

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Diana Derycz-Kessler & Paul Kessler

Founders of The Los Angeles Film School



Story By Suzanne Takowsky
Photos by Michael Helms

As parents, it's only natural to want to offer the generations that follow us a fighting chance at a good life. An environment where they don't just survive, but thrive with opportunity to be happy, productive, and successful in their goals and dreams. But the job market today isn't what it was for the baby boomer generation. What worked for us isn't working for our kids, and relying on a framed diploma for a calling card doesn't pull the punch of hands-on experience. With the demand for jobs outnumbering actual jobs available in some professions, many college graduates end up with student loans to pay, but no pay check to pay them. It's not enough to be book-learned; employers today expect the people they hire to hit the ground running on day one. That's why hands-on schools where students get hands-on instruction in classrooms makes or breaks the chances of being hired. On-the-job-training is almost non-existent. If a student has graduated with a degree to do something, he/she better know how to do it the day they start a job. Then, each day the experience they accumulate continues to build superiority.

Also disheartening is many young people aren't pursuing their TRUE passion in life, but going for professions they've been led to believe provide a good living. But what if your son, daughter or grandchild's talent and secret passion is to be a director, computer animation artist or sound engineer, not a dentist or accountant? What would you advise them to pursue? Each person is unique with a special talent...a dream...and a burning passion to achieve it. As with my own children (they're adults now) but watching them yearn and strive for things I didn't understand, left me wondering—WHY? But our children not us and we are not them. And what we are good at, they might not be. And what they are passionate about, we might not understand. But, we need to support them in their efforts to pursue their OWN dreams and goals...not ours.

What's the answer in this high-bred world, filled with high-tech companies and high-follutin' employers who find it easy to fill people's jobs with computers, and only hire a handful of people who walk in the door? Well, to be one of the "handful" means you have to be the brightest and most talented; you have to love what you do, and be passionate about it. Translation: unless we want our youngins' living at home when they're 30, with college diplomas gathering moss in the closet as they scour Craigs List for jobs, we better start encouraging them to discover their passion in life, and then go get it. HOW?

1. Speak with them about their dreams and goals. If they could have a perfect job what would it be?

2. Not everyone does well in a standard college classroom environment; creative types are more hands-on and need action rather than just books. Look for a school that doesn't just offer a desk and a chair, but qualified teachers whose passion for what they do spills out into what they teach. The ability to encourage passion in others comes from the passion we feel within ourselves. Having passion for what we do is the glue that binds us to our goals, and keeps our dreams alive.

Combine two brilliant, independently driven, entrepreneurial jet-fueled personalities who are madly in love, and what do you get? The ongoing saga of an unbeatable couple determined to make this world a better place for generations to come.

Paul Kessler and his wife Diana Derycz-Kessler, founders of The Los Angeles Film School are in the business of building passion and stepping-stones for success. I've done many interviews over the years, but my time with Paul and Diana was very special as we discussed their childhoods, relationship and children (they have five); to the monumental undertaking and commitment they made to each other and the world, when they opened their award-winning film school in 1999. With all the shocking headlines about disgruntled, abusive and bullying teachers and students at schools—imagine how uplifting it was to hear Paul and Diana gush with pride over their staff, instructors and students. It's their passion for life, love, and wanting to construct—inside and out the best film school ever built—that HAS resulted in the best film school ever built.

"Many businesses are founded on the premise of repeating what has been done before, not something different," says Paul. "Our vision from the beginning was to do something that had never been done before. We recognize there are other teaching institutions in the same market place, and we respect what they do. But, we wanted The Los Angeles Film School to be different, groundbreaking, and it started at our launch party which Oliver Stone inaugurated. It was incredible because his presence created so much press. It set the standard for other entertainment greats to come and speak with our students; writers, directors, actors, producers, music greats on every level. Our students learn so much from them."

Entertainment Veteran Instructors Industry VIP Board Members Iconic Guest Lecturers

With a line up of regular guest speakers rolling in and out the likes of Samuel L. Jackson, Quentin Tarantino, Aaron Sorkin, Richard Kelly, Macy Gray, Jason Mewes, Kevin Smith and a leg-long list of other industry VIPs who visit and speak with the students about pursuing their passion in life, the school is rockin' with an entertainment vibe, and there are lots of smiling faces everywhere you look. The day I visited the school to meet Paul and Diana it was nothing I expected. Very unschool-like; contemporary décor, plenty of open space for students to roam, and room to sit and network at every turn. Nevertheless, tight security is in place as you enter the campus building. Student IDs are required and visitors must have scheduled appointments. The atmosphere although friendly, sends the message loud and clear that the school is a serious place with guidelines they expect to be followed. The Los Angeles Film School sits on Sunset Boulevard near Vine Street in the heart of Hollywood. Included in

the "campus" is a digital, high definition, Dolby Surround, THX-Certified 345-seat theater, additional 6-story building and the Ivar Theater. Approximately 230,000 square-feet of facilities, more than 20 labs and a 4,000 square-foot Hollywood Sound Stage—all within walking distance. In between buildings are great little places to grab food, and Metro bus stops are everywhere you look—perfect access no matter where students come from—day or night.

As I ventured through the hallways and looked in the classrooms (many have glass walls), I saw firsthand how different a HANDS-ON classroom is from a standard classroom with only desks and students holding books trying to envision what they read. Paul, Diana, and their partners spared no expense making certain students get what they need in school to help them get a job in the real world. Millions of dollars have outfitted classroom after classroom in the school. Recording and soundboard equipment, computers, animation equipment, digital and film cameras...you name it. Students aren't just learning from books, they are working on actual industry-standard equipment and software they will use on a job site. Although its first program was in Film, the school expanded, and currently offers degrees in Film, Recording Arts Computer Animation, Game Production and Entertainment Business. They also offer accelerated educational programs based on 12 to 14 months or 18 months for extended education. Each month new classes and new students start; each month students graduate. The Los Angeles Film School students walk away from graduation day with a clear path to their careers, or job offers within their reach.

Audio • Computer Animation Entertainment Business Film • Game Production

THE VISION: Build an Entertainment Media School in the Heart of the Entertainment Capital of the World—Hollywood.

ST: I find it unthinkable that in the heart of the movie industry Hollywood/LA there was no film school before you and Paul founded The Los Angeles Film School.

DIANA: Correct. The concept of the school was brought to Paul as an investment opportunity. And being the ultimate entrepreneur he is...he asked me to join him in the venture. We put a tremendous amount of time and effort into formulating the plans, finding the space and investing in the infrastructure of the school. The most important element to us was how we would design the curriculum. We wanted to offer students from every culture, a first-hand experience in the film and media industries. We wanted

the environment to be supportive at every level, and classrooms filled hope and possibility. We invested in the best equipment, and from the very beginning brought on a high caliber staff, and people established in the entertainment business as instructors to teach our students.

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PAUL: When the concept was brought to me in 1998, I listened, and was very intrigued, but I wanted to see it on paper so it was easier to study before I got involved in such a huge undertaking. The people we brought on board from the get-go to lead the school had a vision that the school would be a hands-on, learning institution. The majority of our faculty are the fabric of filmmaking, and they have tremendous credentials. In the beginning we said to them... if you could design the perfect film school; if you could make it the perfect learning environment what would you do? And, that is the philosophy that launched the school. Our goal was to create a perfect learning environment in the middle of the entertainment capital of the world—Hollywood. It was the vision of very talented people from the film industry that brought The Los Angeles Film School to life. They designed a film school—a media school that they themselves would want to attend.

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Since opening the school in 1999, enrollment has grown from 170 to a student body of 2,500 and currently offers both Associates and Bachelor's degrees. The Los Angeles Film School is fully accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC) listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting institution. The school is approved to train veterans by the California State Approving Agency for Veterans Education (CSAAVE) and works under contract with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs with federal authority, part of the California State Government. The school is a member of the Servicemembers Opportunity College Consortium, approved for Air

Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine, Navy and U.S. government tuition assistance through the DODMOU. An Advisor to the college is former Air Force Chief of Staff Four Star General Merrill McPeak. For any student, any age, wanting a career in the entertainment industry, The Los Angeles Film School is the first step to making their dreams come true.

Hands-On Instruction Industry Connections Entertainment Mecca

Combining technical knowledge and hands-on training, industry experts deliver programs that give students a direct path to their career choices. Because the school has relationships with entertainment veterans that span every facet of the industry, graduates can find work on their own, many also work with other students on outside projects, and through the numerous networking events the school hosts each year, some of the industry's most powerful and influential heavy weights pluck students from the school for job placement and internships.

ST: How wonderful that well-known industry leaders teach, are guest speakers and support your events.

PAUL: It goes back to our goal to make the school a world-class teaching institution and a community entertainment hub; a place where people across the industry could use our theater, sound stages, and facility for film premiers. We worked in collaboration with many people to view the school as a premier venue, and entertainment cultural mecca. By the end of 2012, we will have had 200 events on our campus. We have premiers on a weekly basis and invite screen directors, actors, animators, cinematographers, sound engineers to join us, and they do. It's important for our students to have first-hand interaction with the film industry.

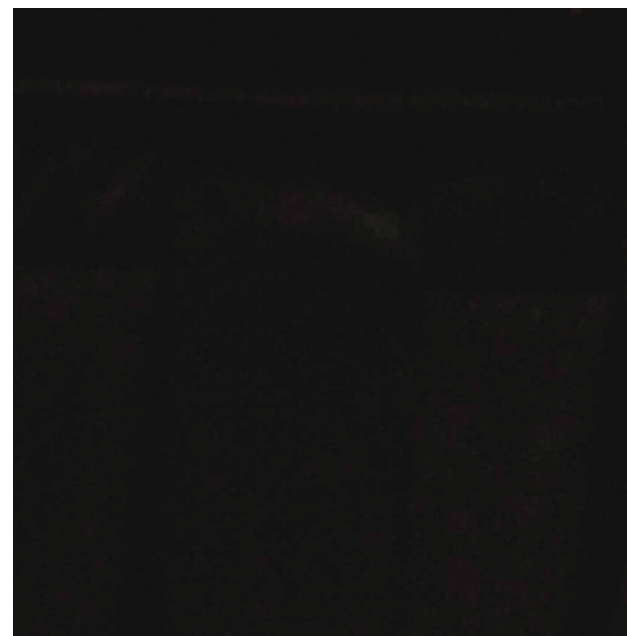
DIANA: We have a vibrant Career Development office. This distinguishes The Los Angeles Film School from other schools that offer film studies. Our Career Development department has relationships with employers world wide and the focus is not only training in their respective crafts; students learn how to get a job, write a resume, and how to network around town. And, I don't mean simply networking with employers they believe can give them a job. We emphasize networking with other students. We can't count the graduates who went off to accomplish great things in various fields and brought classmates to help with a movie or game development. When students are ready to graduate, we ask they get involved with our Career Development department. We want to make certain—as best we can—that they take the first step getting into the industry. Some students find jobs with companies that do independent work, other jobs are industry freelance positions. Our Career Development department helps students identify what they like, and feel most comfortable doing and we guide them in that direction. A vast majority of students leave our school and go directly on to successful careers in the entertainment industry.

A Match Made In Heaven

Today, Paul and Diana's life together comes with all the material advantages of two highly successful, hard working and multi-career oriented individuals. A smart and talented attorney (her) and a savvy Wall Street Investment and Finance entrepreneur (him). The obvious affection they have for each other hardly gives away the fact they've been together for 14-years (married for 12). Not only do they share the duties of overseeing a thriving media arts college, but have numerous other large scale business ventures. And if that isn't enough, they are parents to five children who when younger all lived with them. Paul had four children from a prior marriage (his oldest is in college) and they have a son together, age seven. It's clear from being around the couple, they not only love each other as husband and wife, but respect each other as confidants and business partners. Paul said, "Early on we made a commitment our relationship comes first, and we focus on that every day.



Richard Kelly & iconic director & writer Quentin Tarantino speak to students about making movies.



Guest Speaker legendary actor Samuel L. Jackson

If our relationship is in sync it's because we each give 110 percent." It's just possible their determination to be a successful and loving team at home and work comes from the economic hardship and family turmoil each faced and overcame during childhood as their families were torn apart, the result of divorce. Both revealed the perseverance and motivation they felt throughout their teens as they struggled to break free from poverty and lack of a structured family life.

Diana was born in Los Angeles. Her mother is Mexican and her father was Ukrainian. Money was scarce on blue-collar wages and her parents ultimately divorced. Diana's mother moved them to Mexico where they lived with Diana's grandmother in a small town outside of Mexico City, but when she was 13, they moved back to L.A. Initially it wasn't easy for Diana who had to relearn English. But after, along with her straight A report cards came dreams of college and a professional career. Unfortunately, when the time came there was no money for college, but smart thinking paid off as Diana applied for and got low-income student loans, while also working as a fashion model to pay what the loans didn't. Her determination to "make it" in this world came in the form of a UCLA Bachelors degree, Masters from Stanford, Law degree from Harvard Law School, and a prestigious position in New York working for an international law firm that incredibly moved her to Mexico City to oversee international oil, gas and financial businesses of clients. Next stop...Paul Kessler.

ST: What's the moment that changed your life?

DIANA: When I knew I had to support myself and pay for college. I was lucky because our household income was so low, I qualified for loans and programs otherwise I wouldn't have gotten. I met Paul after I started my own law practice and when I introduced a client to him for a project. The project didn't work, but Paul and I started dating and got married. Afterwards, he asked if I would work with him. Paul made me more entrepreneurial because he is the ultimate entrepreneur; exciting, hard working and loves finance. We co-own and manage our family businesses together that include technology, bio-technology, real estate, oil, gas and our newest venture is Start Engine, the largest technology incubator in Los Angeles. We make a perfect team. When Paul brought the idea of the film school to me it was a natural fit as I already had a big interest in film and television. While working in New York, I took extension classes at NYU to study directing, and now I have an opportunity to fulfill one of my passions to help up and coming filmmakers and we have executive produced some independent films. Through the school, I am able to speak at inner city schools to children all ages on setting goals and finding their passion in life. Watching their faces light up with hope and promise is very rewarding. We started the film school with a flagship idea of teaching kids how to be filmmakers in a very hands-on way, and from there we expanded. Our vision is to become the preeminent institution on the West coast... in the U.S. and in the world for media arts. We want everyone who has dreams of working in the film and media industry to be able to have the chance to learn their craft, and go out into the world and fulfill their passion in life.



"I come from the business side. Diana is amazing in her perspective and legal and organizational skills; she puts things together," says Paul. "I'm more of a visionary, and at times I don't see the pitfalls she does. We balance each other, but don't step on each other's turf. We talk constantly and are very involved in all of our ventures." Paul is well into his third decade as a high stakes finance investor who put his name on the map from Wall Street to countries around the world. His business revolves around multi-million dollar companies he starts, then sells, or buys... possibly revamps, and sells to other companies who take them public. Not bad for a guy who is the first to tell you he "didn't finish college"...of course not! He was busy making money, something he became very good at in his 20s while working in the health care industry—before Wall Street caught his eye.

Born in Newport Beach and raised in L.A., Paul's early upbringing was financially secure until his parents divorced. Living with his mother became chaotic, he says as she went through their money, throwing them into a financial free fall that forced them to move numerous times to different locations. Unlike Diana he didn't have a traditional education mostly due to an unstable family life that left no time to enjoy or excel in school. In high school things got worse and by age 15, Paul was on his own; many times he didn't have a place to sleep, and credits the generosity of extended family members and friends for helping him. During high school a strong work ethic kicked in..."I had many paths in life to choose from, but I very much wanted to succeed and have a good financial life. I wanted to make something of myself and I wanted to become successful. Wherever I was...whatever I was doing... if there was any opportunity, even if the door was open just a little bit to do something...to learn something new...I jumped on it."

ST: Is fear of failure ever a factor in what you do?

PAUL: No. To move forward in life you have to be ready for what comes. I've made mistakes and had successes. I was always fascinated with Wall Street and finance. I was a voracious reader and I studied and educated myself on what it took to finance and grow companies, then take them public—an area in which I had no experience except from what I read. I went to conferences, met people and studied capital formation, and I made money. I became a pioneer in Private Investment and Public Equity, and over 20 years have become one of the most active financiers in the United States in that market.

I so enjoyed my interview with Paul and Diana learning how the dynamics of their give and take relationship not only built a business empire, but uncomplicated what could have been a hectic personal life trying to make time for each other, care for five kids and keep a non-stop workload. It's about the trust they have for one to take the lead over here, why the other takes the lead over there. In 2011, Paul and Activision cofounder Howard Marks, a powerhouse in gaming, founded StartEngine, an LA-based accelerator that helps startup technology companies get off the ground with a strategy for success that attracts high level investment opportunities in 90 days. StartEngine offers startups everything from financial advise and administrative support to legal services and perks like office space and regular sit-downs with industry leaders. StartEngine is on a mission to deliver 500 LA startups in five years. It's a terrific opportunity for new businesses check it out: www.startengine.com And for information about The Los Angeles Film School please visit: www.lafilmschool.edu and www.recordingcareer.com or call 877-952-3456. This school is truly changing the lives of people, all ages, and from all walks of life. ●

photography: www.MichaelHelms.com