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>> That's Professor Brian Willrich. This is the Extra Mile Podcast, and I'm your host, Elise Pipitone.

[Music]

Brian Willrich joined Mohawk after a 20-year career in television, broadcasting, and video production. Brian combines all of that experience with a real passion for mentoring students. Every year, Brian plays the part of executive producer, helping teams of students script, shoot, and edit dozens of videos for nonprofits, community groups, and startups. I talked with Brian about how these projects get chosen and what's the payoff for students and clients. Brian also talks about the time he flew to California for work and ended up in a penthouse suite in downtown L.A. So, here's my conversation with TV and broadcasting professor, Brian Willrich. Alright, Brian Willrich. I'm so excited to be chatting with you today. I think that you are just a shining example of someone who has brought all of your industry experience into the classroom, and it's setting up some cool projects so that students can actually interact with the community, get some real-world skills, and learn kind of over the stumbling blocks with you as a mentor, before they enter into the field of TV media production. So, thank you for joining us today.

>> Thanks for having me, Elise.

>> You're welcome. I also want to note that you have brought some buttons to this interview. One is a bad button and one is a good button. Do you want to explain?

>> Yes, I brought a couple props. So, the red button, is for me to hit if I don't like the question, or if you don't like the answer, and the green button, is if I like the question or you like the answer. But I won't do it too often because it'll be annoying, I'm sure.

>> I don't know. I might do it. [Inaudible] So this bad and good button, no reading between the lines. We'll just know-

>> That's right.

>> -if I'm crossing the line or not with my questions. So, why don't you give listeners out there a little bit of a background on what is your background in the TV film industry, as well as your transition to becoming a professor here?

>> Sure. Well, I was a Mohawk grad from the television broadcasting department, the department I now teach in. And right away, I was lucky to get a job at CHTV. And I worked there for 20 years, doing all kinds of great stuff, sports, got to travel a lot, mainly covering sporting events. And then I started to do some freelance work, and it's funny. Early on, I remember seeing another coworker, and I started there when I was 20 years old. And I remember seeing another coworker that was 40 years old, and I thought he was old. And I thought, "Geez, when I'm 40, I won't be here anymore. I'll be off doing something else." And literally—

>> You probably couldn't even imagine yourself at 40 at that time.

>> No. And just by coincidence, 20 years later, after working at CH, when I was 40, I left. I started to do a lot of freelance work and thought, "I'm going to give it a go because if I don't, you know, I might look back and wish I had." So, I bought all my own camera equipment, opened up an office in a strip plaza called WDTV, Willrich Digital Television. And off I went. And did that for five years before Mohawk came calling. I actually taught part time in the journalism department. Camera work and editing. And then a fulltime position came open in the television department, and I applied. And I was lucky enough to get it. And I've been there — this is my 14th season—

>> Wow.

>> -of television talk. Fourteen seasons in that department.

>> We don't talk semesters. We talk seasons here.

>> Yes.

>> So, what kinds of things were you producing in your production company before you became fulltime here?

>> Oh, geez. All kinds of stuff. I went to parachuting commercials for Mervish [phonetic] Productions. These were plays before the [inaudible] of Toronto.

>> Amazing.

>> I went to L.A. and shot a commercial with Ryan Gosling. I have a picture in my office of the two of us.

>> Was this before he was really — was he Notebook famous by this point?

>> He was — yes, oh yes. He was a young guy. That was — when was that? Fifteen years ago, I guess.

>> Wow.

>> Not to name drop but, these are just some of the fantastic things I got to do. Funny, quick story about the shoot in L.A. So, there's about 20 people on the production crew. Only two Canadians. When Ryan Gosling showed up, he just said hi to everyone, and all I said was, "Hi, Ryan." He said, "You're Canadian." I'm like, "How the heck do you know I'm Canadian?" He says, "By

your accent.” I don’t have an accent but, anyways. And we’re staying at this really nice hotel, downtown L.A. And the producer, the head guy, was handing out room keys to everyone. And I get a room key that has PH on it. I’m like, “PH. What the heck is PH?” So, we all get on the elevator and we’re going up to our rooms, and I hit the PH button and it was the Penthouse. I had the entire top floor with a pool on the roof.

>> Did Ryan hook you up because you were Canadian?

>> No, no. It wasn’t Ryan. It was just the producer – it was just random. Whoever got a room.

>> Wow.

>> You just grabbed a room key and that was it. I called my wife later that day and said, “See if you can get time off work to come and join me.”

>> Wish you were here.

>> But she couldn’t. She has been able to join me on some trips. One of the best ones was Universal Studios when I did some work there for a week, but yes, so I’ve been able to travel. I’ve been to World Series and all kinds of other sporting events. Yes, and just met lots of great people and you know, every day’s a new adventure in this business, which we tell the students that you know, if you’re lucky enough to graduate, you know, at the top of your class or if you do really well in school and you get a job, or go freelance, which is becoming the way of the world these days, contract work, every day is just a new adventure. It’s awesome.

>> So, how do you bring all of your experience into the classroom and expose students who can’t necessarily leave and work on projects yet?

>> Well, what I try to do is get out of the classroom.

>> Yes.

>> Where students learn the most is when they’re off doing stuff. And I don’t want them to go and make mistakes or get bad habits ingrained in them. So, I try to go with them as often as possible. This evening, I’m working with students in one of the buildings, M-wing, producing this drama. And we’re actually going to be there three nights in a row. So, I’ll be there with them, mentoring them and helping them along and making suggestions and stuff. So, for – I’m lucky. The courses I teach allow me to go off with students off campus, for the most part, and film projects with them. And then that’s really where the learning takes place. Not in the classroom. You can’t teach them video production because every location’s different. Every environment’s different. Every people you meet are different. There’s so many different things that come up that you really need. I think it’s best if I’m there with them.

>> From my experience working with students too, on these hands-on projects with your department, I find a lot of the stumbling blocks come about when you

know, things that you can't necessarily teach in a lecture. Things like dealing with a client or you know, what you do and what you don't do when you come to a meeting. So, I would imagine this is really valuable lessons that they're learning. Is there something that reoccurs, that comes up, that is a main issue?

>> Well, I tell the students in my 38 years of working on video projects, I have yet to work on a project or be on location, and not have a piece of equipment fail. Every time.

>> Yes.

>> Every time, something goes wrong, and you just expect it. It could be something minor, like a mic cable's not working. So, you grab the spare. It could be running on battery power. It could be the memory card. The SD card, and the camera stops working. There's always something.

>> You're planning for the unplannable.

>> Yes, you know, it's a quote from a movie, "Hope for the best, plan for the worst," and again, I try to ingrain that in the students, because it's going to happen. It's going to happen every time. And you have to troubleshoot, and you learn from all these issues and mistakes or whatever, so hopefully, it won't happen again.

>> So, let's talk a little bit, looping back to the Public Service Announcements project that students work on with you.

>> Okay, so working with community partners?

>> Yes.

>> Sure.

>> Can you speak a little bit about how decided to do this and some of the partners that you've worked with?

>> So, when I started here, I took over a course that was essentially, it's called Advanced Single Camera Production, but it's producing a promotional video, a corporate video, with a client. And a lot of our clients come through the agency, which I love. Joe Dudot [phonetic] is awesome.

>> He is.

>> He generally vets the clients ahead of time, screens them, and then brings them in for us to meet with. Then I, if I decide it's a good fit for the program, and there's something visual for students to film, I go to their location of business, and check it out for myself and meet with the people who'll be involved in the project. And then, if everything's a go, I add them to my list, and then match them up with a student group, and off we go, producing projects for them.

>> That's great.

>> And they range from several, you know, 30-second or one-minute commercials, social media stuff, longer format stuff, seven to ten-minute promotional

videos. There's a whole range. Usually clients want a bit of everything. They're very social media conscious now, like everybody is. So, they want very short videos for the website and social media, and then longer videos to show like different events and for the website as well.

>> That's great exposure for our students, too. What are some of the organizations that you've worked with?

>> Wow. The list is very long. Probably we've worked with – well, we've done about a hundred videos since I started doing this. At least.

>> Wow.

>> We do about 20 to 30 in the two semesters, fall and winter. Mainly we do them during the winter semester. Last year, we did about 22 separate videos. Separate video projects. And some of the clients are the Canadian Cancer Society, Ronald McDonald House, Goodwill, Community Living, a lot of nonprofits and some companies that are new startups. One that comes to mind that was a really cool project for students to work on is called Sniper Skin. They make new grips for anything, tennis rackets, lacrosse sticks, mainly – it started with hockey sticks. Now, it's anything. And they have a patent on this type of grip that just shrinks to the handle and is really good to hold onto. So, we had students do a promotional video for them. And when it hit social media, YouTube, it went crazy. Within a few weeks, they had a quarter of a million hits. And who knows where it is now?

>> Wow.

>> And they've been very–

>> And something like that to put on your portfolio as a new grad.

>> Oh, it was great. The students love hockey, play hockey. So, they just love working on a project doing something they love. And – hey, this is a good thing. And this company, Sniper Skin, ended up hiring that student group to work all summer long, producing about four or five more videos.

>> Amazing.

>> Which was great. And that's our goal, is for students to get a job. Contract work is great, especially while they're still in school. So, they were still in school and getting paid to go work on projects, which was awesome.

>> Wonderful. So, a recruiting mechanism for our students–

>> Oh, definitely.

>> -but also, if an agency or an organization is pleased with our work, they'll be return customers.

>> And that's – that happens a lot, and I tell students, “Hey, try to do good work with your clients so you've got it on your demo reel, and it may lead to more work.” And a lot of the clients don't have much in the way of video

promotion, and if the students are successful, producing something that's really good, they are willing to hire them and pay them.

>> So, what do you – how do you choose one over the other? Is it, has to be in our community, a nonprofit, or what gets the green light from you?

>> Transportation for students is an issue, so I like it to be in the community. We have had some partnerships with businesses in Toronto, in Houghton region and in other places. And it's critical that the students have transportation because there's so much equipment, cameras and tripods and lights and stuff they have to take. So, they can't take a bus. So, that's generally one issue. And but mainly the clients I select are people I think that will actively be engaged with the students. And have a good location for students to film at. I look at it as, "If I would like to work with them, and want to work on the project." If it's something that's appealing to me, then I know the students will like it as well.

>> And so, how many students are involved in each one of these projects [inaudible]?

>> The students groups range from about 4 to 6.

>> Okay.

>> Which is standard in a small production. Bigger productions involve – in third year, they work on bigger productions, longer format, and those groups go up to about 8. If you think of a feature film, they could have 50 to 100 people working on it, so although these groups, you know, in a college, academic setting seem large, they sometimes are bare bones in order to fill all the positions necessary to work on a project.

>> You mentioned that organizations are becoming more social media conscious. Have you seen that there are other trends in this field, that are changing a lot? I know that you mentioned freelancing as well.

>> Definitely, it's a – becoming a contract world for a number of different job types, contract or freelance. And I think it's, to some extent, it's a good way to work. I did it myself after 20 years of fulltime, well-paying job, I left, because I wanted that experience and I got to pick and choose the work I wanted to do. And you know, and that led to travel and everything else, which was awesome. So, it's not a bad thing. It's a good thing.

>> Are you teaching your students how to be more entrepreneurial then as well?

>> The – you know, we have the Surge [assumed spelling], which is awesome here, which has a lot of guest speakers and lectures about being entrepreneurial, but I do. And I tell students, "If you're interested in doing your own thing, starting your own business, or just doing some freelance work," I supply them with all the documents and contracts and everything I use. All the budgets, everything, so that they can hit the ground running, and get started right away. And look professional at the same time.

>> Yes, and they can take that into the real world–

>> Yes.

>> -after they leave.

>> Yes.

>> So, what's been the most challenging shoot your students have been involved with? And we'll ask the most rewarding shoot after that? End on a good note.

>> Most challenging shoot? Probably just a couple years ago, they did a documentary about suicides on Six Nations [assumed spelling]. We had a student from Six Nations who was the producer.

>> Wow.

>> They actually won an award, a national award, for this documentary. And they had to go to Six Nations prior to filming for a couple days of sensitivity training to learn–

>> I was just going to ask [inaudible].

>> -to learn all about the issue and how to approach people and talk to people, and how to behave and everything around these people who have had terrible things happen to their lives.

>> Especially when you're exploring this part of our history and our culture.

>> And these students work really hard, and it paid off for them and you know, it's telling a story that really needed to be told. That was probably one of the more complicated and tricky and very sensitive projects they've worked on. And what was the other question? What's the–?

>> What was the most rewarding? Would it be the same one or would it be–?

>> I don't know. Most rewarding project. Well, there was a documentary, you know, things that have happened recently are the ones that come to mind first. We had a group of students do another documentary. I just love documentaries. We had a group of students do a documentary last year on gaming. And some of the most popular games out there. And they travelled all across North America, going to gaming conventions and filming people who get dressed up like gamers at all these other conventions. And they went to competitions.

>> It's a huge subculture.

>> It is.

>> Yes.

>> And they were all gamers too, so again, they love doing something that they're actively interested in. And they went to L.A. to the studios that are responsible for some of the top games that are out there right now, for PlayStation and Xbox and all that stuff. And they were the first film crew ever allowed inside their walls, to show where it all takes place.

>> Wow.

>> And where it all is being developed. And they were able to film–

>> Well, it's incredible.

>> -animators working on the next generation of these games.

>> So, you got a sneak preview at what's going–

>> Exactly and–

>> -that must have been really exciting for them.

>> -the fact that they, you know, talked their way into this place, and went to L.A. on their own dime, paid their own way.

>> Wow.

>> Using Mohawk's equipment, and they – what they produced was phenomenal. It was so good. I'm showing students this year, because I'm so proud of the work they did. So, that comes to mind as being a real winner recently for sure.

>> Is there somewhere you can access the student work?

>> So, all of our student work is posted on our Vimeo page, Mohawk College Media. All of our newscasts, corporate productions, documentaries. Some of the dramas, because of the sensitive nature, sometimes I don't post them because it is public.

>> Yes.

>> But generally speaking, all of our work can be found on Mohawk College Media on Vimeo.

>> So, I know that it can be a big learning curve for students to produce these videos, to start learning about how they may run their own business one day, and take this all in. What is the most valuable, real-world lessons that students learn working with you?

>> I hope it's how to handle their selves, how to be professional, how to have fun doing it. Don't take it too serious. I tell them, "We're not doing brain surgery. No one's going to die if you make a mistake."

>> This is the time to make mistakes.

>> Make mistakes. Learn from it. And move on – and take some risks without you know, having safety an issue or a possibility of damaging the equipment, but take some risks. Try some things and learn from that and enjoy it while you're doing it.

>> It's obvious that you're very passionate about what your do, and you want to see your students succeed. So, why do you go the extra mile for students? What's your motivation?

>> Well, I don't consider it going the extra mile. It's just the way I do things and that's, so they can benefit and do well. I remember when I was – back when I was 20-years old, 38 years ago, don't do the math please. When I started in the business, working full-time at CH, I told myself, "I never want to compromise what I'm doing, and the time my employer asked me to compromise and do less than what I'm capable of doing, I'm leaving." And I still carry that philosophy in the back of my mind. And another reason is, some of the programming on television and online, has really taken a step back when it comes to production quality. Like some of the shows they put on, aren't done very well. There's a lot of winners, but there's you know – it used to be there was a certain standard before you could have something broadcast, and now that's really gone by the wayside. And I just personally don't want to watch anymore bad shows, so that's why I'm trying to ensure that the students produce something good in the future, so I've got something good to watch. I'm being a little selfish about the whole thing, but–

>> A little self-serving, but in the end–.

>> -yes, you know? I want there to be good programming out there for people to watch.

>> So, we're talking about how you know, your motivation, somewhat self-serving, but still you want to see students succeed.

>> Oh, for sure.

>> We've talked a little bit about what students get out of working with you in this program, but is there someone that's gone the extra mile for you?

>> No, that's – probably for me, my mentor and inspiration was my Uncle Abe Concorian [phonetic]. He was a film cameraman. He introduced to me in Grade 11, the film world. I thought I was going to be an electrician. I was going through high school to be an electrical technician. And then in Grade 11, he changed my mind. He actually worked at CH when it first opened up, and he took me on a tour of the studios. And I was always a bit of a camera bug, and I had a little Instamatic camera and spent – well, my parents spent a lot of money on film back then, so I could snap off pictures all the time. And he introduced me to the whole television world. And I fell in love. Changed my major in Grade 12 to Communications. And I followed in his footsteps. So, he worked at CH and then I, upon graduation, worked at CH.

>> So, he opened the door for you almost to that possibility.

>> He did. He wasn't working there when I was working there, so there really wasn't any nepotism, but anyways – and then, taught – hey. That's a good thing. He taught at Mohawk, and when I came to Mohawk, he was one of my instructors. He taught film and film cameras back then when I was a student. Half the course was film and half was video. And he taught the film portion, and now I'm teaching in – at Mohawk. So, I have literally followed in his footsteps, all the way along through my career, just like he did.

>> That's amazing.

>> So, he's really the one that inspired me, and he loved the business just like I do. And yes, he's the guy.

>> Showed you that this could be a possibility for your [inaudible].

>> Oh, definitely. Yes. Yes, he was a game changer for me, for sure.

>> Is there someone else at Mohawk College that is doing amazing work that you want to recognize?

>> You know, I'm sure there's lots of people, but I really, honestly think, everyone in our department should be recognized and you know, when they hand out awards, I think, "Well, why didn't you know, Pat Hanson [phonetic], or Ra Shiman [phonetic], or Joe Mamone [phonetic]-?" You know?

>> They're all great.

>> They're all deserving. They're all great. And these are the people I'm around every day, so I know. And again, there's other people I know doing great things here. But all of them, have great experience in the business. Still are involved. Help students to get internships. Help them to get paid work, paid gigs. And they're all you know, trying their best. We all get along famously. I'm so lucky to be working that department. And our bosses and everything. Kurt Mueller's [phonetic] awesome and it's just such a great environment to be part of. And they all go the extra mile. They all do what they can to make sure students are successful, whether it's on a project or getting an internship or getting a job.

>> Amazing. Well, thank you so much for sitting down with us, and giving us some more insight into what makes you tick, what makes you stay long hours, I'm sure, into the evenings and weekends, supporting our students and exposing them to this great art form and career option. So, thank you.

>> Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

>> A big thanks to Brian Willrich for sharing his story, and going above and beyond for students. Thanks also to my colleague Shawn Coffey [phonetic] for recording and editing our conversation. You can find more information about the tv and broadcasting program in the podcast show notes. And if you know someone who's going the extra mile for students at Mohawk College, send an email to Extramile@mohawkcollege.ca. And if you like the show, give us a five-star rating. Thanks for listening.

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