





IN THE SWEET *spot*

“IT’S ABOUT PASSION,” SAYS
PRODUCER DEBRA MARTIN CHASE,
WHOSE DRIVE AND INSTINCTS
HAVE LED HER FROM HARVARD
LAW TO MASSIVE SUCCESS IN FILM,
TV AND THEATER.

WRITTEN BY LISA Y. GARIBAY
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About to graduate Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude from Mount Holyoke College with a degree in political science, young Debra Martin Chase had two worlds of possibility before her. In one hand was an application for Harvard Law School; in the other, an application for the USC Master of Fine Arts program. The hardworking student had grown up guided by her father, a film and TV buff, to cultivate an affinity for onscreen storytelling and an appreciation for its capacity to bring about change.

But Chase was also grounded in reality. She knew no one in the film and TV business, much less anyone there who looked like her. The law school application felt safest.

"I thought, 'With this one, at least I know that when push comes to shove, I can put a roof over my head,'" Chase recalls. So that was that.

But it was far from the end of the story. After receiving her J.D. from Harvard (magna cum laude, again), a stint practicing law with major firms and Fortune 500 companies, and a now-or-never career pivot, the woman who would go on to lead Martin Chase Productions not only found firm footing in the film and TV business, but she also built a solid foundation for generations of producers who followed.

Chase's tenacity and ingenuity—as evidenced by the success she's racked up since her first leadership role steering Denzel Washington's Mundy Lane Entertainment in 1992—should have been enough to ensure success in the industry. But on a wildly uneven playing field, having a law degree meant she might just be able to dispel bias and receive the respect she deserved.

"I'd walk into industry meetings and just knew they thought I was the assistant," says Chase. "But because I went to law school and practiced law, I could say, 'Listen, I have been in boardrooms. I know what I'm capable of.'"

UNSToPPABLE

What Chase proved capable of is astonishing. Her pragmatism and passion helped her become one of the most successful producers over the last three decades. Her work has earned Academy, Emmy, Golden Globe, SAG, BET and NAACP Image Award nominations, a Peabody Award, a Critics Choice Award and three Tony Awards. At press time, the Chase-produced Broadway play *Purpose* was in contention for six 2025 Tony Awards and had just been awarded a Pulitzer for drama, while the musical *Death Becomes Her* received 10 nominations.

A beacon of possibility, Chase became the first Black female producer to secure an overall deal at a major studio when she signed with Disney in 2001. She was the first Black woman to produce a film grossing more than \$100 million with *Courage Under Fire* while at Mundy

Lane. Films Chase has produced have grossed over a half billion dollars at the box office, including beloved franchises *The Princess Diaries* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, which launched the careers of Anne Hathaway and Blake Lively, respectively. The second of Chase's *Cheetah Girls* teen music trilogy was the most-watched movie debut in Disney Channel history.

The 2019 Chase-produced biopic *Harriet* employed more than a dozen women and people of color in leadership positions both above and below the line. The film garnered two Academy Award nominations for Cynthia Erivo—who was already a Tony winner—for Best Actress and Best Song. The 2023 documentary *Being Mary Tyler Moore* was nominated for an Emmy and a PGA award and won the Critics Choice Award for Best Archival Documentary.

Chase ran Whitney Houston's

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company BrownHouse Productions from 1995 to 2000. There, Chase honed her TV chops producing ABC's Emmy-winning TV musical *Cinderella*, a ratings success costarring Houston and young vocal powerhouse Brandy, who became the first Black actress to play Cinderella on-screen.

Chase's 2003 Lifetime series *Missing* was the most-watched series premiere in the network's history, while her TBS documentary *Hank Aaron: Chasing the Dream* received both Academy and Emmy nominations and won a Peabody Award. Further proof of Chase's business acumen is the partnership she secured with Mattel's American Girl Company to develop and produce content around its products and merchandise, resulting in five TV movies that aired on NBC and the Disney Channel.

Martin Chase Productions signed an overall deal with Universal Television in 2017. The company went on to produce the five-season hit CBS show *The Equalizer*, starring Queen Latifah—who first worked with Chase on the 2010 film *Just Wright*—in her first leading role in a television drama.

Flipping the lead character's gender was a gamble, a twist on the original '80s series and 2010s trilogy of films led by Edward Woodward and Denzel Washington, respectively—as was the casting of a Black actress in the lead role. But Chase's decision paid off. The series cultivated an impassioned fan base that rallied behind the show's timely themes and Latifah's compelling portrayal of a hero standing up against the most corrupt to help the most vulnerable.

PAYING IT FORWARD

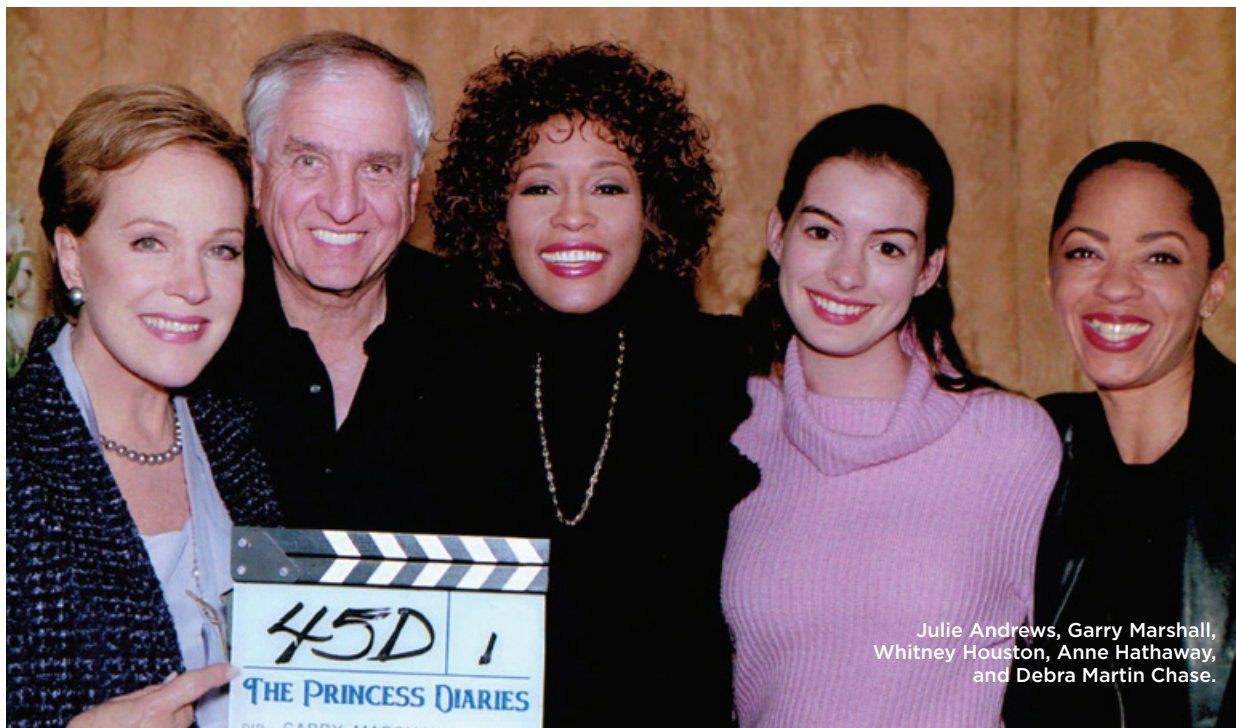
There is perhaps no greater mark of one's success than the achievements of those they have mentored. Yet another up-and-comer who benefited from being taken under Chase's wing is now an undisputed ruler of the TV realm: Shonda Rhimes.

"She got me my first job as an

WHAT CHASE
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A PEABODY AWARD, A
CRITICS CHOICE AWARD
AND THREE TONYS.



America Ferrara, Amber Tamblyn, Debra Martin Chase, Blake Lively, Sanaa Hamri, and Alexis Bledel on the set of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2*.



Julie Andrews, Garry Marshall,
Whitney Houston, Anne Hathaway,
and Debra Martin Chase.

NINA JACOBSON: “AN UNSTOPPABLE-FORCE QUALITY.”

Nina Jacobson was copresident of the Walt Disney Motion Picture Group in 2000 when Debra Martin Chase pitched an adaptation of the YA novel *The Princess Diaries* for the screen. Disney greenlit the film with Chase and Whitney Houston as producers, pairing legendary actress Julie Andrews with 18-year-old Anne Hathaway and launching her career as a star. The box office hit led Disney to offer an overall deal to Chase, who became the first Black female producer to have a deal at a major studio.

The Princess Diaries was Debra’s and my first chance to make something from start to finish together. We had a shared dream of what that movie could be, and it remains one of the movies I’m most proud of.

The cross-generational component of *The Princess Diaries*—seeing a young woman taking the mantle of leadership and being built up and transformed by an older woman—meant a lot to both of us. That it turned out to mean a lot to other people, particularly young women, was everything that we had hoped for.

I was so impressed with Debra as a producer and as a partner that we (Disney) wanted to have a deal with her. It means a lot the first time you get a deal without a big piece of talent as the anchor, where it’s just about your talent as a producer. We were lucky to be able to invest in her.

Debra brings conviction and joy to the work. She always had a strong sense of certainty that she’s going to get her movie made, is going to get over whatever the next obstacle is—an unstoppable-force quality, but always gracious.

I ask myself every day, “What am I doing to get my movie made?” I learned that from watching Debra succeed as a producer.

I have even greater respect for Debra now, for how long she’s managed to do this, and all the people that she’s brought along with her. When you look back over her career, you really appreciate just how big the rock is that she pushed up that hill.

assistant. She got me my second job as a research director on the Oscar-nominated documentary *Hank Aaron*. She brought me in to write *The Princess Diaries 2*, my first big studio film,”

Rhimes recounted to *Essence* in 2020.

“She was also willing to dive into difficult conversations,” Rhimes added. “When I was screwing up or acting like a hot mess, Debra flat-out told me that I

was ruining my opportunities.”

Chase proclaims without hesitation that her dedication to mentorship is due to the support given to her when she was starting out.

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Pearlena Igbokwe (second from left) and Debra Martin Chase (second from right) with *Equalizer* costars Liza Lapira, Queen Latifah and Chris Noth.

PEARLENA IGBOKWE:

“AN INCREDIBLE ROLE MODEL FOR ME.”

Pearlena Igbokwe, currently chairman of Universal Studio Group, was president of Universal Television when Martin Chase Productions signed an overall deal there in 2017. After a lightbulb moment during a general meeting with Chase and Queen Latifah, Igbokwe greenlit a remake of the drama series *The Equalizer*. With Queen Latifah in the lead role and Chase as EP, the show was an immediate hit from its debut in a coveted post-Super Bowl slot in 2021, running for five successful seasons.

I went to an event early on in my career, and when I saw Debra, I was inspired by how she was paving the way in the entertainment industry. She has been such an incredible role model for me from that day forward.

When I came to Universal Television, Debra was one of the first producers I made a deal with. She is an accomplished producer with a list of credits that includes some of my favorite movies and TV projects. I believed her experience and talent relationships could be instrumental in UTV’s success. And after five seasons of *The Equalizer*, I was proven correct.

People often tell you not to meet your heroes. But working in partnership with her continues to inspire me on a daily basis. Debra continues to exceed all expectations. She is a producer who “gets it.” She knows what the job is, and she rolls up her sleeves and gets it done. On time, on budget and with an unparalleled vision.



At the premiere of *Purpose*. Front: Kara Young; Second row: LaChanze, Robyn Coles, LaTanya Richardson Jackson, Debra Martin Chase, Jon Michael Hill, Alana Arenas; Third row: Corey Hawkins, Glenn Davis, Wendell Pierce.

MARC PLATT: “FORMIDABLE, INTELLIGENT AND SUCH GOOD TASTE.”

Producer Marc Platt met Debra Martin Chase in the early '90s when he was president of TriStar Pictures and she was running Denzel Washington's company, Mundy Lane. The two produced the 2022 Broadway musical A Strange Loop, which won Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Book, and 2022's Topdog/Underdog, which won the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play. Their most recent stage productions, Purpose and

Death Becomes Her, received a combined 16 nominations for the 2025 Tony Awards.

I was impressed with Debra from the first day I met her—her keen intelligence, good taste and creativity. She has a strong point of view and she's a good listener at the same time.

I'm always looking to bring new voices to Broadway—not only writers and actors, but also producers. Given Debra's stature in the industry and her accomplishments as a film and TV producer, I thought, “This is someone who has so much to offer to Broadway.”

She jumped at the opportunity and has proven herself to be as formidable, intelligent, and in possession of

such good taste in theater as she is in film and television.

Because Debra and I have known each other for so long and have such mutual respect, there's a lot of professional and creative trust. Not that we agree on everything, but we're coming from the same place, both as creative and business individuals, and with the way we treat our colleagues and artists.

It's easy when things go well. It's far more challenging when challenges present themselves. You want to be linked with those you share trust, experience and values with. Debra is someone I welcome on any production I pursue.



Debra Martin Chase
and producing partner
Whitney Houston.

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The groundbreaking roles, the first-of-their-kind stories, the generation-defining talents, the vast audiences inspired and entertained—these may never have come to be without the generosity of Chase's first mentor in the business: legendary studio head Frank Price.

As a lawyer, Chase had proven she could triumph in a tough arena. But her success was motivated by a fear of failure, she admits, more than joy and soulfulness. She was troubled by the prospect of waking up decades later chiding herself for not following her heart. So she decided to take the leap—she left law.

She was accepted into the executive development program at Price-led



Cinderella costars Brandy
and Whitney Houston with
EP Neil Meron, Debra Martin
Chase and EP Craig Zadan.

Columbia Pictures, which brought in professionals from various disciplines to learn the business. By chance, Chase was seated next to Price at a program luncheon, and the two clicked.

Chase became Price's executive assistant, shadowing him for a year with intimate access to how he conducted business. Every evening, they'd sit in Price's office, where he would answer Chase's questions about why a script was purchased or passed on, why or why not a project was greenlit, where he thought the business was going and why.

Price departed Columbia in 1983. But before he did, he made sure to put Chase on the creative staff at the studio. From that launching pad, Chase took off.

But it wasn't smooth sailing from that point on. It's a given that every producer will face challenges that appear insurmountable. Some, like Chase, will hit a wall after years of hammering away when they question whether they're doing the right thing with their lives. (More on that in the Q&A that follows.) For Chase, passion was the fuel that saw her through.

"It's a business about passion. If you don't want it that badly, it's probably not going to happen. It's an up-and-down business, and you just got to stay the course. My dream growing up was to be sitting here now talking to you, and to have a library of things that I'm proud of to have done."

Among her many points of pride is one that brings Chase to tears when she talks about it. In 2024, Mount Holyoke College received a large gift to endow two named faculty chairs. One of these is the Debra Martin Chase '77 Chair in Film Media Theater. That young, soon-to-be-graduate conflicted about which path to follow likely never imagined such a distinction was in her future.

And after all this, as much as anything, Chase is proud to be able to state one fact: "I'm still here and I'm still relevant."



Just Wright cast and crew: Queen Latifah, Derek Dudley, Phylicia Rashad, Common, Debra Martin Chase, and Shakim Compere.

Q&A

HAS YOUR APPROACH TO PRODUCING CHANGED SINCE YOU STARTED OUT?

DEBRA MARTIN CHASE: For me it's always about finding that sweet spot—being cognizant of what people are buying, what's working or not working for audiences, while having a vision for how to push the envelope. How do I do something that has not been done before, or not been done before in the right way, that will land?

When I sold *Princess Diaries* to Disney, the general wisdom was you could not make a movie for girls and have it do well. You could make a movie for boys, and girls would go to that. Nina Jacobson and Todd Garner had taken over as coheads of Disney. The studio had made *The Parent Trap* with Lindsay Lohan for a good price, and it had done well. Based on that, they said, "Maybe *Princess Diaries* could work."

Our movie and *Legally Blonde* came out and did really well. Suddenly, it was like, "Oh my god, there's this whole audience that hasn't been served, this whole genre we've neglected."

When I started out, movies were up top, and TV was the stepchild. If you were a movie producer, director or actor, you didn't go anywhere near television. But I learned to find the material, then figure out what the right medium was. Not everything is a movie.

I came to the business with a mission. Growing up, I was a huge film and television buff, thanks to my dad. But I didn't see a lot of people who looked like me on screen. So it was important for me to find material that I thought was marketable and could get made, but I also wanted to break down stereotypes and prejudices.

I had no idea when I came to Hollywood that I would be the first Black woman to produce a mainstream movie at a major studio. I was like, "Other people are producing movies. That's what I want to do." Then I got here and realized, oh my god, I've got to climb the mountain with weights to get there.

When I ran Denzel Washington's company, I was talking with an executive about the script for *Philadelphia*. Denzel's role was not defined from a race standpoint, but the assumption was always that he was white. I asked the executive, "Why couldn't he be Black?" He was like, "Ohhhh ... maybe so!" People just didn't think like that.

When I hired a young Shonda Rhimes, who had been my intern, to write *Princess Diaries 2*, the first thing we did was to say, "We are putting a Black princess in this movie." So we wrote it that way. We had to consciously do that so that nobody would question it or try and take her out.

People had no concept that they were being discriminatory. Not that things are perfect now, but they are so much better. The consciousness of the town is different.

A BIG PUSH NOW IS TO CULTIVATE A PROJECT BY PARTNERING WITH SOMEONE ON SOCIAL MEDIA WHO HAS A BUILT-IN AUDIENCE. DO YOU AGREE WITH THAT APPROACH?

DEBRA MARTIN CHASE: Certainly, in terms of the marketing. Social media is hugely important, and aligning yourself with people who have their own base of influence is important. A lot of times, we don't service the bulk of the country. There's a whole country out there that we need to be servicing. So I think it's really important for producers to be out in the world.

LA is not the world. LA is an industry town. And LA is one of the most

“WHEN I HIRED A YOUNG SHONDA RHIMES, WHO HAD BEEN MY INTERN, TO WRITE *PRINCESS DIARIES 2*, THE FIRST THING WE DID WAS TO SAY, ‘WE ARE PUTTING A BLACK PRINCESS IN THIS MOVIE.’”

segregated cities residentially. In LA, you get a very distorted view on the world if you only stay in the city.

I think it's about reaching as many people as possible. That's how we define success in our business. It's constantly walking that line between needing to be pragmatic and commercial, because then I get to do more stuff and people believe in me. On the other hand, I have messages that are important to me to impart that feed my soul.

HOW DOES YOUR TV, FILM AND THEATER BUSINESS ECOSYSTEM WORK?

DEBRA MARTIN CHASE: The core of my business is television. I had the amazing experience of having five seasons of *The Equalizer*. It's lovely because you create a family and you're on this journey

together. The show was well received, and we were able to both entertain and have messages.

We started shooting in November 2020, pre-COVID vaccine, which was rough. But it was also fantastic, because we were giving jobs to over 200 people. And as a practical matter, to have five seasons of income from a show is fantastic.

The movie business has become so difficult that you just can't count on it. *Harriet* took six years to get done. I'm hopeful that we will be doing *Princess Diaries 3* next year. But it's been a 10-year journey for Annie (Hathaway) and I to get here.

When I added TV to my portfolio, it was because it moved faster. Traditionally, network TV is on a cycle, a season. The movie stuff just creeps forward. I needed to have some churn



Debra Martin Chase and Cynthia Erivo on the set of *Harriet*.

emotionally as much as financially.

In today's world, film, television and theater are all blending. Titles and actors and writers are in all three mediums. Theater felt like a natural extension of what I was doing, particularly since I've done a lot of musicals for screen. A good friend of mine, Stephen Sherrill, a long-time chairman of the board of Second Stage Theater, he invited me onto the board about 10 years ago. It was a good way for me to learn the business.

David Stone is a big supporter of Second Stage Theater. When we honored him one year, Marc Platt found out that I was on the board. We were old friends from when he ran TriStar, and he asked me, "Are you interested in producing theater?" I said, "Yes, it's one of the reasons I'm doing this." He and David have been amazing mentors.

YOU RECEIVED THE

PRODUCERS MARK FOR *BEING MARY TYLER MOORE*. WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF HAVING DONE ON THAT FILM TO EARN THE MARK?

DEBRA MARTIN CHASE: I remember jumping up and down when I got the Mark. It was a big deal for me. (Producer) Lena (Waithe) had the initial interaction with Dr. Robert Levine, who is Mary's widower, and I was the next call. We put the thing together from there. We found the filmmaker, pitched it to a few buyers, and then worked with Endeavor Content to get it made.

Mary was so important to me growing up. It means so much to know that we have solidified her rightful place in Hollywood history for a new generation. One of my assistants, who was in her 20s, had heard Mary's name, but didn't really know who she was. Now, she's

like, "Oh my god, Mary Tyler Moore!"

We producers play a big role in the business. We have to fight for the project, for the respect, for the money. We used to get development fees; now we don't. Every time you turn around, they're chipping away at what we do, the compensation and the title and this and that.

How many times have we been in a situation where the studio is negotiating a deal with a star and they throw in a producer credit because it'll help them in the dealmaking, but then they don't know how to produce? No one else's credit just gets handed out. You don't get a writer's or director's credit just because.

We as producers need to do a better job of educating the public and the industry about what we do. People think you just write a check. That's why I think the PGA Mark has been great.

WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS THAT PEOPLE COUNT ON YOU TO BRING TO A PROJECT? WHAT EXCITES YOU MOST ABOUT BEING A PRODUCER?

DEBRA MARTIN CHASE: I'm a really good storyteller. I'm good about rolling up my sleeves and working with my writers. I love casting and have a pretty good track record.

It's also about leadership. I believe that the producer and director set the tone for any production by saying that people need to respect each other, and we're not going to tolerate bad behavior. You're going to reward people, make it fun, and create a sense of family. People are working hard. They want to feel appreciated and protected.

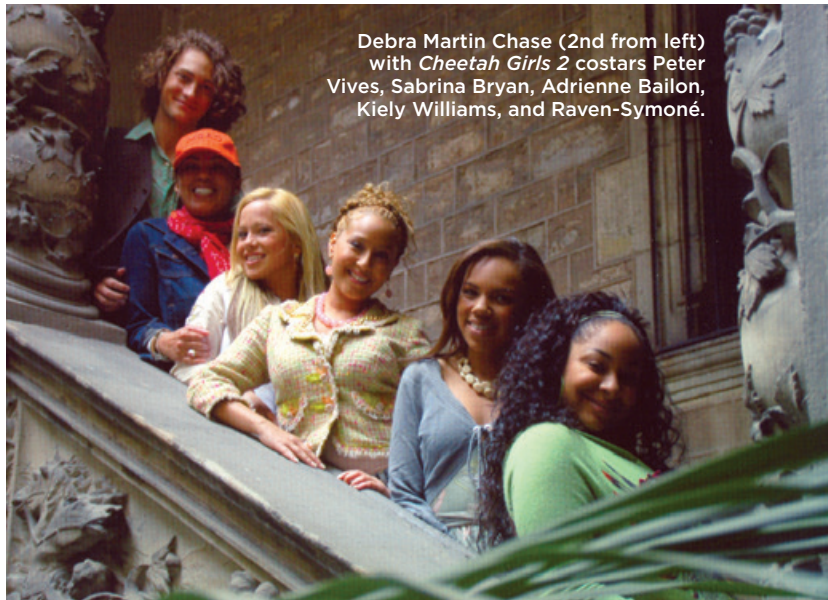
When we started *The Equalizer* in November 2020 in the middle of the pandemic, I was on set all day every day not only to steer the ship, but also because people were out there risking their lives.

I'm a very hands-on, old-fashioned producer. I work with the writers, sell it, find a director, and then we cast together. I'm on set. I want to know that I've done everything possible to make something as great as I can.

I don't easily commit. It needs to mean something to me to take that journey because you're going to have to fight. You're going to take two steps forward to take three steps back half the time. So I have to have a reason to take it on, to see it through.

In terms of marketing and publicity, I go out there and do my part to get the word out. Producers are an essential part of the process. We got stories to tell and advice to give. I do a lot of interviews and panels. I have a base that exists beyond Hollywood. For *Harriet*, I spoke at the NAACP national convention and debuted the teaser there.

We're all trying to figure out ways to cut through the noise in the marketplace. To the extent that people know who I am and that I have a brand,



Debra Martin Chase (2nd from left) with *Cheetah Girls 2* costars Peter Vives, Sabrina Bryan, Adrienne Bailon, Kiely Williams, and Raven-Symoné.

that can only be helpful in the selling of a project.

MANY PEOPLE IN THE INDUSTRY ARE STRUGGLING TO NOT ONLY PERSEVERE PROFESSIONALLY, BUT SIMPLY TO MAKE A LIVING, WHICH COULD MEAN LEAVING THE INDUSTRY. DO YOU HAVE ADVICE FOR PRODUCERS WHO ARE CONSIDERING A CAREER CHANGE?

DEBRA MARTIN CHASE: About 12 years ago, I was at one of those points. Nothing was coming together. I had a big movie fall apart at the last minute. I thought maybe the universe was trying to tell me that I should be thinking about doing something else. Because I am a lawyer and I did practice, I explored that. I looked into film finance.

I'd had the good fortune of being based at Disney for 20 years. All of a sudden, I realized there was nobody left there who was personally invested in me and my career. People were very respectful, but they didn't really know me. So I took a year to just breathe.

I'd reached a point where I had

changed, Disney had changed, the business had changed, the world had changed. So I needed to figure out how to reboot—how to remotivate myself and find new inspiration.

I had been friends with civil rights leader Vernon Jordan for many years. His stepdaughter has been one of my best friends since college. Toward the end of my walkabout year, I poured my heart out to him about not knowing if I should continue in the business.

He said something that was like a slap in the face: "You are too old to start over. You have great experience. You have great relationships. You have a great track record. People respect you. You need to figure this out." It was the thing that I needed to hear the most, and it came at the right time. I realized I still had something more to say.

It came full circle with *Harriet*. We had our premiere at the African American Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and Vernon's daughter had a dinner party where I told the story of what Vernon had said to me. After I was done, he said to me, "I told you that back then because I knew you would end up here now." ■