

ST. JOHN'S LAW GOT TALENT

Alumni Play Leading Roles in the Entertainment Industry



St. John's Law alumni and friends at the recent Webster Hall meetup

WALKING INTO WEBSTER HALL, the iconic concert and nightclub venue in Manhattan's once gritty, now trendy East Village, is a bit of a time warp. There's the just-right musty smell of a 120-year-old landmark whose Grand Ballroom and smaller stages have showcased a range of talent—from Julie Andrews, Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, Eric Clapton, and Tina Turner to U2, Beastie Boys, Metallica, Wiz Khalifa, and LCD Soundsystem.

And, on a recent sultry summer evening, the historic performance space played the fitting host to a group of St. John's Law alumni in the entertainment industry, who come together regularly in New York City.

It's an eclectic ensemble of veterans and newcomers working in house or in law firms under the "entertainment law" umbrella. They represent creative or performing artists in film, television, theater, music, sports, online media, and other industries, or counsel the business people and businesses who collaborate with those artists.

The group is the brainchild of **MICHELLE JOHNSON '05**, director of production legal at the television, global-based format, and digital production company Embassy Row.

Johnson's career in entertainment has taken her from MTV to ABC, where she provided counsel on *Good Morning America*, *The Chew*, and *The View*, to her current role handling a range of business and legal affairs for industry-acclaimed shows, including *Watch What Happens Live*, *Cutthroat Kitchen*, and *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*.

"My work at Embassy Row is fast-paced and mentally stimulating, which are two essentials for me to be fulfilled in my professional life," says Johnson. "On any given day, I might handle First Amendment matters, close the terms of a construction contract, negotiate an on-camera appearance, and draft a music licensing agreement." The idea for the alumni group, she explains, grew out of a desire to connect with other St. John's Law graduates who share her enthusiasm for this special line of work.

"I started with contact information for about seven alumni in the industry," Johnson says. "With help from fellow alumni like Christina Kim Constantine '13, director of legal affairs at Bustle, and Joseph Delorme '10, a business and legal affairs attorney at Monami Entertainment, in less than a year, the group has grown to over 45 participants. I believe that, as word spreads, many more alumni will join us."



Teronse Miller II '16

Just a year out of St. John's, **TERONSE MILLER II '16** and **PEDRO G. ALVARADO '16** welcome the support and camaraderie that the alumni group offers. "As someone relatively new in my career, I appreciate the opportunity to hear about other people's experiences, and to learn from them while having a good time fellowshipping," says Miller, who works at the intersection of technology and entertainment as staff counsel—programming for the U.S. cable carrier Charter Communications Inc.

"Whether I'm drafting content acquisition agreements, analyzing FCC regulations for compliance, or assisting our general counsel, it's rewarding to help bring excellent media and television content to millions of people across the country," Miller adds. "This is often called the 'Golden Age of Television,' and I get to influence and contribute to it."



Michelle Johnson '05



Pedro G. Alvarado '16



Jessica Stukonis '13



James E. Waller '07C, '15L



Neil J. Dudich '01



Jeffery Fannell '92C, '96L

Alvarado shares his classmate's delight in using his law degree to contribute to the popular culture. As an associate at Vogel Bach & Horn LLP, he works with several companies within the entertainment industry handling a wide range of intellectual property matters. He's also senior consultant for a South African fashion line, Deep Settle Movement. In that role, he oversees the brand's expansion into new markets, negotiates with potential buyers, drafts apparel distribution and sponsorship agreements, and ensures that the company's intellectual property is fully protected.

Miller and Alvarado also cite similar experiences at St. John's Law as particularly formative on their career paths. Both built their practical knowledge and skills taking Intellectual Property courses taught by Professors Jeremy Sheff and Eva E. Subotnik, co-directors of the St. John's Intellectual Property Law Center (IPLC). They also benefitted from multiple internships in the entertainment space, and they expanded their professional aptitudes and connections as members of the Law School's student-run Entertainment, Arts, and Sports Law Society (EASL).

EASL receives high praise from others in the alumni group as well. "It was a terrific resource, especially as a 1L who was passionate about IP Law and looking for every opportunity to explore that practice area," says **JESSICA STUKONIS '13**, senior manager, legal and business affairs at AMC Networks, where her responsibilities include content licensing for television and subscription-video-on-demand platforms, and intellectual property enforcement and protection.

Pursuing a legal career in the entertainment industry was a natural fit for Stukonis, who enrolled in St. John's evening program after working for a pop-culture-influenced retail store. "I regularly talked to customers about their media interests," she says of her duties at the store. "If our conversations led us to anything new and buzzy, or if we experienced any common threads or requests, we'd channel that information to our licensing team, and they'd coordinate with their business contacts and our legal team to see if they could bring related merchandise into the store," she explains. "There was something about that process that always intrigued me."

In addition to being active in EASL at St. John's, Stukonis was a two-time summer extern at Sony Music Entertainment. Those externships led to full-time work after graduation, and Stukonis spent over two years in Sony's contract administration department, analyzing, summarizing, and advising on a variety of music industry agreements, among other responsibilities.

"Even though my career is only just beginning, I feel like I've come full circle from the days when I was working at that retail store," Stukonis says. "I'm actually doing what I set out to do, and it's exhilarating." She's also excited to be part of the alumni group organized by Johnson. "It's so important for alumni in the same career space to have opportunities to network and connect, and I can't applaud Michelle enough for taking the initiative to bring us all together," she says. "It's interesting to see how the same baseline—a legal education at St. John's—has taken all of us down similar, yet unique career paths."

Like Stukonis, **JAMES E. WALLER '07C, '15L** launched his career in the entertainment industry with a Law School externship. Describing himself as "intimately engaged with music since his days as a student in the Boys Choir of Harlem," Waller came to St. John's Law after working as a project manager at Def Jam Enterprises with a "very clear vision" of the type of law he wanted to practice.

During his two-year externship at Warner Bros. Records, Waller drafted and reviewed personal service agreements, appearance releases, and other entertainment related contracts. Today, as an attorney in the company's business and legal affairs department, he handles traditional record industry matters for a roster of 30 artists, including drafting and negotiating recording agreements, third-party license agreements, and technology services agreements.

Waller finds the work fulfilling. "It's all about the music," he says. "Sometimes the days are long and frustrating, but when a record is released, and I know I played a role in getting it to market, there's no greater feeling. I have the opportunity to work on something I'm passionate about every single day."

While **NEIL J. DUDICH '01** didn't chart a direct professional path to the entertainment industry, like Waller he finds great fulfillment in his work. As eastern executive director for the Directors Guild of America (DGA), Dudich helps to guide the world's foremost labor organization protecting the creative and economic rights of directors and their teams working in film, television, commercials, documentaries, news, sports, and new media.

Dudich came to the DGA from New York State United Teachers, where he served as in-house counsel specializing in the representation of professionals on a wide range of labor and employment matters. While he left the active practice of law with the move, Dudich says he has no regrets. "The opportunity presented an interesting and exciting challenge, so I accepted.

Someone once told me, 'you can do anything you want with a law degree, you can even be a lawyer.' I've definitely found that to be true."

Tracing his career path back to his days at St. John's Law, Dudich shares: "There were many influences of course, but Professor David Gregory stands above the others. I took his Labor and Employment Law courses, and served as his research assistant. He was instrumental in me landing my first job with the teachers' union, which led to my current position. He's not just a wonderful mentor, he's a friend, and my career path would have been drastically different without him."

Now, as a participant in Johnson's alumni group, Dudich is happy to connect with alumni in the entertainment field. "I've always been proud to be a St. John's Law graduate, and it's been a nice homecoming of sorts," he says. "After all, it's people, and the relationships we build with them, that make work meaningful."

When it comes to people and relationships, **JEFFERY FANNELL '92C, '96L** couldn't agree with Dudich more. "Serving others and helping them reach their goals drives me," he says, referring to his work overseeing all operations and leading client representation as president of Jeff Fannell & Associates (JFA). "Getting to do this in the sports industry is an added bonus."

Fannell launched JFA after 10 successful years as counsel, and then assistant general counsel, of the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA). As a key figure at the MLBPA, he managed grievances on behalf of players and advised them and their agents in matters of salary arbitration, contract negotiations, and other issues arising under collective bargaining agreements and individual player contracts.

Prior to working in sports, Fannell was a field attorney for the National Labor Relations Board in New York City and served as an associate general counsel to the AFL-CIO. "I made the connection between labor and employment law and the career I envisioned in sports law during my 1L year at St. John's," he explains. "There had been labor stoppages in professional baseball and football and, that year, hockey was experiencing one. So I set out to get well-grounded in labor law with the hope that it would lead me to a career in sports."

Fannell is quick to connect the steps along his career path. "My early work in labor law was great preparation for my work at

the MLBPA, which is a labor union," he says. "My work at the MLBPA, in turn, placed me in increasingly challenging situations, dealing with complex legal issues and extraordinarily high stakes, financial and otherwise. Without question, those challenges made me a better lawyer and gave me the confidence to go out on my own with JFA."

Fannell also easily connects the practice of sports law to the wider entertainment industry. "For me, it all starts with an understanding that professional athletes and entertainers are extraordinarily talented individuals," he says. "They're able to play and perform at a level that the majority of us simply cannot achieve. Their supreme talents are drivers of entire industries and deserve to be protected and compensated accordingly."

Over the years, Fannell has brought his time and talents home to St. John's Law as an adjunct professor and as deputy director of the former LL.M. in Sports Law. He's continuing this tradition of giving back to *alma mater* by sharing his interests and insights with the entertainment law alumni group. "Michelle has been terrific in fostering the connection among us, and giving the group deeper meaning for us all," he says.

Another industry veteran sharing his experience and expertise with the group is **JOSEPH P. SALVO '89**, executive vice president and general counsel of Sesame Workshop, home to Sesame Street and the beloved Muppets.

"I'm at a point in my career when I'm in a position to look back, give back, and do what I can to help make this world a slightly better place before I leave, and I'm incredibly grateful for that opportunity," Salvo says about his current job overseeing all business, legal, and government affairs at Sesame Workshop. He brings a wealth of knowledge to the position, gained as a high-profile copyright and IP litigator at Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP; as in-house counsel at Sony Music, Arista Records, and Sony BMG Music Entertainment; and as general counsel at HiT Entertainment and Mattel, Inc.

Salvo has also served as president of the Copyright Society of the USA (CSUSA), an organization he became acquainted with as a student at St. John's Law. "One of my extremely important Law School mentors was Professor Joseph (Joe) Beard," he shares. "He taught me Copyright Law, got me involved in the CSUSA, encouraged me to join EASL, and invited me to guest lecture in his class after I graduated, which led to my current adjunct professor position at St. John's."

The valued mentorship has come full circle. A number of alumni in the group that Johnson assembled say that their Entertainment Law class with “Professor Salvo,” and their interactions with him as EASL’s faculty advisor, fueled their desire to pursue a career in the entertainment industry.

“I tell my students that their legal education at St. John’s provides them—as it has provided me—with all the tools necessary to work, succeed, and excel in this field,” Salvo says. “I’ve worked side-by-side with, as opposing counsel to, and as the manager of lawyers from ‘the best law schools,’ and St. John’s graduates can go toe to toe with any of them. I also remind my students that the Law School stands less than 10 miles from one of the true epicenters of the entertainment industry, providing opportunities that are unparalleled in almost any other part of the country.”

Joseph P. Salvo '89



At the heart of the industry epicenter that Salvo mentions is Manhattan’s theater district, where curtains rise and fall on Broadway shows daily. It’s a creative enclave that **LOREN H. PLOTKIN '66** knows especially well.

For over 40 years, as a partner at Levine Plotkin & Mennin, LLP, he has represented individuals and entities primarily involved in the arts, principally legitimate theater, photography and visual arts, and fashion. Plotkin’s diverse clientele includes authors, composers, lyricists, librettists, producers, models, and celebrities. He and his firm have done legal work for such notable Broadway productions as *Hamilton*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, *In the Heights*, *Avenue Q*, and *Rent*.

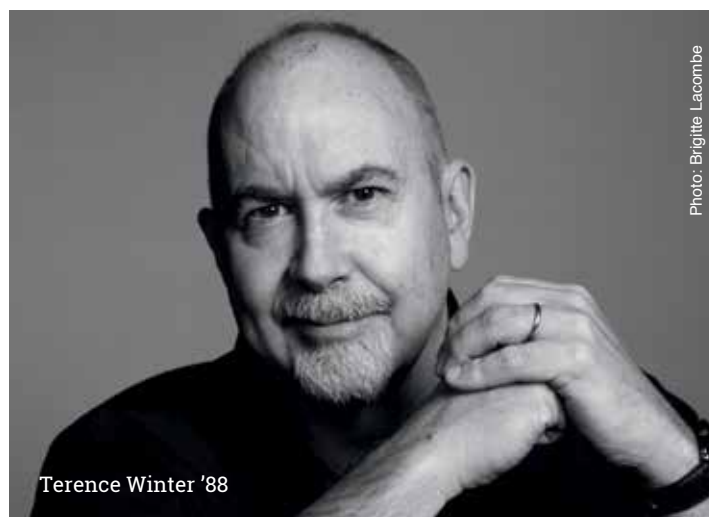
“Working in the theater industry is unique because the community is so small,” he notes. “It doesn’t permit, in most cases, aggressive zero sum negotiations, since most of the agreements result in relationships that have to work for the artists and the business people in order for them to create live theater. There are some exceptions, but they represent a minority. I prefer working in an environment that encourages ‘win-win’ results. That’s not to say that negotiations aren’t spirited, but the representatives are usually sensitive to the fact that the clients will have to work together in the future.”

Plotkin, who returned to St. John’s Law recently to be honored by EASL, the Intellectual Property Law Society, and the IPLC, describes his work as “joyful.” That joy, he says, comes from helping people bring their artistry to the world, seeing the positive impact that has, and having the opportunity to play

a small part in the process. “Artists see things that aren’t there,” he says. “I love working with people who see things that aren’t there.”

Artistry takes many forms. Great storytelling is one of them, as evidenced by the creative output of **TERENCE WINTER '88**, the award-winning writer and producer for television and film.

After graduating from St. John’s, Winter practiced law in New York City before moving to Los Angeles to pursue a screenwriting career. He is the creator and executive producer of *Boardwalk Empire*, HBO’s critically acclaimed drama series. He also co-created and was the executive producer of HBO’s *Vinyl*.



Terence Winter '88

Prior to those shows, Winter was one of the writers and executive producers of *The Sopranos*, for which he was honored with four Emmy Awards and three Writer’s Guild Awards. His screenplay for *The Wolf of Wall Street* earned Winter an Academy Award nomination, and he’s now developing a biopic on the life of artist Andy Warhol, to star Academy Award winner Jared Leto.

Although Winter started his writing career at age 33 and had some bumps along the way, he says he wouldn’t change a thing. “Because of what I do, I get to meet people from all walks of life and hear their incredible stories. In doing the research for my scripts I get paid to read and learn about things I would never have had the exposure to in any other field. And I get to entertain people, making them laugh, cry, and think, which is incredibly rewarding.”



Loren H. Plotkin '66



Richard Pawelczyk '96

Winter, who was honored at the Law School’s 90th Anniversary Gala, is also grateful for his legal education. “I draw on everything I learned at St. John’s—analytical thinking, how to present both sides of a story effectively, my work ethic—every single day,” he says. “I firmly believe that law school is great preparation for literally any job.”

And some jobs, and passions, are great preparation for law school. Just ask **RICHARD PAWELCZYK '96**, the Webster Hall Entertainment Corp. executive who hosted the alumni group meetup at Webster Hall this summer. “This industry is populated by frustrated musicians,” he says. “I played in bands, and music has always been a passion, even the business side—like when I was young and studying the liner notes on an album (when there were albums).”

At St. John’s Law, Pawelczyk took his interest in music to Professor Beard’s Intellectual Property classroom. “He was the entertainment law guy at the Law School and provided the foundation of much of what I do today,” he says.

Pawelczyk started his career in private practice, representing companies and artists in a broad spectrum of intellectual property and entertainment law transactions and litigation. His clients included Isaac Hayes, Yoko Ono, and the Marley family.

He then went in house, devoting his talents to turning Webster Hall Entertainment Corp. into a successful concert promotion and marketing entity throughout the Northeast. “As chief operating officer, I enjoy the diversity of the work and the diversity of styles,” says Pawelczyk. “I bring in business, co-produce events, oversee all transactions and litigation, and counsel on my company’s various ventures and properties.”

While live music still flourishes, Pawelczyk acknowledges that success in the music business, as in the larger entertainment industry, comes from anticipating trends. “Technology and the world itself change quickly, and the law can barely keep up,” he observes. “You need to be the person, respectful but assertive, who provides knowledge that’s absent from a particular situation.”

To learn more about the entertainment industry alumni group featured here, please contact Michelle Johnson '05 at sjulawseipalumni@gmail.com.



Joseph Jerome '93

JOSEPH JEROME '93 shares a similar view from his vantage point as senior vice president, legal and business affairs at CBS Television Distribution. “Practitioners need to be aware of the ever-changing platforms and players who comprise the entertainment universe from all realms,” he says.

Jerome pursued film studies as an undergraduate, but found himself working full time in his family’s insurance business after college. “I always wanted to be in the entertainment industry, and enrolling in the evening program at St. John’s Law provided a bridge to achieving that dream,” he says. “But it wasn’t until taking Professor Beard’s Copyright Law class in my third year that I fully realized I could marry my passion for entertainment with the practice of law.”

After starting his career in New York working at both a boutique law firm, representing clients in the independent film world, and as counsel for various Viacom and Paramount divisions, including Simon & Schuster, Showtime, and Madison Square Garden, Jerome moved to the West Coast for his work with CBS. While currently the production attorney for *Entertainment Tonight* and *The Insider*, over the years he’s worked on multiple other shows including six seasons of *The Montel Williams Show*.

“I’ve been directly involved in the production of an hour of daily television for nearly two decades,” says Jerome. “To be a part of a show’s collaborative team, advising on and vetting broadcast and digital content throughout the day, and then seeing it all come to fruition immediately is extremely gratifying.”

Gratification in entertainment work well done is a tie that binds Jerome to Michelle Johnson, to the Law School alumni group she started, and to the many St. John’s Law alumni who have made—or are making—their mark in the field. “I feel that we’ve only started to scratch the surface,” Johnson says. “There’s so much individual and collective insight and wisdom we can tap and share, and I look forward to facilitating that exchange for the benefit of our industry, our profession, and our *alma mater*.”