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## Cover story: Indie Memphis strikes back

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The conventional wisdom is that sequels are never as good as the original. Though there are a few rare exceptions — “The Godfather: Part II” and “Drunken Master II,” for two examples — the second act of a great film is more likely to produce the likes of “Speed 2: Cruise Control” and “Staying Alive.”

One of Memphis’ own great plots — to thread the reel on this narrative metaphor — was “released” in 1998. The Edge coffee shop was the scene of the inaugural entry of what today is known as the Indie Memphis Film Festival. That first, no-budget affair featured screenings of University of Memphis student films projected onto a “sheet hung on the wall,” according to a 2017 *Memphis* magazine story.

Local nonprofit Delta Axis took over the concept beginning the next year. The festival grew as a volunteer-led organization and graduated to bigger venues: the Memphis College of Art, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, New Daisy Theater, Muvico at Peabody Place, and, at last, Malco Theatres.

Under codirectors Les Edwards, a contract fractional CFO, and Emily Trenholm, a nonprofit executive, a foundation was laid from 2002 to 2007 for Indie Memphis to become independent and hire staffers.

Those efforts culminated in 2008, when Indie Memphis registered as a 501(c)(3) and hired its first full-time executive director, Erik Jambor, the cofounder of the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival in Birmingham.

The nonprofit’s first-year financials show revenue of about \$180,000 and expenses of \$179,000. Notably, its tax return also indicate that board president Edwards loaned Indie Memphis \$17,708 for operating capital; new-hire Jambor loaned his employer a couple-hundred bucks, too.

Indie Memphis rocketed out of the gate: earning plaudits by national press as one of the best festivals in the U.S., signing Duncan-Williams Inc. as presenting sponsor, and drawing huge crowds at additional locations, including the newly opened Playhouse on the Square.

By 2012, Indie Memphis’ revenue hit \$287,000, turning a profit of \$45,000.

Despite its success, within two years the festival suffered a near-death experience.

Revenue dipped and stuck at around \$276,000, while expenses ballooned to \$283,000 and \$333,000 in 2013 and 2014, respectively. The festival seemed to suffer from being understaffed and too ambitious — with simultaneous screenings across numerous locations and a host of after-parties where local and out-of-town film industry attendees could network. A down year in attendance sapped cash reserves and struck an incapacitating blow.

Indie Memphis was in an existential crisis, on the verge of an unhappy ending. Jambor resigned in early 2015, and the board went on a retreat to figure out what to do: Shut it down, downsize, or regroup and come back.

Of course, all this is merely the prequel.

### A New Hope



ANDREA MORALES | COURTESY INDIE MEMPHIS

Scenes from the 2018 Indie Memphis, including the red carpet and block party tent on Cooper Street in Midtown.

Enter Ryan Watt, this story's proverbial Luke Skywalker.

Watt got into entrepreneurship right out of college. He was 23 years old when he joined two computer techs in a company that offered cloud-based data backups to small businesses — a rarity at the time. That startup, Metro Backup, incubated in Emerge Memphis. He was a partner and president by 2006, when he sold Metro to Securas Consulting Group. Watt headed up marketing there for a few years, but he missed the process of building something.

That's when he took a "detour" into filmmaking.

Some of Watt's friends were shooting a music video for rappers Lord T & Eloise.

Watt said he "got the production bug while hanging out on the set" — so he quit his day job with Securas and produced his friends' vampire flick, "Daylight Fades."

He helped raise the film's budget of \$200,000 and attended the 2008 Indie Memphis "to soak up as much information as possible" about film producing.

"I learned everything the hard way, and it will always be the most difficult thing I've ever done," Watt said.

Inspired by the experience, he founded his own production company, Paper Moon Films, in 2009, focusing on small budget movies and traveling the festival circuits.

Since "producing low-budget films doesn't pay the bills," Watt also teamed with some of his "Daylight Fades" colleagues in a corporate video production and documentary firm, New School Media.

The skills he developed as an entrepreneur were useful in filmmaking.

"I consider producing films to be startups: Where do you find the money? How do you get to the finish line?" Watt said.

He was a familiar face at Indie Memphis, serving on its film screening committee beginning in 2009 and its board in 2014. When Jambor resigned, Watt agreed to serve as the interim executive director.

He ended up loving the work and put in for the permanent position. The board liked what they had in Watt and hired him.

"Working for a nonprofit wasn't in my background," Watt said. "So, I treated it very much like a business."



Another lead character in the efforts to rescue Indie Memphis was cast with the 2015 board appointment of Molly Wexler.

Wexler's background was in nonprofit development, governance, and budgeting, having served as director of programming for the Jewish Foundation of Memphis from 2004 to 2009 and as director of financial resource development for the Memphis Jewish Federation from 2009 to 2013.

In the interstitial time when Indie Memphis weighed its future — or if it would even have one — longtime leader Iddo Patt saw a way to inject new blood by adding Wexler's experience to the board's institutional knowledge and the supporters' passion.

"While Indie Memphis had done well, it was more of a grassroots effort," said Wexler, who was named president in 2016.

The board wrote a script for strategic growth and outreach, including the incorporation of more voices around the table.

"A lot of people were willing to give it a shot," Wexler said of the decision to revamp rather than mothball Indie Memphis.

Another holdover was crucial to Indie Memphis' survival: presenting sponsor Duncan-Williams, which stuck with the festival during the transition period. Firm president Duncan Williams said he and chief marketing and corporate social responsibility officer Gary Lendermon never wavered in their commitment.

"I'm not a movie buff myself, but the festival was cool and different, and we like to do things that other investment firms don't do around the country," Williams said of his company's sponsorship.

Wexler didn't mince words when she recently spoke of the role Williams and his company played in saving Indie Memphis.

"If it wasn't for him, we wouldn't be here," Wexler said.

The 2015 festival didn't scrimp on the entertainment, but it was tightly focused.

"We kept expenses very lean," Watt said.

That helped build up reserves and stabilize the books. Expenses in 2015 were down \$134,000, year-over-year, to \$199,000.

Moreover, revenue was up about 8 percent. It scored record-setting ticket sales and screened high-profile, buzzed-about independent films, such as "Brooklyn" and "Carol," that would go on to earn numerous Oscar nominations.

A year after losing \$56,000, Indie Memphis turned a \$100,000 profit.

Watt also credited his predecessor, Jambor, with Indie Memphis' successes.

"Erik set us up for success," Watt said. "Our budget wasn't huge [back then], but the reputation was excellent — not just here but across the country. Erik had built such great relationships in the industry. I felt it just needed a better fundraising plan."

The heroes met their Yodas in 2016, through Patt and ArtsMemphis.

"One day, Molly and Ryan were at our office," recalled Elizabeth Rouse, president and CEO of ArtsMemphis, which has funded Indie Memphis since 2008 and works throughout the year with all of the groups it supports. "It just so happened that Give Back Memphis was there talking about their plans to start up."

Give Back Memphis was an idea being explored by Bill Craddock and Babs Feibelman — former ArtsMemphis employees and veterans of the nonprofit sector — to launch a pro bono program led by retired professionals and other experienced leaders who had time to freely share their wisdom with nonprofits.

Indie Memphis needed help with governance, strategic planning, and growth — all areas in which Give Back Memphis could offer assistance. And so the festival was chosen through ArtsMemphis to be a pilot recipient of Give Back Memphis' work.

"That was huge for us," Wexler said. "Give Back Memphis helped us with a strategic planning and fundraising, and gave us access to focus groups — all for free."

Indie Memphis worked closely with consultant Barbara Prescott. She helped the festival fill out and stay on track with its strategic plan, Wexler said, including ensuring there was a development person on the staff — a first for Indie Memphis.

“We hadn’t come up with a clearly thought-out development strategy before,” Wexler said. “The strategy was no longer ‘let’s just go make money.’”

“Give Back Memphis’ help was probably more valuable than any financial support,” Rouse said.

From the outside, things may not have appeared to skip a beat. But, with a fresh board and leadership, and new insights and training, Indie Memphis had turned a calamity into an opportunity. It was a happy ending, but it wasn’t the end.

### **Return of the Indie**

What the Indie Memphis sequel needed, it was determined, was for Watt to focus on raising money, which he couldn’t do enough of while playing so many other roles. Indie Memphis executive directors had always programmed the festival in addition to their other duties. So, the organization created new positions, such as a festival programmer and artistic director.

Today, the nonprofit is up to five full-time employees — including Brigid Wheeler, a longtime festival hand who was named senior programmer and director of operations in January 2019 — and three part-time, year-round contractors.

Having a 365-day approach to fundraising has made all the difference to the organization’s survival and thriving.

Some of the reimagined messaging was to show the business community and community at large that Indie Memphis isn’t just for film insiders.

“This is for everybody,” Watt said. “Literally, we have a tag line of ‘Film for all.’”

Now, he said, the work has evolved, from convincing people to support Indie Memphis into “repetitively getting the word out to more people more often.”

Wexler said, “On the corporate side, it’s about being thoughtful and thinking of what kind of places our visibility would be a boon for [a potential sponsor]. We want to listen. They’ll let us know what they want to do.”

Just as important is its individual members, Wexler said. The organization nurtures its grassroots base with low-barrier costs for membership and patron levels.

Indie Memphis has added a wide range of programs the past five years, so that now it’s a year-round organization more than (just) a weeklong festival. Many of the new offerings are geared toward the audience, such as the Indie Memphis Nights weekly film series, which began in 2017, sponsored by Orion Federal Credit Union.

“Now, our members can expect at least a movie every week,” Watt said.

Artist grants, filmmaking workshops, and residency programs, and more were implemented to nurture independent artists — a “vertical path of support to build a career, from youth beginners up to experienced artists receiving education, mentoring, residencies, and, ultimately, funding,” per Indie Memphis’ 2018 annual report.

In 2016, the “beginners” were addressed with the Youth Film Fest, workshops, and mentorship to train and fund high school filmmakers, all supported by the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis.

Indie Memphis is also concentrating on black filmmakers: The Black Creators Forum, a two-day symposium funded by ArtsMemphis, began last year. And, the Black Filmmaker Residency and Fellowship for Screenwriting were created, in part to support the development of a screenplay for a feature film to be produced locally. Academy Award winner Barry Jenkins funded and selected the 2019 recipients.

The galactic story told by Indie Memphis’ financials is of skyrocketing revenue: \$299,000 in 2015, \$405,000 in 2016, \$521,000 in 2017, and \$652,000 in 2018. It projects 2019 revenue of \$750,000.

“It’s incredible,” Rouse said of Indie Memphis’ rate of growth. “It’s not just revenue; it’s programming, too. For an organization to go from one festival to a program every single week, with just a few staffers, is phenomenal.”

Watt said his approach hasn't changed.

"I definitely treat Indie Memphis, and each program, as a startup," he said. "As opposed to having a philosophy of launching something only when you have every detail perfectly worked out, I'd rather pilot a program and learn from it and grow it."

Duncan Williams said he has loved "watching this small, closed, indie film festival turn into this behemoth."





“What Ryan has done is amazing. He is more of a business-minded leader,” Williams said. “When we started, the sponsorship list was short and sweet. Now, it’s a who’s who. That’s where Duncan-Williams has helped: Having a company that has a brand like [ours] helps others have a comfort level that Indie Memphis does things the right way. It’s become a place where you want your name.”

“You can’t help but get excited,” said Daniel Weickenand, Orion CEO. “It’s been an amazing transition.”

Indie Memphis’ success doesn’t just move the needle for local filmgoers and filmmakers. A large contingent of festival attendees come in from out of town and stay for up to a week, day and night, experiencing a burgeoning city.

“It showcases the talent in the city,” Williams said. “When you have outsiders promote what a great city Memphis is, people pay attention.”

“It highlights the positives about Memphis,” Weickenand said. “We support Indie Memphis because it highlights the creative culture we have here. It’s better to have a soft flame that lights up the whole room. The city will live and die by its creativity.”

Wexler recently passed the presidential reins to retired college professor Brett Robbs, but she’s no less invested in its future. Wexler wants to see more foundations on board locally and nationally — “and there’s always room for more corporate sponsors.” But, she also doesn’t want Indie Memphis to get too much bigger.

“We’re not that far from where we wanted to be,” Wexler said. “There’s a sweet spot — about \$800,000 to \$850,000 in annual revenue — that would provide the staff and money we need for the programs we want to do. We don’t want to just keep growing, growing, growing.”

Though Watt can now focus on networking, development, and strategy, he said there are some drawbacks: “In the early days, I was watching every movie. The sad part about our wonderful growth is I, basically, don’t watch movies anymore. But, now I have more fun seeing us grow.”

Instead of “getting to watch screeners at midnight,” Watt said, “fundraising is on my mind every day.”

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