





EVERY THING IS

Possible

**YOLANDA COCHRAN'S RARE
BLEND OF FISCAL SMARTS,
CREATIVE VISION AND
GET-IT-DONE ENERGY HAS
ENABLED HER TO PRODUCE
AN ASTONISHING RANGE OF
PROJECTS, WHILE WINNING
ADMIRERS FROM ALL WALKS OF
THE INDUSTRY.**

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In the chill of deep, dark space, almost 2 billion miles from Earth, is Jupiter, the largest planet in our solar system and one of the brightest spots in the night sky. Close to a hundred different moons circle it. Among them hovers an icy satellite named Europa that demands our attention—for it is on this moon that we have detected the presence of liquid water.

And where there's liquid water, there might also be life.

Yolanda Cochran has been passionate about this moon of possibility since 1989. That's when the NASA probe *Galileo* gathered evidence that Europa harbored an ocean beneath its frozen surface that's bigger than all of Earth's oceans combined.

Cochran and her husband, J.D.—both self-proclaimed sci-fi nerds—cowrote a feature screenplay, titled after the moon, about the what-ifs of Europa. Cochran has been actively working to get the film made for years. It is, in fact, Cochran's number one bucket list project. If someone presented her with the opportunity to get *Europa* made, but only under the condition that she quit the business altogether once it was done, Cochran would say yes to the ultimatum in a heartbeat.

Luckily for those of us on Earth, Cochran's passion extends beyond this personal project. Her combination of pragmatism and vision is firmly grounded by a bachelor's degree in accounting from USC, the school where she inadvertently fell in love with filmmaking, not to mention her husband. Her expertise, honed by hands-on work in almost every single area of production, has brought dozens of features and TV series to life over her decades-long career on both the independent and studio sides.

As a studio production partner, Cochran has overseen projects including *The Bold Type*, *Siren*, *Motherland: Fort Salem*, a reboot of *iCarly*, and the resurgence of *Nick News*. She helped launch original series including Netflix's

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—PRENTICE PENNY

That Girl Lay Lay, *NFL Slimetime* and *Good Trouble*.

On the feature side, Cochran produced the Hughes brothers' *The Book of Eli*; musical dramedy *Joyful Noise* starring Chloe Bailey, Queen Latifah, Keke Palmer and Dolly Parton; *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2*, *Beautiful Creatures* with writer-director Richard LaGravenese; and the Oscar-winning *The Blind Side*, among many, many others.

Cochran currently is head of production at Imagine Entertainment

and Jax Media, where her slate includes acclaimed TV projects like Netflix's *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman*, Fox's *Animal Control*, and *Roy Wood Jr.: Lonely Flowers* for Hulu.

It's an impressive track record, for sure. And one that belies a background that was light years away from Hollywood.

JOURNEY TO THE STARS

Cochran didn't grow up dreaming of moviemaking. Raised in Houston, Texas, where the oil and gas industry abounds, she planned on becoming a chemical engineer within that sector. Accordingly, she attended a magnet high school, where she thrived and thoroughly enjoyed four years' worth of chemistry classes.

During her senior year she took an internship with Shell Oil, but became discouraged by the day-to-day reality. "I thought, this is so boring. I can't do this," she recalls.

When she began reexamining her options for the future, Cochran was inspired to read in a USC brochure about their highly ranked accounting program. It sparked an idea for a new career path—one that wasn't so far afield for the teen who used to pretend to be a "business lady" when she was a kid.

So ever the pragmatist, Cochran decided to apply her aptitude for numbers into pursuing an accounting degree. The deal was sealed when she visited USC and fell in love with it and the city of Los Angeles.

At USC, interaction with the university's world-renowned school of cinematic arts is inescapable; small shoots by student filmmakers are always taking place on campus. Cochran was intrigued, but felt that work in that field was too glamorous and untouchable. She loved going to the movies, but the industry was so removed from her life in Texas that it never occurred to her that it was a business.

Cochran made friends with students who had come to USC expressly to



PHOTO COURTESY OF MEKO WINBUSH; OPPOSITE: PHOTO BY CURTIS BECHDHOLT

pursue film. They would pull anyone they could into their orbit to help with their projects. Inevitably, Cochran became one of those helping hands.

“Most people were relaxed and chill in our film school group of friends we call The Clique. What immediately struck me about Yolanda was that even at 19 years old, she did not play games. She was about her business,” says Prentice Penny, executive producer and showrunner of *Insecure*. “I was immediately like, ‘Oh, if I’m making a movie with her, I better be about my business.’”

There was no safer way for The Clique to build a foundation for success than to be allowed to fail without the stakes being very high. Not to mention the opportunity it gave all of them, Cochran included, to serve in so many different roles on set.

“We had no money, but Yolanda was always wanting to know what I wanted,

and she would exhaust every possibility to make that happen,” Penny recalls. “She had a unique ability to know what you were trying to do and then find ways to make that work. She cares. Hard. And not just about making a movie, but about the people she’s aligned with.”

Still, pursuing a career in film didn’t seem advisable to the no-nonsense Cochran. Worried about getting a job after graduation, she went through with the accounting degree.

THE RIGHT STUFF

But Cochran didn’t give up film when she took on her first accounting job as an auditor with KPMG. She happily gave nights and weekends to the community of filmmaking peers she had bonded with at USC.

Eventually, Cochran couldn’t resist the gravitational pull of the entertainment industry. She left corporate accounting to give film a shot as a freelance

production accountant. The first feature she worked on in this capacity was John McTiernan’s 1999 feature *The 13th Warrior*, followed by stints on the accounting teams for *Nutty Professor II* and *Blue Streak*, among others.

In 2005, with support from their friends from The Clique, Cochran and her husband cowrote and shot a low-budget feature called *Paved With Good Intentions*, giving her more of the grit, ingenuity and compassion to successfully work with indie filmmakers in the future. It also further convinced Cochran that she had made the right move.

“I really loved and was so adept at physical production and that part of the producing end of things,” Cochran says. “The skill set is in my DNA.”

“Yolanda’s approach to producing is specifically unique because of her background in accounting,” Penny says. “Most production finance people don’t understand the creative and most

Opposite page: On the mix stage for *Gray Matter*: Mix tech David Semon, editor Byron Wong, re-recording mixer Caleb Hollenback, director Meko Winbush, supervising sound editor Jeffrey Pitts and Yolanda Cochran.

This page: “The Clique” from USC. Top row: Kymberli Winter, Terence Paul Winter, Angela Northington, James Lesure, Edu Black, James Mathis. Middle row: Mark Haslett, Taneka Johnson, Talicia Raggs, JD Cochran, Yolanda Cochran, Nichelle Protho. Bottom row: Christine Haslett, Dayna Lynne North, J. August Richards, Prentice Penny, Jevon Phillips.

creative don't think about the finances. Because she has both of those as fields of study she can lean on, it gives her a leg up in bridging both sides of the process.”

Cochran agrees that accounting provides her an invaluable perspective. “You get exposure to every aspect of the filmmaking, and because every department is doing something that has a cost associated with it, it has to filter through and come to the accounting department,” she explains.

“A lot of filmmakers don't care what things cost. I feel good about my track record because I've been able to do creative projects with high production value and not go over budget.” But, she adds, this doesn't mean saying no to every request. “The role is actually to say, ‘Yes, you can have it. Let me figure out how to let you have it with the resources we have.’”

It also doesn't mean making regrettable decisions in an attempt to come in under budget. “If you made a bunch of creative compromises or cut scenes or days because you thought you didn't have enough money, then at the end there's half a million dollars of savings, nobody's happy about that. Right on budget is where you want to be.”

Producer Christine Sacani first met Cochran in 2005 when Sacani was hired to produce *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* for Warner Bros. and Alcon. At the time, Cochran was the financial



controller at Alcon, which she joined in 2002. “But she was so much more than a controller,” Sacani recalls. “She was a creative problem-solver with a pronounced love for the process.”

When the two partnered again to produce the *Sisterhood* sequel in 2007, Cochran had risen to senior vice president of production for Alcon, and was one of the best production executives Sacani had—or has since—worked with. “As a former controller, the numbers part was a given. But her equal gift for the creative is what moves her above the rest,” Sacani says.

Broderick Johnson, CEO and

cofounder of Alcon Entertainment, agrees with that assessment of Cochran's broad skill set, which flourished throughout her 12 years with the company, during which her two daughters were born.

“One of Yolanda's most valuable traits at Alcon was not only being extremely thorough and professional in her core job overseeing the physical production of our films, but also how she was able to successfully interface with talent, local production professionals and her Alcon teammates in a way that made everyone feel supported and unified in the goal of making great movies.”

When Cochran moved into TV as an executive at FreeForm, she had the opportunity to work with Sacani again on two series: *The Fosters* and *Good Trouble*. Sacani welcomed Cochran's calm, confident approach as a breath of fresh air.

"Television has a different rhythm than film, and Yolanda was quick to understand that maintaining an open perspective is critical," Sacani says. "Yolanda made this a priority. Always willing to think outside the box, she is a person who not only listens but truly hears you, and can filter, adjust and move forward with decisions that are best for everyone."

Joanna Johnson, executive producer and showrunner of both series, echoes that assessment. "Yolanda is very sharp, fair and committed to the creative product. She was particularly supportive of me and the stories we were telling on *Good Trouble*. She has a unique perspective, a wealth of knowledge, and is committed to great storytelling with important impact."

The credits and respect garnered by Cochran's combination of creative vision and pragmatic accountability caught the eye of Imagine Entertainment at a critical point of expansion.

Imagine Entertainment president Justin Wilkes first met Cochran during the company's search for a head of production—a role that would also oversee Imagine's production services arm, Jax Media. "We hadn't worked together previously, but her reputation very much preceded her," he says. "I was already a fan of her work and the range she'd demonstrated across projects."

Cochran was able to offer a winning combination of having worked in-house for studios and freelance as an independent, in both physical production and accounting. She was brought on board to fill the position in 2024. In addition to producing Jax's film and TV projects, she is the face of Jax Media on the production services sales front, and offers production

support and consultation to Imagine's scripted divisions.

Cochran joined the Imagine family as the industry struggled to recover from COVID and the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. Shrinking budgets and fewer calls for content were squeezing out business opportunities, and the company knew it had to bring someone on board who had relationships in the industry and the business sense to be able to generate new business while also sustaining projects it already had in the works. Retention was prized over expansion, but the latter wouldn't hurt. Cochran has delivered on both fronts.

"At its core, producing is about problem-solving, and given the headwinds our industry continues to face, Yolanda's expertise, temperament, and leadership have been a true stabilizing force," Wilkes says. "Production services is a demanding business even in optimal conditions, and what consistently stands out is how she and the entire Jax team rise to meet those challenges across every series. She brings a level of rigor and composure that elevates not just Jax, but the broader Imagine ecosystem."

He adds, "Working alongside Yolanda has been incredibly rewarding on both fronts: helping steer the business while also engaging in the creative and logistical nuances of specific projects—most recently, the latest remote segment for *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman* on Netflix."

While it is accurate to categorize Jax as a production services company, under Cochran's direction it also provides true creative leadership and collaboration for any partner, studio or otherwise.

"When you look at the body of work she's overseen at Jax—from *Emily in Paris* to *Bait* to *My Next Guest*—it reflects an exceptional range of formats, budgets and international locations. What's remarkable is her ability to consistently deliver what we think of as 'premium at a price point.'" Wilkes says. "That

balance is incredibly difficult to achieve, and she does it without compromising creative ambition. And that's just her work here. Her track record prior to Jax is equally impressive."

A MISSION OF INTEGRITY

When it comes to defining Cochran as a producer, one word sums up how she impresses those she has worked with: integrity.

"Yolanda is one of the realest, most honest and decent people I know," Penny says. "There's not a false bone in her body. If she says she can do it, I know she will do whatever it takes to try. That is a difficult trait to come by, and that has always stuck with me. When I'm producing or showrunning, I definitely try to always keep that energy top of mind."

"Great producers are often described as Swiss Army knives," Wilkes says. "They can adapt, solve and execute under any circumstances. What sets Yolanda apart is not just that versatility, but the depth of her experience. She's worked across film, television and documentary, with firsthand experience both in the field and within the studio system. That breadth gives her a unique perspective and command. Just as importantly, she brings an extraordinary level of grace under pressure. When you combine that with her track record, it's clear she's someone emerging producers can look to—not just for what she's accomplished, but for how she's accomplished it."

In service of her commitment to the profession of producing, Cochran has served multiple terms as treasurer on the PGA's board of directors. She has also served as the Guild's national cochair of the Women's Impact Network committee, and as a member of the Anti-Harassment Task Force, One Guild Steering Committee, and the Production Safety Best Practices Task Force.

"I first met Yolanda when she ran as an independent candidate for the PGA board. It was a gutsy move, and



Top left: Yolanda Cochran with producers Broderick Johnson and Alison Greenspan during the filming of *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2* in New York City.

Above: Yolanda Cochran, director Sanaa Hamri and executive producer Christine Sacani during the filming of *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2* in Santorini, Greece.

Left: Yolanda Cochran with producers Broderick Johnson (far left) and Andrew Kosove (second from right) on a scouting trip in the Alps for *Point Break*.



I was thrilled she won a seat,” says Donna Gigliotti, producer of *Hidden Figures*, *Silver Linings Playbook* and *80 for Brady*. “Yolanda is one of the kindest, smartest people I know. She’s very perceptive about issues facing our industry, and she’s really good at looking around the corner to see what’s coming next. When she speaks, you can trust that she has done her homework.”

What motivates Cochran to power through that homework is the joy she gets from helping others.

“What I love most about my job as a producer is coming to love the creative vision of the filmmaker, whether it’s the writer in TV or director in film, then making it my mission to do everything humanly possible to get them everything they want to bring that to a reality on screen,” Cochran says. “Part of that is also standing in a place where those individuals only need to focus on what is most important for them to do their best job.”

For Cochran, this involves not only keeping an eye on the big picture, but also appreciating every contributor on an individual level. When starting a project, she studies the crew list and call sheet, and then makes a plan to

directly engage crew members to learn more about them.

“Each one of those departments and the artisans in those departments are so important. The notion of above the line or below the line should only be a budget segregation scenario, not how we regard and interact with each other day to day,” Cochran says. “Understanding the integral contribution of every person on your shooting crew should be something that is front of mind at all times, not a platitude.”

Along these lines, she believes it’s a mistake to keep a line producer solely focused on logistics, schedules and budgets versus seeing them as full creative partners. “Some of the most creative results on projects come out of those individuals finding a way to give a filmmaker something that was never



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—CHRISTINE SACANI



Yolanda Cochran and first assistant director Shad Melvin on the set of *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman*.
Opposite: Cochran with *My Next Guest* producer John Nemeth.

planned, yet within the exact same creative and monetary resources that have been allotted.”

HORIZONS OF OPPORTUNITY

In 2023, Cochran found her producing efforts captured on camera for Season 5 of the HBO Max reality series *Project Greenlight*. The series documented the immense effort of the 18-day shoot for the mother-daughter sci-fi thriller *Gray Matter* by first-time feature director Meko Winbush. It’s no easy feat to make a film for the first time, especially when the process will be put out for the world to see.

“There was so much going on and I had never worked with a producer at this level or in this capacity. I grew to trust Yolanda very quickly,” Winbush recalls. “I knew that everything she was doing and telling me was coming from a place of experience and was in service of the story we were trying to tell. I constantly felt supported, which

allowed me to focus on directing.

“She set a wonderful example, always answered my questions, and didn’t expect me to know everything,” Winbush continues. “Little things, like taking me through every single page of the budget, were immensely beneficial for helping me set expectations and advancing my production knowledge. Yolanda set a very high bar. I know what a good producer is now. It’s what I expect going forward.”

Cochran was just as inspired by Winbush and is committed to helping advance her career.

“I’m very, very passionate about getting her a second feature,” Cochran says. “I’m excited about creating that opportunity, because in this business, you can’t make it unless you have advocates, someone in your corner who really believes in you and pushes with you.”

Cochran counts among her credits producing the documentary short and podcast miniseries *Breaking the Glass*,

highlighting and seeking solutions to challenges specific to gender and race in the entertainment industry.

“When you bring in a diversity of perspectives, they challenge each other if people are open and willing to examine how things can be different and better. You end up with a higher quality end result,” she says.

“Yolanda is committed to the idea that everyone has a worthy voice, and she believes in the importance of diverse points of view. Her generosity is one of her great contributions to our industry,” says Gigliotti.

“If there’s 30% of women in a leadership role, all the metrics improve,” Cochran adds. “If you have more diversity, whatever those diversity measures are, then you tend to have an improved result.”

Unsurprisingly, Cochran has gone about this in a very no-nonsense way.

“When I was at various studios, I would be invited to diversity groups



within those studios, and we would talk about how we could encourage this on our projects and among the decision-makers. One of the first things I said was, 'Let's stop the conversation about this being the right thing to do and make it about how that person is going to benefit personally and directly.' My thing was basically, 'Let me tell you how you're going to put more money in your pocket.'

"Yolanda is always finding ways to do better—as a human, as a producer and as an advocate for bettering our industry. This means representation, inclusion and integrity in the macro as well as micro areas of our business," says Sacani. "The work that she continues to do to find better solutions for efficiency, to take care of marginalized groups, and just to make sure that people are treated fairly, is super inspiring—all while raising a beautiful family, heading production at a prolific entertainment company and

developing projects of her own."

"I don't know how she balances it all," says Winbush. "I'm convinced she doesn't sleep."

A VOYAGE OF PERSEVERENCE

The nature of producing has always been about uncertainty, forecasting and preparing. But the job is ultimately about being hopeful, which is the energy that carries Cochran forward as she continues developing her own projects.

"It took a long time before I had stuff of my own that I was so passionate about that I had to keep pushing, keep trying," she says. "Stories I feel really matter and need to be out there in the world. The things that really draw me in are stories that reveal our common humanity, where you might not necessarily think we have things in common."

Which brings us back to the cold, distant moon of Europa. The moon of possibility. Along with the tug of

telling the story of the life that could be harbored by that extraterrestrial ocean, Cochran saw an opportunity to inspire young people to study science and embark upon careers that advance space exploration and its positive impact on the quality of life on our planet.

"We've had a bit of retrenchment, but I think our business is still going forward as far as what stories we're telling, by who, and how we can best create atmospheres where we can foster engagement and voices from all of walks of life, all of humanity," Cochran says.

Thanks to the practice Cochran has had balancing the big picture with the most minute detail, the imaginative with the enumerative, major studios with shoestring indies, film and TV, comedy and drama, and the myriad personalities involved in it all, she has come to understand that making meaningful film and TV is not rocket science—and that everything is possible. ■