake, myself, and Marcy Goodman were at a press conference in the Red Room on the afternoon of March 11th, 2020, where Mayor Frank Jackson declared a state of civil emergency and canceled the St.

Patrick's Day Parade and the 44th Cleveland International Film Festival. And while we were shell-shocked at the time, here is where some luck entered the narrative. As it so happened, this was the first festival where we contracted with a company to secure the files of our films online as opposed to receiving them via FedEx and UPS shipments of external hard drives. The company not only had our film files in the cloud, but miraculously, they had a method by which they could deliver the films through a web browser, and they even created smart TV apps so that people could use their Apple TV or their Roku to attend the festival virtually.

Chris and the entire board stepped up to underwrite CIFF44 Streams, which launched about five weeks after that City Hall press conference and that of course positioned us to have another virtual festival in 2021. And then we did finally open at Playhouse Square, our forever home in 2022. And there were 1,088 days between the last day of the 2019 festival and opening night of the 46th Cleveland International Film Festival in 2022. And so, in many ways, we were completely starting over.

And as I mentioned, not only were we changing venues, not only were we coming out in the wake of a pandemic, but the American public's viewing habits have changed. So, we continue to search for reasons and strategies to draw people to the playoffs where we've had two great years here and all indications are Our third year is going to be great as well. But I welcome thoughts from anybody on our call here today or just feel free to email me or call me because we always love to hear community feedback of what makes it compelling to draw people in person to our screenings.

And we have So much great content this year and we're so proud to be a resident company of Playhouse Square. Craig Hassel, the CEO, David Green, and the entire team are just incredibly supportive. We cannot believe our fortune not only to work with this incredible team, but how lucky are we as Clevelanders to have Playhouse Square, one of the world's largest performing arts centers, the largest one in the United States out of Lincoln Center, right here in downtown Cleveland on Euclid Avenue.

And just to think that 50 years ago there was a wrecking ball on Euclid Avenue ready to knock these theaters down, for parking but some great Cleveland leaders stepped up and stopped the demolition from happening and then literally spent decades building these theaters back up to the magnificent state that they are in right now and they just continue to get better. I don't know who all has been down to Playhouse Square since they had their Marquee Moments event last summer, but it's just brighter than ever with their completely reinvented signage system for the various theater, marquees, and just everything else around here.

So, thanks again to Angela and the Cleveland Leadership Center team, and thanks to all of you for sharing some time for me to talk. About the 48th Cleveland International Film Festival, which runs in-person through this Saturday, April 13th, and then CIFF48 Streams runs April 14th through the 21st. Awesome.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

Thank you, Patrick. So, thanks for sharing that journey to Playhouse Square. Clearly, there was a lot of perseverance on display, lots of innovation, but what other leadership skills did you have to tap into to ensure that the festival was going to evolve and progress through those challenges?

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

When we walked in those doors to start planning for that 2022 festival, I mean, we really just had to walk in with a blank slate and use the best practices that we had at Tower City, but it was a completely different venue. One of the competitive advantages for our festival is that if you go to other festivals around the country around the world, you won't always see this. We've always been under one roof. We were under one roof at the Cedar Lee Theater in Cleveland Heights. We were under one roof at Tower City Center.

And thanks to the people that helped save Playhouse Square, everything is contiguous inside the main theaters of the complex, the palace, the state, the Ohio, the Allen and the Upper Allen. You know, we're fortunate that we have a seasonal team of about 200 people that had a lot of institutional knowledge that brought those best practices alongside the eight full timers of the festival. And it's just really all about talented people and building a team that can make this kind of magic happen.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

So, this past weekend, Cleveland was just alive with the Final Four tournament and the Eclipse and the home opener. Did any of that negatively impact the attendance at the film festival?

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

Well, we actually saw a lot of people coming in that had been first time Cleveland visitors and first time Cleveland International Film Festival visitors. So, we're firm believers in a rising tide and we were thrilled to see how busy downtown Cleveland was. And some people may not realize, but starting last April 1st, starting that Monday, pretty much all of the downtown hotels were completely sold out for the NCAA. Because not only were the teams coming in towards the end of the week, but there was an enormous production team.

And the media team that were in for it. So, it was great to see the vibrancy along Euclid Avenue and all around downtown. You know, Monday was an unusual day for us. Typically, Mondays are our quietest days at the festival. And of course, we did not program any films until after the eclipse concluded. We

basically started screening films in the six o'clock hour. And yes, it was, it was a lighter day, but I mean, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. And I just want to thank mother nature for cooperating.

And we got to see a stunning show here, here in Cleveland with, you know, literally, it would seem like tens of thousands of people who came in to experience it, and maybe had never been to Cleveland before.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

You mentioned the change in viewing habits and in-person viewing habits. Where do you see the future of the film festival going in response to those changes?

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

Yeah, I mean, I think one thing that we learned about streaming is that there were audiences that had not been able to make it to downtown Cleveland, to Tower City, to experience the festival either ever or for a long time and a variety of different factors could play into that. But we were able to find new audiences in 2020 and 2021 when we were entirely virtual. So, we are definitely, I believe, going to continue to have some type of streaming component. It may not look like what it has been for these first three years where a streaming festival immediately follows the in-person festival.

But maybe you'll see more streaming opportunities throughout the year. I mean, for example, we for the first time partnered with the Greater Cleveland Urban Film Festival for a Black History Month program in February. Maybe you'll see more programming like that. And now that we're really settling in at Playhouse Square, maybe we will have programs around the year at Playhouse Square. Right now, there's only one program that we do in person at Playhouse Square and that's what we call Get Shorty, which is a You Pick the Shorts event in February where we invite people to come in and they vote with their phones, and they help program a short film in the festival.

I think there are more creative ways to use the incredible venues here at Playhouse Square year-round. We just need to build into that.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

Other than geographic moves, what other major transitions have you witnessed at the Cleveland International Film Festival?

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

Well, I mean, if you look at the 25 years, I think that filmmaking is far more accessible than it ever was before. I mean, when I started full-time in 2001, and that was back in a day where a filmmaker would have to, they would have to buy film, they would have to rent a camera, they would have to have that film processed, then they'd have to rent this enormous piece of equipment to edit their film, and of course, That's completely changed in the last 25 years, because for the most part, films are digital.

It's more economically accessible. I mean, you can edit films on your own phone in some cases. We've had films in the festival that have been good enough that were basically filmed on an iPhone and edited through Apple software, but it's incredible content. And I think we'll continue to see that type of evolution as the technology continues to get better. And you mentioned partnerships.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

Can you talk more about how you identify those? What do you look for? And how have your partnerships evolved over time?

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

Yeah, you know, the lineup of community partners is different each year. And that's because the lineup of films is different each year. So, for example, the Adoption Network is a cherished partner for the Cleveland International Film Festival, but unfortunately, if there's not a film about adoption, we're not able to partner with them. Fortunately, there's almost always a film about leadership, and that's why the Cleveland Leadership Center is a partner every year. But we open an application every January, and we ask perspective partners, nonprofit organizations, just to complete a brief form that explains their mission, maybe explain some of the programming that they're doing in that particular calendar year.

And then we have a team that literally tries to match the films in the upcoming festival with their mission and work. And, you know, what I always like to say is like the timing for a film festival is a bit of a curse, but the programming is the blessing because there's If you had a lot more time, there'd be so much more that you could do with the various programs in the festival. But we are proud to have over 130 nonprofits that are supporting various films in the festival. And for anybody that's interested in their nonprofit participating next year, just email me and we'll make sure that you get on the invite list for the 2025 festival.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

So, it's no secret that you will soon be taking a role outside of the Cleveland International Film Festival, much to our chagrin. But can you talk a little bit about what's next and what that transition will look like.

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

Sure. So I announced last August that this was going to be my last festival and people kept asking me, you know, what do you want to do? What do you want to do? And for me, it was really who do I want to work with? And an opportunity revealed itself because an alumnus of Leadership Cleveland, class of 2013, Eric Wobser, returned home to Sandusky earlier last year to take the helm of basically a newly constituted to an organization called the Greater Sandusky Partnership, which is essentially the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Organization for Erie and Huron counties and he's building a team there and I've known Eric for 20 years.

In fact, he worked across the street from the film festival office when he was the executive director of Ohio City Incorporated from 2009 to 2014 and certainly played a role in the progress of the neighborhood during that five-year period. So, when the opportunity became available, I was very excited. I'm glad that I'm still going to be in the region. I grew up in a little town called Wellington, Ohio, and I'm just as close to my hometown in Sandusky as I am here today. And I'll be back in Cleveland all the time but looking forward to working with Eric and his team to support the Western part of our region going forward.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

What will you be taking with you from this role and your experiences in it as you transition to your next?

CLC Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

Yeah, I certainly think community engagement is something that I'm particularly proud of. We did not have a community engagement program 23 years ago and for the last 21 years we've been building it up. So, I think that that's something that will translate there. And certainly, fundraising is my primary role and that will play a factor as to the impact of this newly constituted organization and what it's going to have the capacity to do.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

Talk a little bit more about how you bring the community into the film festival. What's the process like to choose the films, to screen the films, and how does the community play into that?

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

We always say that the Clevelanders own this festival, that we don't own it. They determine the winners of cash awards exceeding Being \$100,000 each year through their audience votes. We have a volunteer team of over 150 people that screen the submissions that come in. We had over 4000 submissions. Where 4000 filmmakers paid us to consider their films and it's a highly Competitive process less than 5% of the films that are submitted to the festival actually get in. But you know, we don't.

We don't engage film scholars or film critics. We just engage Clevelanders and people who like film because that's who we're programming for. So, you know our audience helps program the festival. It helps determine who the award winners are, and we welcome all sorts of feedback from across the board every year to improve the festival from year to year. I mean, we always have a long list of what to do better next year. And I know that model will continue long after I leave.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

We have another hard-hitting question that came in here. Is it true that you were once the correct answer in a trivia contest hosted by local comedian, Mike Polk? And if so, share what the question was with us.

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

Oh my gosh, I think that's true, but my memory is so. Poor that I think I'm going to be able to remember, but you know, Michael Junior is one of my favorite Cleveland personalities and the one of my favorite traditions was always to go on his comedy show each winter or early spring at Pickwick and Frolic at hilarities there and I just think Mike is such a great asset to our region and I'm glad that he's on WKYC kind of continuing his amazingness to a much larger audience. I wish I could answer your question, I don't remember.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

Well, we'll follow up on that. And what else can we on the call do besides attending the film festival? What can we do to support the work at the Cleveland International Film Festival?

Patrick Shepherd | CIFF

Yeah, I mean, honestly, we, we are a nonprofit organization, and it costs over \$3 million to produce this event every spring in downtown Cleveland. And while we are fortunate to have support from corporations and foundations and government, you know, support from Clevelanders and our audience is critical to that. So that's why we have a challenge match going on at this festival through the Playhouse

Square run and the streaming run. We have a \$100,000 goal, and we're just a little over \$50,000 here in day eight.

So, a contribution on our website at clevelandfilm.org, or if you make it down to the festival, we have challenge match stations in the lobbies of the Allen Theater and the Key Bank State Theater. So, thank you for allowing me to make that pitch.

Angela O'Donnell | CLC

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for taking time out of a very busy week to share with all of us today. Thank you for all you've done and we're glad to know that you will not be far away so we can find you. Thank you. And thank you to everyone who joined us today.