

## TRANSCRIPT FOR EPISODE 34: REDOUBLED MY DEVOTION TO TEACHING

[Introduction music]

Christine Becker: [00:00:15] Welcome to Cinema Journal presents Aca Media. I'm Christine Becker.

Michael Kackman: And I'm Michael Kackman.

Christine Becker: And it's nearing the end of the semester. We've just got finals week to go, and wow, I'm looking forward to this one being over, I've got to say. I mean, I always am. It's good to end.

Michael Kackman: Yeah, always, always.

Christine Becker: But this one has a little special spice to it that I would like to...

Michael Kackman: A [soup's on] of crises.

Christine Becker: Yes, that has just been a lot to go through. It's been - I almost said the word fun. I don't quite mean that, but there's been challenges to the teaching in the last month.

Michael Kackman: These are not boring times.

Christine Becker: [00:00:48] No, these are not boring times and I've in many ways re-doubled my devotion to teaching and to talking with students and I've really been buoyed by how passionate and thoughtful my students have been through this time, so it's a good thing for that, I guess, if you've got to find silver linings.

Michael Kackman: [00:01:08] Yeah. You know, they're pretty amazing. You know? And we're in the middle of some sort of epochal change, right? Regardless of one's personal political perspective, we are in the middle of or maybe at the beginning of what is increasingly looking like a fairly radical overhaul of

our understanding of our civic culture and how it's mediated and what kinds of mechanisms we have to communicate with one another across political divides.

[00:01:43] And it's pretty high-stakes stuff and really difficult. That's a difficult moment to all of a sudden be, "Okay, welcome, voter. Here are your keys to adulthood."

Christine Becker: Right, and to figure out how to talk to about that with students, which actually we've been touting, the previous couple of months, the interview that we've got coming in this episode with Susan Ohmer, and I'm very proud to say I think Susan Ohmer delivers on what we said she was going to give us to help us understand what it's like to teach during this climate, and specifically teach about politics.

[00:02:18] And then we also touted, I think, that if anyone could make us feel at least a little bit warm and fuzzy inside about this, it's Susan Ohmer, and I do think she does that.

Michael Kackman: Yeah. We are lucky enough to have her just down the hall from us as our colleague, but for the rest of us, I hope you enjoy this conversation.

Christine Becker: And let me make just one quick note on the audio here, I recorded this interview and it was the end of the semester, I screwed up a few things, so the first few minutes sound a little funky and then it flips after four minutes. I had it on the wrong setting, so I apologize for the sudden shift. Maybe that's a nice metaphor for the ground shifting underneath us. The audio, all the things around us are shifting, so that's reflected in our interview.

Michael Kackman: You don't need to adjust your set.

Christine Becker: Okay, thank you.

Michael Kackman: [00:02:58] We also have coming up, after the conversation with Susan Ohmer, we have a conversation with Leslie LeMond talking about how it is that SCMS is organized and how

conferences are put on and the hotel selection process and that sort of thing. So we'll bring that to you shortly.

[musical interlude]

Christine Becker: [00:03:32] Susan Ohmer is associate professor in the Department of film, television and theater and the William T Carey and Helen Kuhn Carey chair of modern communication at the University of Notre Dame. She is the author of *George Gallup in Hollywood*, from Columbia University Press and is currently completing a book on the Disney studio during the 1940s. She teaches classes in the film and television history and culture, including film and television culture, Walt Disney, and of most interest to this interview, , media and presidential elections.

[00:03:58] And this semester, she has taught two sections of that course; one to freshman and another to juniors and seniors. I am joined here at Notre Dame by my colleague, Susan Ohmer. Thank you so much for joining Aca Media, Susan.

Susan Ohmer: Thank you for inviting me.

Christine Becker: We are very tired to talk - literally I just said we are very tired to talk.

Susan Ohmer: We are. We are both tired.

Christine Becker: I literally meant to say we are very excited, but I think that's a Freudian slip. We're going to leave that in there. I'm very tired now. There are two weeks left in the semester, and especially the last month since the election has been a very exhausting time, or the last two weeks. I don't know, it's felt like years.

[00:04:32] But in fact, that's why we really wanted to talk to you, because you're finishing up a class, in fact two classes - we'll get to that in the second - on media and the presidency, and I'm just really fascinated to hear how that experience has gone. You've taught this multiple times now. You teach it

during presidential election years, so you've taught in a number of times and so I'm curious how this time around has compared it to the previous times. The unique challenges of doing a class like this, benefits, drawbacks. What has this time been like?

Susan Ohmer: [00:04:57] Well, you're right. I started teaching this class during the 2000 election, which was memorable in many ways, and I've taught it every four years since. I always look forward to it. I love the subject. It is a joy to talk with our students about their thoughts and ideas about elections, but this one was memorable and positive and negative ways. One thing I've been thinking about is that this is an election - in the past, I used to struggle with the persona I would adopt in the classroom. So when I first started teaching this class, some of my colleagues in journalism, for example, advised that I should be neutral; I should not give away my political views.

[00:05:35] I should do my very best to be objective. And I obviously succeeded at that, because one day when I was going on about something, a student came up to me and said, "Now, I can tell you're a strong supporter of George Bush," so I thought, "Okay, I've gone too far in the other direction." So I tried that for two elections, and then I think it was in '08 I thought, "This is not what people do. It's not me."

[00:05:58] So I decided I was going to be candid. I said I don't want you to waste five minutes guessing your professors thoughts. It doesn't matter what my thoughts are. It's your thoughts that are important. So here's what I think, here's what I am, but my goal in this class is for all of us to create an environment where we can talk to each other and listen attentively. That there are not many places in our society where we can do that about politics.

[00:06:26] And, I said if you feel me tilting in a certain direction, just call me on it. It's okay. And once, a student did say, "I think you're tilting." But I think I was going off on a rant at that point. But in general, I've found I'm much more comfortable with that and I think the students appreciate the honesty, that we all have a strong views and the important thing is how we talk about them and how we support them and how we develop our ideas. So I have felt that this year in particular, that's been a real challenge. I set as a goal that we model an environment of respectful listening, and it's not an environment that we've had much in this election.

[00:07:00] So in that sense, the class was unusual, I think, but I've really tried to do that, to sort of break down some of that divisiveness. And I've been impressed, students are respectful towards each other. They understand that we are all in this together and they really do listen to each other, even when they obviously disagree.

Christine Becker: Well, that must have been especially interesting in teaching right after the election, because I taught the morning after the election and my first class is on media stardom, and when there's something really big going on, you have that debate, like, "Do I bring this into the classroom or do I not?"

[00:07:32] And I'm never comfortable bringing in something that feels separate from the topic, but media stardom is about - except for a class on media and the presidency, is about is on the nose as you can get. So we had a really interesting conversation, but it was one of the hardest days I've ever had to teach. It was so stressful. I didn't know what they were going to say. I didn't know what I was going to say. I don't know if I was going to say the wrong thing. There were a couple of things where I felt like I said the wrong thing, so what was that day like in that class? We had a lot of really heightened emotions tied to that.

Susan Ohmer: [00:08:01] Well, what was striking about that is that we did a secret ballot on election day. I didn't do it before, then I didn't want anybody to worry about being outed but we did a secret ballot on election day and it came out that in one class, two of 18 students voted for Trump and then the other class, three of about 30 voted for Trump. So it was a small number, and certainly smaller than the general population. But before the election, the people who voted for Trump did not reveal themselves.

[00:08:30] They were much more cautious. And I figured that. I figured people were holding back, for whatever reasons. The class after the election, they came out of the woodwork. They seemed empowered to speak. Like, "All right, we won, now I can talk about why that is or why I voted for him." I think that was a welcome element to the conversation, because they had been a much more quiet before the election, so they did feel now that they could speak. Now, the students who voted for Clinton were distraught.

[00:09:00] I mean, the emotion, as you say, was very high that day. They were talking not only about how could this happen, but about the impact on their lives and the lives of other students. That people who were here as part of the DACA program were worried about what would happen. People were worried about family members or friends being deported. They were worried about applications for their lives down the road. I mean, there was, compared to other times I've taught this, a much more emotional, much more fearful, genuinely fearful and anxious reaction about how this was going to affect them.

[00:09:37] It wasn't just a change in administration. It was, "My life could be offended because of this." So that was really striking compared to previous years.

Christine Becker: And I wanted to follow up with one other aspect of the course, because you had two versions of this course. One that you talk to freshman here at Notre Dame and then one to upperclassman. So what comparisons and contrasts stand out between those two student bases. What is the contrast between that?

Susan Ohmer: [00:09:58] Well, this is the first time I did that, and I can't wait to do this in 2020, because it was fascinating. The freshman, it's their first semester in college, so one of the things they're getting used to is, "What can we talk about in college?" You could see them gaining more confidence in their own voices, that yes, we can talk about, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement. We can talk about your experiences, your friends experiences, what you think about this. You don't have to hold back, that this is what we're here for. You know, our university president talk about universities as a place where we can freely and frankly explore ideas.

[00:10:31] And I believe that passionately, it is one of the goals that I tried to communicate to the freshman. So the other thing that was wonderful about them is that they are discovering what it means to be a voter. And in some ways, I'm really sorry it was this election this could form their baseline idea of what an election is. I'll never forget the day after Trump was asked whether or not he would accept the results and he said, "If I went." One of the students, in all innocence, raise his hands and said, "Now, is this what they would say after the election"

[00:11:01] I just said, "Oh no. Of course it isn't, but how would you know that? So I worry sometimes about the ideas they're developing about what an election is like, because this is not normal. But in general, what is also exciting about working with the first year students is that there's a lot of this class that deals with election history. We had a long segment on the debates and we televised debates and particular moments and how they were put together and they did a great deal of reading about it. And the freshman hadn't seen any of these. Things were really new for them and exciting.

[00:11:36] The juniors and seniors, film and TV majors. Very sophisticated at analyzing images. They're more cynical because they understand how things work. The freshmen are still in shock that these things go on. But they're becoming very sophisticated analysts. But the juniors and seniors, I think, reflect the benefit of the education that they have here. They have a very broad context of history and politics and they're able to represent their ideas thoughtfully.

[00:12:07] That training in philosophy, I think, pays off. They write well, they have a broader framework of understanding. This isn't completely new to them. They have some other parallels that they can understand it with.

Christine Becker: As you mentioned, there, you focus a lot on history in your class, presidential campaigns and elections, so I'm curious about which of those, first of all, which every time do you get really excited about getting to teach? Which particular moments in history. And then also which ones seem most relevant right now?

[00:12:39] We had a lot of people saying, "I've never seen anything like this." So are there precedents for some of this? Is there something that isn't unprecedented? So what are some of the key moments in history you like to reflect on?

Susan Ohmer: [00:12:49] It's interesting, because it varies with each election, and you don't always know. This summer, I was thinking, "Okay, what's the comparison going to be?" And then I realized, and in fact the New York Times said it about a month after I realized it, so I thought, "Okay, I'm in good

company," 1968. Because there's a perception of disorder and unrest and people are protesting and the economy is troubled and we're in a war that is not always popular.

[00:13:13] And along comes a Republican who says, "I can restore order. I will bring back stability. I will bring back the country that you know and love from the past." So absolutely, that sense of things are going a month and I'm the one who can bring it back. And of course we know what happens after that but that we will see it again. So '68. And my freshman started reading Normal Mailer's *Miami and the Seize of Chicago*. And there, one of the things I did was to sort of take them back to television in 1968.

[00:13:44] So we watched footage and media pulled from the Democratic convention, but we also looked at television footage of the time of the Vietnam war, when the cameras went into the field and you saw people bloodied and wounded on camera. They had never seen this. So when we talked about, "This is what you watch it during dinner," and I remember that. You turned on the evening news, which is what there was then, and you saw that, and they were just stunned by it.

[00:14:11] We also look at footage from some guerrilla filmmakers in Chicago who showed what happened along Michigan Avenue during the protests, and there was this a lost woman from the suburbs driving down the street and these soldiers in gas masks, full regalia stop her car, make her get out, and the students, who are used to shopping at Nike Town are saying, "Look at that, that's the bridge on Michigan Avenue." It really brought it home for them. So the '68 comparison was perfect for this election in some disturbing ways, too, but really perfect for it..

[00:14:43] The other thing that I really like to teach is the debates, because the class is in sync with the process of the election. Though in the past, before this year, we started when the conventions were on because we started in August, and up until now, that's when the conventions took place. So I felt really sad this year that the conventions happened in July, so we didn't get to do it live, although we still talked about conventions. But, we were able to focus on debates. And as you know, the president of the University had a forum on debates and Bob Schieffer was here and other moderators, Jim Lehrer.



[00:15:20] My freshmen read Larry's book on the debates, "Tension City," so there he was. The other reason I love teaching this class is that you don't always get to teach a class that is in sync with current events. I'm a historian, so to teach something that is happening now is really fun. And also, it helps the students see that what they're learning matters to these people. Like I'll never forget, when Bob Schieffer was up there on stage, he was talking about slogans in campaigns. And he said, for example, "Tippecanoe and Tyler too."

[00:15:53] Well, we had just look at the election of 1840. And literally, I was sitting at the end of a row of 24 people and I felt this wave go all the way down the row. "Did you hear that? Did you hear that? Bob Schieffer knows about Tippecanoe and Tyler too." So that was really cool, that suddenly they realized here's somebody who's involved in current events, and he knows about this stuff that we studied in class. So that was great, that it has actual meaning to people.

Christine Becker: Also, I'm curious to get your perspective, since you especially have this long perspective on other historical moments, on the media strategies the candidates use to do this campaign and Trump's often very unusual media strategies and then Hillary's perhaps more traditional ones.

Susan Ohmer: [00:16:31] It's a huge question, because one of the things she talked about, too, is other elections that paralleled this one. And one thing that my students are seeing is how much things remain the same. Like one of them is writing a paper on the campaign of 1992, and she said she was reading a transcript of some of the debates and she had to double check what year it was because they were talking about the economy and the war in the Middle East and Clinton running as an outsider.

[00:16:58] And she said, really, you would think it was today. So one thing that strikes he was how things don't change in that way. But another thing that we see is that in the past 20 years, we've had this tension between political campaigns that are extraordinarily media-savvy. I taught the War Room this morning, and that's very much the filmmakers Hegedus and Pennebaker focus very much on Carville and Stephanopoulos in 1992.

[00:17:25] And they're the media strategists, the campaign strategists. So it's a film about the process of thinking about a campaign. They actually wanted to follow Clinton, but he had other people following him so he said "No." So they decided to focus on his strategists and his communications people. So it's meta in that sense that you're reflecting on the process. Is there is a strain in our field of reflecting very deeply about the construction of the political persona, the strategy behind different advertising campaign. We train our students to do it. I train them to do it in this class.

[00:17:58] So there's this awareness of the construction of the image, but at the same time, we've had a trend certainly since Primary Colors in the early '90s, but since 2000 as well, of the films that take apart the image. Think of Alexander Pelosi's Journeys with George, which my students just love. George Bush the son is this relaxed, affable guy who was teasing the press and they hang out with them. You get why people like them. You really do.

[00:18:27] The notion that would you want to have a beer with this guy? Absolutely. The whole plane would want to have a beer with him. So you have media that purports to give us the actual person, the behind-the-scenes person. And both of these are coming in the tension. And what was fascinating about this campaign is that Hillary, I think, exemplified all the strategic expertise of the past 20 years. I mean, she had great advisors, she had her husband, she knew what she was doing. It was textbook perfect in that sense.

[00:18:59] But she is, and I was thinking today, too, if you wanted to develop a political resume, she had it in every way. Senator, Secretary of State, First Lady, whatever. If you deliberately prepared yourself to do this, she did it. But, she was up against a disruptor, and that's what he was, in a year of disruption. And here's a guy who just makes up his own rules, apparently. And I think one of the questions for us going forward is just how accidentally or intuitively disruptive was this? How much was it strategic?

[00:19:34] So for example, in the war room, there's a sequence of where Stephanopoulos and cargo go into the spin room after the third debate and they spin and Mary Madeleine Spin. So we talk with the first year students about what spinning was and what it accomplished, and then I played them a clip

from Trump where he went into the spin room. And you may remember, it was this cataclysmic moment, like, "The candidate is in the spin room, not his PR people."

[00:20:02] Not even Kellyanne Conway, but him. And of course, what happens? The press drops everything. It doesn't matter who else is in there, they go for him. So I asked the class, "If you were a reporter and the candidate comes in, why would you drop everything and cover him?" So we got into ideas of he's not the spin person, he's the candidate. So in that sense, it's more real. So he's working with that. He is also creating life news.

[00:20:30] And, he is continuing the debate, in a way, it's the offstage portion. They asked him flat out questions like, "Well, how exactly are you going to do this?" You know, the debate formalizes it and he has his formal answer, but in the spin room it has the same problems as everything else he said. No specifics. Somebody said, "How are you going to do all of this?" He pointed to his forehead and the reporter said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "It's intelligence. It's up here." That's not a policy.

[00:21:00] But that was a complete disruption of the usual mechanism of the press. But I do think the question is how calculated, in fact, that was. The dynamic of ending the construction of images in the most sophisticated way, but also media that purports to give us the authentic selves the, and then here comes a somebody was saying, "I'm just me. I say what I think, etc. etc." But you've got to wonder - he's a smart guy who knows television the way others really don't.

[00:21:32] So I think one of the stories in the next couple of years will be the thinking and the calculations behind some of these choices.

Christine Becker: It is so difficult to get our grounding. Just in the past week, he's been tweeting things and people are saying, "Oh, he's tweeting these ridiculous things, complaining about the press because he wanted to distract us from the global [bintrest] and so forth." And yet, especially a lot of this is so off-the-cuff, and this morning he was tweeting about how we should put people in jail who burn the flag, you know, I'm hard-pressed to find that there is actually a strategy there, because he seems like he's just

got this sort of thin-skinned way of going off-the-cuff, and I think the media then, that's so outside of what their usual practices are, they don't know what to do with him.

[00:22:16] And so you've got some just reporting it straight, some calling him out for lying. The other part of this that's very confusing going forward is this notion of trying to understand who they really are, the idea that we're all looking through different filters, too. So my dad sent me this email, a list of "facts" about Donald Trump, which was clearly - like it started with, "He was born on this date" and reported to be just this straight up, into ideology and tried to kind of praise him for his business and so forth.

[00:22:42] "Dad, I could give you a list of 50 facts that would have the exact opposite impression and to be a disastrous, potentially damaging force." And this is one of my great concerns forward. How do my dad and I come to some common ground where we're both consuming a media, the same facts, the same realities, and I'm not sure of a solution in that. But I can easily say, "Media literacy is the answer," but I don't know how we enact that across the board

Susan Ohmer: [00:23:08] Right. I mean, it's that we can help our students develop further, but are already out there. A student was in this afternoon and we were talking about that, that if your parents or your grandparents think that way, they're not in class and they may not believe what you say. But this is interesting that you bring this up, because last week, one of the big topics of conversation in the media was the notion of fake news and how people get these ideas from fake news.

[00:23:33] And one conclusion that was bandied about by various columnists is that media are partly to blame, because they don't call it out reporting is often, "Trump says X and Clinton says Y and nobody says Trump is flat out lying or that's completely wrong because they don't want to appear to be partisan." However, one of the things I found so astonishing this week is when Trump, yesterday, said that there was widespread voter fraud in three states, and when the New York Times and other outlets reported this the headline was, "Trump, without any evidence, says..." They would not have done that two weeks ago.

[00:24:09] They really wouldn't have. They would just report it. So to have that as the first sentence you hear us that maybe there's going to be more attention to calling it out. But certainly, encouraging our students to check the source, to look more carefully, but they are educated. They understand how to do this. So, you're right, the question is other people and, also, how you have a discussion with the people coming from such different frameworks.

[00:24:35] One thing I said to my classes right at the beginning is I genuinely don't understand some of these things. For example, why someone who had lost a job in a coal mine would think that the man who lives in Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue above Tiffany's - well, not above Tiffany's, but above jewelry stores, would understand the situation. I genuinely don't get that, but obviously people believe that. And the class was very helpful about offering their thoughts about why this might be.

[00:25:02] But it illustrates why it is important to be frank about what we don't understand and listen to what people say, because maybe in the past there have been at disagreements and we can see different sides. But this year, I think a lot of us are genuinely stunned. Be really don't get it so having the ability to talk to each other and listen is even more important, I think.

Christine Becker: [00:25:24] Which also, I think, is so exhausting the past few, because we're having to have conversation things were not used to and, you know, hopefully we can take some positives away from that. I guess speaking of that, and then going forward, two questions, then. One, what do you think these should be focused on going forward in a Trump presidency, and then secondly what kind of skills and knowledge should we be instilling in our students, specifically?

Susan Ohmer: [00:25:45] Well, one thing I thought about is I think we've done a very good job of educating our students to take images apart. Some of them have become cynical, some of them are proud of their skill, but they can do that. Is that all we need in this environment? I don't think so. And, I think more of their good old liberal arts education is what's needed to be able to understand sources, to make arguments intelligently, to take apart someone's assertions when they just don't make any sense.

[00:26:11] I mean actual critical thinking skills that focus on, dare I say, content as much as the structure of the medium in which it's expressed. We're going to need that. I don't think it's just a question of taking images apart. Another thing I think is there is this desire for authenticity, for going directly to the people, the believe that the media interferes. Trump supposedly loves Twitter because it's direct.

[00:26:40] Well, that was the same thing that Franklin Roosevelt felt about radio when he gave his fireside chats, going directly to people. So I think it would be great to help our students understand how authenticity works, how it can be a choice and a construct that doesn't look like one, but it can be one. And so how that can be a strategic decision, why it's beneficial to do an end run around major media outlets or you go live to present yourself, but how is that, in fact, being used to accomplish certain strategic goals.

[00:27:16] So I see those as two very important things to focus on. We'll equip them to deal with the environment that they're in going forward.

Christine Becker: Well, the last question is do you want to spoil for us what are the final words you're going to say to your students as they go out the door into the Trump presidency starting next month?

Susan Ohmer: [00:27:33] I'm still thinking about it, but one of the things, and it makes me laugh to think of it now, when I first started teaching this course, I was very worried about what would I do after the election because we have another couple of weeks of the semester and I thought, "Oh, what could I do?" But then I realized, well, first of all, you can do all sorts of things. But, we have the inauguration. So I thought, "I want students to be equipped, when they see the inauguration." For example, how much of it is required by law, which is very little, and how much of it is tradition and what people have done in the past that we are carrying on?

[00:28:04] So we're going to talk about that. The other thing we're doing this week is first ladies, which is my absolute favorite thing. If I were reincarnated, I would come back as an historian of first ladies. No kidding. It's so fabulous, because of the way that first ladies represent ideas about women's

roles in different time periods. We've had some stunners. Today, we talked about Mrs. Washington and Abigail Adams and Dolly Madison, who illustrate different aspects of being a first lady, but all of them anticipate or model characteristics that we have now in first ladies.

[00:28:37] They're very memorable in that way, but I would say, you know, I'm still thinking about what I want to say to them, but I want them to feel that they're better-equipped to understand and participate in their environment. And I want them to realize that the education that they have and the critical skills that they have will make it possible for them to be active and intelligent participants and not to hesitate. Don't hold back, don't be quiet.

[00:29:05] You know, we're hearing this notion now, "Give them a chance." Well, we have no choice. Or "Don't criticize just yet." I say you start talking about what you agree or disagree with from day one, because decisions are being made that are going to set the tone and the framework for the next four years, so you'd better believe you speak up. So I want to encourage them to do that. To not, to see our class as a model that can maybe help them going forward to do that.

[00:29:31] I want to feel they are so anxious and they are so fearful that they can deal with this and that they are equipped to deal with the and that they have a good base to move forward from. So however that comes out on the last day, that's what I hope to take away.

Christine Becker: Well, that sounds great. And I've got to say, this interview sounds very inspirational, because that's been one thing I've struggled with. You know, I feel like in many ways, Trump is a rebuke of everything I teach, and so there's that motivation of getting up in the morning, how do you keep teaching? Because you said, also, we can't teach everybody.

[00:30:02] But having command of a classroom and, you know, the gift to help students better navigate this world and through how all this world is mediated for us, media studies, I think media studies couldn't be more important. As hard as it is, sometimes, for me to get up in the morning to teach it, it's also a clarion call of important it is, so thank you for the inspiration you've offered to Aca Media listeners today.

Susan Ohmer: My pleasure. Thank you, Chris.

[Musical interlude]

Christine Becker: [00:30:51] All right, well we hope you found that to be a really invigorating interview. Susan is such an insightful person and such a great teacher, and so we really think her for giving a lot of insight at this difficult moment in this semester.

Michael Kackman: Yes, many thanks.

Christine Becker: Yes. Well, next up we want to give you a little bit more information about how the SCMS conference works. So we got a chance to talk to SCMS' conference coordinator, Leslie LeMond, to help fill in the membership about how all this stuff at the conference happens, because I think a lot of us kind of just show up and the conference is there and we love things and we hate things that we don't really know how those things come together. So we wanted to get some insight on that from Leslie LeMond.

[Musical interlude]

Christine Becker: [00:31:38] I would like to welcome to the Aca Media podcast Leslie LeMond.

Leslie LeMond: Hello.

Christine Becker: We all know Leslie. If you've been to an SCMS conference, you have seen Leslie LeMond in the registration room or running around trying to put out fires. And so we're really grateful to her for talking to Aca Media listeners give us some insight on the SCMS conference and how it's all put together, so your title is SCMS conference manager. What duties does that position entail and how have your duties changed as SCMS has changed over the years?



Leslie LeMond: [00:32:07] First, I wanted to say that the SCMS conference is absolutely a group effort every year, as I'm sure you know. So many people give tirelessly of their time to pull off the conference each year, and most of them are volunteers. That being the board, the program chair, the program committee, the host committee, the sig caucus event coordinators, I could just go on and on. I'm constantly amazed at how much of a well-oiled machine SCMS is, especially knowing how small our wonderful staff is and how well-run we are by our extremely dedicated and hard-working board.

[00:32:46] The next thing I kind of want to say is how much I care for this organization and how fiercely loyal I am to it. The first SCMS I attended was in 1996 in Dallas, and I was Justin Wyatt's RA at the time. I was in grad school, and my duties that semester were to assist Justin with the Dallas conference. As you can imagine, I totally dug that experience. It was Todd Haynes, Lodge Kerrigan, Jennifer Montgomery and getting it to meet all the scholars that I have been reading and studying for years and years. So what was there not to like?

Christine Becker: I have to just quickly interrupt. That was my very first SCMS.

Leslie LeMond: Was it really?

Christine Becker: Yes, it was.

Leslie LeMond: [00:33:31] Oh, we're together, then, Chris. That's great. I wish we had a picture of us both from back then. So that was 1996, and in 1999, I was working as a freelance production coordinator on film and television and live events in Dallas. And thankfully, luckily, Justin Wyatt and Bob Coker called and asked me to come work with SCMS again. And so I've done so ever since.

[00:34:02] I work year-round for SCMS. It's kind of always been difficult for me to explain what I do for the society because it's really more of a fusion of all sorts of things because my responsibilities have grown as the organization has. I'm someone whose job it is to handle details, but I'll try to be a little bit more broad when I'm speaking about my responsibilities so not as to bore everyone to tears.

[00:34:24] So some of the things I do are assist the board in selecting the conference site, doing leg work and research, negotiating the contract with the hotel, negotiating another contract with whatever audiovisual company that we decided to go with, negotiating a third contract with our event services company, which is the people that provide us with registration counters and signage and stuff like that. I coordinate and manage the conference in terms of tying the hotels, the vendors, the board, the home office, the program committee, the host committee, exhibitors, advertisers, etc. all kind of together.

[00:35:05] And handling the logistics as it pertains to panels and workshops and meetings and events and other such things and all that sort of thing. And then I helped try to market the conference, get out as much helpful information to our members about the upcoming conference to make it the most pleasurable experience for them as possible. And then what I do with my part of the program is I work with Del LeMond, who happens to be my brother, to take the information from the program committee, which comes to us having been copyedited by Mark Haynes.

[00:35:43] This is what I mean, this is such a group effort, so the program comes to us from the program committee. It's been copyedited by Mark Haynes, they work from Bruce Brazeau has been done, figuring out the maze of the conference panel workshop scheduling, information from exhibitors and other affiliated groups regarding recessions and events, along with advertising. We take all of that information and we kind of hunker down for an extremely intense three weeks of putting it all together.

[00:36:19] I always say that three weeks scares me, because if somebody gets sick or whatever, well, you just have to get it done anyway because we've got a printer deadline to meet. And then we send the physical program to the program chair, the president, the home office, Mark Haynes, people who have looked at it in its other forms to kind of look it over. It gets proofed many times. Then once the program is done and to the printer, that's when we start with the full-time logistics of room setups and tables and AV and catering and the awards ceremony and that kind of stuff.

[00:36:59] The good thing is that by the time that we have stared at that program for weeks and weeks and weeks, we are really familiar with it and able to work through it pretty well. If you're listening to this podcast and you've never listened to the Aca Media segment with Bruce Brasell that you all did

about the panel and workshop scheduling, I highly recommend that you Google that, because it will make your head spin, and we're just amazed every year what he does with that.

[00:37:29] And lastly, just in explaining my job, I just wanted to thank two people that I couldn't exist without on an annual basis, and that's the two people who helped me with the conference. Their names are Ginger Lee and the other one is my brother, Del LeMond. Ginger is my right hand at the conference. She makes sure everything is running smoothly each day, and Del helps me, along with the layout and design of our conference programs, he designs the graphics and the signage and the social media art and all that kind of stuff, the award ceremony slides, and he works with SCMS on a special projects throughout the year as well.

Christine Becker: Well, that's a lot. There's a lot of things that you're juggling in that job.

Leslie LeMond: [00:38:12] It's fun. And it's interesting and it's always different. So I enjoy it.

Christine Becker: Well, let me ask about one particular ball that you juggle, then, because I think that a lot of our listeners want to know about how we end up with particular venues for the SMS conference.

Leslie LeMond: [00:38:28] I will say that the process is not always the same. It depends, among other things, on kind of what type of economic market you're in. For the sake of our conversation, for instance, I'll talk about the market we're in now, which is a seller's market. Hotels are enjoying record levels of occupancy and demand, which means that rights are declining, and group space is increasingly hard for us to find. We've kind of had to hone our negotiating strategy to try to get the space and dates and rates and concessions and all that we have all become accustomed to.

[00:39:01] A great deal of research is done before board meetings, kind of reaching out to hotels, convention visitor bureaus, national sales representatives, all trying to figure out which cities might be welcoming to us at any particular time. As most people know, the board has always tried to stick with kind of going from region to region; you know, east, west, central, international, and kind of trying to keep that equal.

[00:39:33] But lately, because it is such a seller's market and our membership has made it clear that the most important thing about the conference, and a certain way of looking at it is the nightly rate that we were able to give people. We kind of had to go with a, "Well, where can we get the best deal?" So we haven't always been able to stick with the East/West/central/international, but we like to, when we can, and we definitely always try.

[00:40:02] I really never seen the hotel industry like this, and I've been doing this for a very long time, and everybody that I work with and that does a similar job as myself, they all say the same thing, but at the same time, you can get too crazy about it because the industry and the economy is so cyclical, and hotels are so skittish that they're looking into booking further ahead than normal because they're in this sellers' market, and they're trying to grab as much business as they can while they're in the driver's seat. It's understandable.

[00:40:34] Some people are forecasting that hotels will be like this for the rest of the decade. Some people are saying that it will start to taper off in 2017. I tend to think that based on our political climate in this country in particular, that there's no way for anybody to forecast what's going to happen. But I can tell you that supply is not keeping up with the demand in terms of hotels in a great deal of what we call tier one cities.

Leslie LeMond: [00:41:09] Tier one cities are typically the big convention cities in the country, you know? Chicago, Orlando, Las Vegas, New York, San Francisco. Most of the cities that we go to are considered tier one cities, but it also pertains to things like airports with ample nonstop access, hotel inventory, abundant dining, a certain amount of commendable sleeping rooms, leisure travel appeal, all that kind of stuff.

[00:41:40] And as the rates are going up in the tier one cities, tier two cities are kind of following suit, which are the smaller, like Birmingham Alabama, places like that, Pittsburgh. So we're just trying to go kind of - I hate to say it, but where the wind takes us, but it really is wherever we feel we can get our membership the best bang for their buck kind of thing.

[00:42:05] A few of the issues that hotels have had with us as an organization is our rooms to space ratio. Everyone that's ever been to an SCMS conference and knows that we take up an immense amount of meeting space. We almost killed the meeting space in any hotel that were. So they take issue with us about that.

[00:42:30] We need to be in a hotel that has about 800 guest rooms to get kind of meeting space that we need, and when we're looking at hotels that have that many guest rooms and we're only willing to contract for 350, 400, maybe 450, even on peak nights, the hotels are turning us down, as they can find larger groups to take almost all of their inventory and pay them more in food and beverage and that kind of thing.

[00:42:59] So that leads me to the next one. A lot of them take issue with they believe that we don't order enough food and beverage, that our room block is not high enough, that our dates are limited. We always have been a sticking around the March or almost March dates, and our rate parameters. You know, we go in being very transparent and saying we would never want our rate to be more than XYZ. You know, we want the lowest rate you can possibly give us.

[00:43:29] It would be nice if we could raise our contracted room nights. We're trying an experiment in Chicago and raising it as much as we feel is responsible while still protecting the organization. That's really the reason why everybody's always a saying, you know, if you can stay at the conference hotel, please do. One way to look at it is the room nights the kind of subsidize everything else we do, because that's how the hotels look at it. The more room nights we can block, the better.

[00:44:02] And I completely understand if there is someone listening to this that says that they have called the hotel and our room block has been sold out before, and that's because we have to protect the society and can only contract for as many rooms as we can wisely forecast for based on past history. So if more people stayed at the conference hotel, we could increase our room block. That being said, we do monitor our room block on almost a daily basis and we add as many rooms as if the hotel will allow us on the back and even after our contract has been sold out.

[00:44:39] If you ever have trouble getting a room at the hotel, I would ask that people please email [hotel@scmsconference.com](mailto:hotel@scmsconference.com) and we will work with you and to do all that we can to get you a room in the hotel.

Christine Becker: Well, after your first answer, my metaphor was juggling. This second answer seems like it's, you know, trying to throw a dart into a pretty thin bull's-eye. You've got a very particular range of possibilities you have to accomplish all that. Are there any additional behind-the-scenes aspects of planning the SCMS conferences that you wish more members knew about?

Leslie LeMond: [00:45:15] I kind of want to share what SCMS looks for in a site as well so that people understand that we really do look for all of the things that they care about. We look for location and accessibility, convenience, easy transport, hubs for competing airlines. If you are cities then you'd think have hotels with enough space to accommodate us. Probably most of us realize that.

[00:45:40] We strongly prefer hotels that protect the labor force and avoided jurisdictions where there are policies in place that our members are likely to find objectionable. We take into account how easily our international members would be able to get to a certain place. Is the hotel ADA certified? Is there enough meeting space? The flow and kind of the layout of the space, will we be able to find an AV company that meets our needs? Is the hotel aesthetically pleasing? Will people have a natural light? Can you walk to quick restaurants for lunch and dinner? What are their sustainability and green policies?

[00:46:19] What are their policies on the LGBT community? Their inclusiveness and diversity policies, just basically how much can we negotiate and say and what will our SCMS attendees' experience be? We try to make it as comfortable and inclusive for everyone that attends. In terms of what I would love for more of our members is to know about, I wish that everyone knew how mindful and deliberative the process is.

[00:46:53] How everything that the board does is done with a great deal of care and with thought about how it will affect our members and what's best for our members. In terms of conference planning,

nothing is willy-nilly. You know, the board and the staff carefully weigh all kinds of decisions about we're not only to hold the conference, but the size of the conference, the budget of the conference, the events of the conference, how to give people as many value-added benefits like complementary Wi-Fi in the guest room or free Wi-Fi in the meeting space.

[00:47:29] You know, in Montréal, we were able to get breakfast at the Fairmont. Anybody that stays at the hotel will get a \$15 food and beverage credit which you can use at the bar...

Christine Becker: Good to know.

Michael Kackman: ...posted to their hotel room. Yeah, to their hotel room every night, so just trying to give people as much as we possibly can. The fact that the conference is a very large puzzle with 1,000 little pieces that somehow has to go together with something for people to keep in mind.

[00:48:03] All of us tend to focus on the things that we care about or are interested in, but the conference has to be a place where everyone feels valued and heard and where people can choose to participate as little or as much as they wish, and I'm proud of that SCMS is an inclusive organization that values differences. That we've looked into going to all of the following cities; New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Austin, Washington DC, Baltimore, Portland, San Diego, Miami, Pittsburgh, Dallas, New Orleans, Nashville, Cuba, Puerto Rico.

[00:48:44] Basically, if you can think of it, we've looked into it. We also looked into international cities, and right now, that's just difficult, financially, for us as a society. Another thing on the survey, too, are people mentioned that they attended other conferences, and their nightly rates are better. And that's it typically when we hear about things like that, I'll respond and say, you know, when is that conference? Because it's generally in December or January and you just have to remember that our conference is in March, where a great deal of places consider that peak season.

[00:49:22] And even when it's not peak season for a particular city, like in Chicago it's not considered peak season, but we still have competition over spring break and things like that. And then, many times,

many people have said that they have a better rate at a bigger conference. It's a bigger conference, where that organization can give more room nights to the hotel, so they're just able to negotiate a cheaper rate.

[00:49:47] So those are really the things that I hope that people take away from this, that we really do, we really are working very, very hard to try to get the best deals for everyone and that the conference sites are really just not, you know, things seem very random sometimes and just drive. People think they are just drawn out of thin air because a particular person must want to go to a particular place, but that's not what's been happening.

Christine Becker: All right, then my third metaphor is you are a ninja. This sounds like ninja skills to be able to navigate and negotiate all of that.

Leslie LeMond: Thanks, that's very nice of you.

Christine Becker: Well, let me get you out with one last question, then. If you have any things we should know about going into Chicago in March 2017, any tips about the conference venue we should know about?

Leslie LeMond: [00:50:38] One thing that I think I should share that most people probably don't realize and we will be getting more information out soon is that a portion conference will take place in the car club, which is connected to the Fairmont Chicago, so we will have some panels and workshops and events in the Fairmont Chicago and some in the mid-America club, and they're connected by a headway, basically, by a walkway.

[00:51:09] But there will be a little bit more, you know, it'll be like if people can remember being at the Hilton Chicago where it's this massive building and you're walking from one end to the other, but we did this thing where we videotape it and we timed it and multiple people did it in different ways and we just thought when we compared it with the other hotels that were up against it, we felt like it was the best choice because it was giving us - all the rooms have an abundance of natural light. We feel like people



will feel comfortable and be able to walk around and there are lots of networking little places to sit, you know, sit and gather and we'll have nice lounge this year.

[00:51:55] We're really looking forward to it. We think it will be a very successful conference. The conference program, the draft will be put up soon online. 2017 is shaping up to be a wonderful SCMS conference, so we look forward to it.

Christine Becker: I hope we also have the wonderful circumstances we had last time of just having to run into the furry conference so I hope there's something as delightful this time.

Leslie LeMond: [00:52:23] Yes, I agree. I agree.

Christine Becker: I assume that was one of the things you couldn't possibly plan for with your ninja skills, that we would we with furies. But that ended up being, I think the talk of the conference. So even sometimes you can just log into good stuff.

Leslie LeMond: [00:52:36] Right, that was great, I have to say.

Christine Becker: Right. Well, thank you so much for this information. We really greatly appreciate it. We look forward to seeing you all in Chicago in March.

Leslie LeMond: Thank you, Chris.

[Musical interlude]

Michael Kackman: Well, it's great to hear from Les. She's been working on hosting SCMS conferences forever. She is the man.

Christine Becker: [00:53:01] Yeah. And that along scope of knowledge is really informative to the membership, who we just experienced all of it in a piecemeal way it is to hear an overall view of how it all comes together, that is really important and informative.

Michael Kackman: And for so many of us, SCMS is the big conference, and so it feels like, you know, it might feel like a small large conference compared to something like MLA or something, but of course when you're a conference organizer and negotiating with hotels, we are actually a really large, small conference, which upends some of those expectations about how space will be allocated and stuff. It's a challenge.

Christine Becker: [00:53:37] Yeah, and we're grateful to everyone who works so hard, because that conference is hugely important to people. I mean, it's critical in terms of things like hiring and promotion for participation in SCMS, so we're grateful for all the work that into that platform available to us.

Michael Kackman: Yeah, so many thanks to Leslie to all of the hard-working staff is, thank you.

Christine Becker: [00:54:01] And as long as we are on the thank yous, we'll finish the episode up here with our usual thank you, but it's the end of...

Michael Kackman: Cue the jingle bells.

Christine Becker: Yes, it's the end of the year and we're in that kind of reflective, looking back on the year mood.

Michael Kackman: Pass the eggnog.

Christine Becker: Yeah. Well, there you go. We should have started with that. Just give some extra thank yous to the people who helped make Aca Media happen across the years. So first of all, SCMS gives us a grant to help pay to keep this going, so thank you so much to SCMS for the great support you give us all year long.

Michael Kackman: And that support also comes in the form of back channel emails from some of you and some of the members of the board and the staff who are really generous with their suggestions and ideas and helpful. So we're very grateful for that.

Christine Becker: [00:54:47] Definitely. We also want to thank - I started to say our else, but that seems really insulting to describe the people working alongside us. We're all a Santa clauses. So Bill Kirkpatrick at Denison University and the Department of medications at Denison University, thank you so much for all of the help, insight and support and encouragement.

Michael Kackman: Yeah. Bill has been involved in this from the very beginning. I think he was on board even before I was, right? As a producer?

Christine Becker: Yeah. I remember him saying Michael would be a great idea, so those of you out there...

Michael Kackman: Rue the day.

Christine Becker: ...blame Bill.

Michael Kackman: blame Bill. Bill built, essentially, our website and the public face of Aca Media is engineered by Bill.

Christine Becker: Yep. We also, in just about every possible way, couldn't do this without Todd Thompson. I mentioned earlier that I screwed up the audio on Susan Ohmer's interview, and I screwed it up and way more ways than you guys could even imagine, but we have Todd Thompson and the incredible work he can do with even the smallest to the largest a mistake and fixing all of our errors and making us a sound like we have some measure of competence. I swear we do.

[00:55:56] But the way Todd polishes everything and then add in the music, it's just a really incredible work he does. We wouldn't be Aca Media without Todd Thompson's expertise.

Michael Kackman: It's true. Sometimes working with a pro makes a big difference.

Christine Becker: Right. And then I think did Joel and Stephanie come on board this your last year?

Michael Kackman: I think it was around this time last year, because we met up at SCMS and we'd already been working together for a few months.

Christine Becker: Yeah, so if we had a particularly good year, I think we can then thank especially Joel Neville Anderson, especially at University of Rochester, and Stephanie Brown at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, so thanks so much to them for stepping up to volunteer to help. And again, in all kinds of ways you listeners that don't have any idea, they're doing all kinds of stuff behind the scenes, so we're so grateful to the help that they've offered us.

Michael Kackman: That's neat.

Christine Becker: All right. And just a few final housekeeping notes. Thank you to, in this particular episode, Susan Ohmer for giving us a really great insight into teaching in this very difficult time.

Michael Kackman: We're grateful to Leslie LeMond, the SCMS conference coordinator for sharing some of her experience and insights.

Christine Becker: [00:57:02] And check out our website for links it to everything in this episode. That's [aca-media.org](http://aca-media.org), follow our Twitter feed, [aca\\_media](#) and leave a review on iTunes. You know, if you're doing your end-of-the-year reflections, things that you thought help you out in 2016, if Aca Media was one of those things...

Michael Kackman: Those of you who are teachers and now that the numbers matter, but the thing that everybody goes straight to other comments. So if you got some things to share, we're all ears.

Christine Becker: Fill out our evals.

Michael Kackman: Yeah, fill out those evals. We can't grade without them.

Christine Becker: Yes. All right, well, that wraps us up for 2016. You'll next year us in the year 2017.

Michael Kackman: Jingle, jingle, jingle.

Christine Becker: Yeah. Let's hope we all...

Michael Kackman: Maintain.