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**HELLO SUNSHINE PRESIDENT OF FILM AND
TELEVISION LAUREN NEUSTADTER TALKS ABOUT
HER JOURNEY TO REESE WITHERSPOON'S
COMPANY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF
CELEBRATING WOMEN'S NARRATIVES.**

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In January 2021, Lauren Neustadter was promoted to the coveted position of president, film and TV of Hello Sunshine, Reese Witherspoon's media company that spotlights diverse narratives centering on women.

Neustadter joined Hello Sunshine in 2017 as head of film and television and worked on critically acclaimed series such as *The Morning Show* on Apple TV+ and *Little Fires Everywhere*. She was also the supervising producer on the second season of HBO's *Big Little Lies*. She and Witherspoon quickly developed a working relationship that clicks—so much so that she helped Hello Sunshine nab 18 Emmy nominations in 2020.

However, before she began producing phenomenal stories centered on women, Neustadter wasn't necessarily looking to be a producer.

"Since I was a child, I thought I wanted to act," Neustadter says on

the set of her latest project, *Your Place or Mine*, Hello Sunshine's upcoming rom-com directed by *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* alum Aline Brosh McKenna and starring Witherspoon and Ashton Kutcher.

"I loved being a part of a production," she adds. "I loved being in plays. I loved being on movie sets. It was the feeling of camaraderie and the idea of bringing a story to life."

She gravitated to storytelling, and always thought that she wanted to be in front of the camera. But when she came to Los Angeles for college and started auditioning, she realized acting wasn't necessarily the direction she wanted to go.

From there, she worked in publicity and enjoyed being part of a production office—but this was in the unscripted space. "I realized that what I missed was that sense of telling a great story."

A friend of Neustadter insisted she interview to become an assistant to a producer, which she did. "This extraordinary producer basically said

that if I didn't have agency experience, I would need to be the assistant that did the travel and the gifts. And while certainly I would've been excited about that opportunity, I chose to go get a job at CAA. I became an agency assistant. And from there I happened to land on the motion picture lit desk."

That's where Neustadter's storytelling career really began to take shape. She started reading scripts, and her curiosity in how movies were made started growing. She would eventually find a formative mentor in Keri Putnam, who at the time was executive vice president at HBO Films.

When she left HBO, Putnam went on to Miramax and brought Neustadter with her. "She made me an executive and I became, through that time, very well versed in the executive side of things," says Neustadter.

She laughs, "To be honest, I didn't know how to be a producer and also a mom—and that was always the thing that made

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me inclined to stay on the executive side.”

When Neustadter went to then-20th Century Fox to work on the feature movie side, she met Witherspoon and served as an executive on the action rom-com *This Means War*. This would prove to be another benchmark in her career.

“I made that movie with her, but in a larger sense, what I was noticing was, the more character-driven stories were being told with greater frequency on a smaller screen, so I moved over to television,” she says. “I went over to Fox network, and I had the privilege of working on *The Mindy Project*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *24*, and the *Lethal Weapon* series. It was a range of shows where I got to really be in the thick of it with these incredible creatives that I loved.”

When Neustadter was about to sign another deal—and seven and a half months pregnant with her second child—she received a call.

OUT OF THE BLUE

“I got a call out of the blue saying, ‘Have you heard about Reese’s new company, Hello Sunshine? And do you want to come run film and television? Reese remembers you.’ I was completely floored and flattered. I said, ‘Does Reese know that I’m seven and a half months pregnant?’ And the answer was, ‘Yes, she does.’ And I said, ‘Well, does she care?’”

They responded, “No, she wants to meet with you. She wants to talk to you.”

And when Reese Witherspoon wants to talk, you accept.

Neustadter says that it was incredibly flattering to have Witherspoon remember her. She recalls that the conversations that followed between the two of them were very inspiring. Witherspoon wanted to build a company filled with incredible women—and men, too. But women would be at the center. What excited Neustadter the most was that she would be a partner and very involved in helping build Hello Sunshine.

“I feel very proud of what we’ve been able to do,” says Neustadter. “Each of the projects, in its own way, is another one of our children, and we really care about

them. It’s been gratifying to get to build all of this together with her. Our team is unbelievable, and to get to build all of this together from the ground up has been extraordinary.”

When Neustadter became president of film and TV at Hello Sunshine, she felt privileged to have the opportunity to continue to build on what Witherspoon and Bruna Papandrea started with *Gone Girl*, *Wild* and *Big Little Lies*.

As the company grew, Neustadter and the team began to develop a sixth sense as to what to prioritize for Hello Sunshine. The team began to understand what stories felt right and exemplified the mission of celebrating stories for, about, and made by women.

“Now, nearly five years in, we can shortcut that conversation, and say, ‘You know what? This one feels like it’s a bit too dark’ or ‘This one feels like it’s a bit too sad,’ or whatever.”

INCLUSIVITY OF STORYTELLING

The relationship between Neustadter and Witherspoon has flourished, and since launching, Hello Sunshine has become a touchstone of representation and inclusivity of storytelling similar to companies like Charles D. King’s MACRO and Ava DuVernay’s ARRAY. Neustadter says that she welcomes the industry’s dramatic shift toward representation of people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, women, and other marginalized voices.

“The thing I think is extraordinary and unique about Hello Sunshine is that the ways women treat each other have changed in ways that I think are important—and that feels encouraging for the next generation,” Neustadter points out.

She adds, “I think when we started Hello Sunshine, it was really singular. One of the things that is exciting is that it isn’t entirely singular anymore. People are making a concerted effort to create a representative room, whether it’s a representative room of executives, or representative writers room or representative crew.”

For Neustadter, it’s not just about checking boxes or tokenism. It’s about making a shift in the industry that’s



NEW MEMBERS

A SPOTLIGHT ON SOME OF THE NEWEST MEMBERS OF THE PRODUCERS GUILD AND WHAT MAKES THEM TICK



Sacha Ben Harroche

Cinema has always been in Harroche's future, but as he consumed movies, he didn't exactly know where in the industry he fit in. To figure that out, he took an honest look at himself and what he wanted to do with his skill set. Since he was a teenager, Harroche was an entrepreneur, and with that in mind, becoming a producer was the obvious choice.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received about producing?

I never had the chance to have a real mentor in the industry, but I would say that the piece of advice that was forced on myself was to put your ego on the side when you are producing. You don't work for you nor anyone else—you work for a vision.

very organic and heartfelt. "I think it impacts the stories that we're telling," says Neustadter in regard to inclusivity. "It impacts the storytellers, the teams that are assembled and casting. Truly, I feel like there is a magnificent awareness and a genuine desire for inclusive storytelling across the industry now."

Hello Sunshine definitely delivers when it comes to inclusive storylines that reflect our current social landscape, from the #MeToo movement parallels in *The Morning Show* to the racial and class tensions in the suburban saga of *Little Fires Everywhere* based on the novel by Celeste Ng.

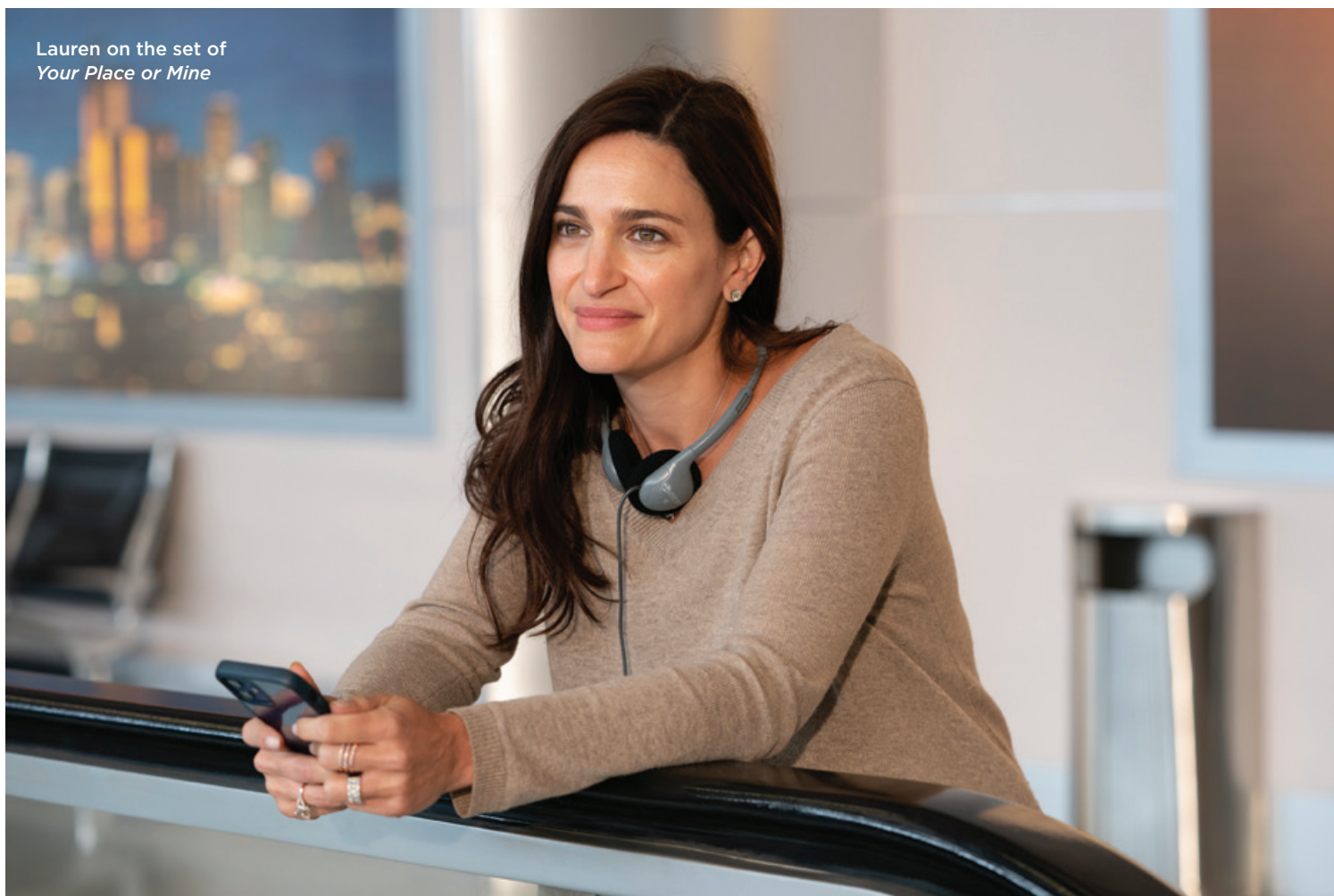
Despite the sunny sound of the company's name, Neustadter states that they aren't afraid to dive deep into the heart of things. Even though things do get dark in shows like *Little Fires Everywhere*, Neustadter says that they don't want to leave their audiences depressed or bereft; they want to leave them with hope. For instance, the main characters of Elena (Witherspoon) and Mia (Kerry Washington) go through so much during the course of the series, but they can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"We aim to make content that brings people into conversation," she says. "Everybody's going to have their own point of view and their own opinion, but the goal is never to have people opposing each other and arguing about something. Rather, when you watch *Big Little Lies*, hopefully you're having a conversation about all of these different things that are under the surface and the issues that are being addressed on that show."

A BIGGER CANVAS

As Neustadter thrived with Hello Sunshine, people began to take notice—including the private-equity giant Blackstone Group. In August 2021, Hello Sunshine was sold to Blackstone as part of a new venture run by former Walt Disney Co. executives Kevin Mayer and Tom Staggs. Witherspoon and CEO Sarah Harden will join the board of the unnamed company and will continue to operate Hello Sunshine. This poses the questions: What does the acquisition mean for Hello Sunshine?

"Not one thing has changed," states Neustadter. "I think they acquired us because they love what we're doing and they want us to keep doing it. It allows us to dream even bigger, to paint on a bigger canvas. Kevin, Tom, and everybody at Blackstone have been amazing to us, and just



incredibly encouraging.”

That big canvas is painted with an abundance of projects including the aforementioned *Your Place or Mine*

as well as a limited series adaption of Tembi Locke’s best-selling memoir *From Scratch* starring Zoe Saldana; an Amazon series based on the Taylor

Jenkins Reid ’70s-set romance *Daisy Jones & the Six*; the Apple series *The Last Thing He Told Me* starring Jennifer Garner; and the reality competition series *My Kind of Country*, which is also at Apple. In addition, Hello Sunshine has Daisy Edgar-Jones starring in a feature adaptation of Delia Owens’ *Where the Crawdads Sing*; *Something From Tiffany’s* starring Zoey Deutch; and Apple TV+ series *Surface* starring Gugu Mbatha-Raw. Needless to say, Hello Sunshine is not short on content.

“Romance is an area where we’re leaning in, and I want to continue to lean in,” says Neustadter. “But I also think about other arenas where we have the opportunity to continue to grow into. I often think, ‘How can we be making

“Truly, I feel like there is a magnificent awareness and a genuine desire for inclusive storytelling across the industry now.”

Lauren Neustadter and team attend a *Little Fires Everywhere* press brunch. Back row: Celeste Ng, Neustadter, Pilar Savone and Liz Tigelaar. Front row: Gavin Lewis, Jade Pettyjohn, Lexi Underwood, Megan Stott and Jordan Elsass



great shows that moms can be watching with their kids?’ I watch a lot of family content with my kids, and a lot of times a lot of the stories are centered on little boys. It’s getting better, but there’s real opportunity to tell stories that young girls and their moms can watch and experience together.”

She adds that she wants Hello Sunshine to continue to work with great collaborators and to stretch their wings in genres like comedy. There are opportunities to continue to move in the lanes that Hello Sunshine drives in right now while also traversing new ground.

“I just hope that we are able to continue to tell stories that challenge and inspire us. I hope we get to tell even more of them. I think we’re really lucky that our team continues to grow, so that the scope of what we’re able to do can continue to grow in tandem.” ■

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Kaley Cuoco

Big Bang Theory alum Kaley Cuoco never wanted to produce unless she found the perfect project to make her own. This is when *The Flight Attendant* entered her life. The acclaimed HBO Max series inspired her to finally produce—and it worked out in her favor. *The Flight Attendant* earned her an Emmy nomination as both a producer and lead actress in a comedy series.

What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever received about producing?

Sarah Schechter once told me there are no dumb questions and to ask about anything, always, no matter what.