

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

DIANE ENGLISH INTERVIEW  
*MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Diane English**  
**Screenwriter & Director**  
**9/29/2011**  
**Interviewed by Talleah McMahon**  
**Total Running Time: 58 minutes and 43 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America  
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Diane English  
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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Let's start talking about your childhood in Buffalo. What was it like living there?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I grew up in Buffalo, New York. It was actually, despite all the jokes that people make about that city, it was a great place to grow up. A lot of ethnic neighborhoods merged, and I think that was very constructive and very great for me as a writer because you are exposed to a lot. I lived in the city, not in the suburbs, and went to school with all kinds of people, and it was a great town culturally, also.

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Buffalo has a rich history in art and music and I enjoyed my time there. But at a certain point, it was time to go.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

So you mentioned in Buffalo, you lived in the city and that it was culturally rich. Did you go to plays and other cultural events as a kid?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

When I was growing up in Buffalo, my family really didn't take me to many cultural events. I kind of found those things on my own. But there was a wonderful theater called the Studio Arena Theater, and a lot of plays were sort of born there before they went out to the rest of the country. And like I

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said, there's a rich history there. Albright-Knox Art Gallery is one of the finest small art galleries in the country.

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Buffalo is always a stop for anybody in the music business who is on tour. Very appreciative audiences and we were just surrounded by it, and it was easy to get to. It was just easy to go and take part in those things.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

And what did your parents do? Tell me a little bit about your family.

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DIANE ENGLISH:

My dad was an electrician at the Niagara Mohawk Power Plant because Buffalo is very close to Niagara Falls, and my mom was a bookkeeper and had great dreams of being a professional singer. She was a singer at a younger-right out of high school. She was in a group and they did some stuff with the USO. And when she got married, my dad put a stop to that.

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So, she was a very frustrated performer and she made sure that her daughter had piano lessons, dance lessons, anything to prepare me to take over from where she left off.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

And did you feel like you wanted to be a performer at that point?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

No, I never wanted to be a performer. That was her thing. And I remember that she entered me in a singing contest. There was a local kiddie show and she taught me how to sing “how much is that doggie in the window.” And when I got there for the audition, I just burst into tears and I just did not want to do it. And it was a very traumatic experience in my young life. But that taught me pretty early on that if I was going to have a career in show business, it would be behind the camera and not in front of.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Did you have that sense that one of your parents had more power in your family than the other?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Yeah. I mean, my dad—and this is kind of common knowledge—was an alcoholic. And so, it’s really hard growing up in a house with that disease so prevalent. So, we never knew which dad we were getting that day, whether we were getting the good dad or the bad dad. And so, it was a very difficult-

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I mean, they say one of the definitions of a comedy writer is somebody who had a painful childhood, so I would definitely put myself in that category. It was tough on my mom, it was tough on my brother, and I was the oldest of the two, so often times, you become the parent in that situation.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

And how was your relationship with your brother? Did you have the sense that they had a different set of expectations for him than they had for you?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

My brother is six years younger than me and so, we weren't close siblings because of the age difference. I found him to be mostly an annoyance, and now we're really tight, of course. But yeah, I mean in that era, my father had expectations of my brother, that he would excel in sports, that he would make a lot of money, and- Very different from me. And I think it was really hard for my brother to live up to those expectations.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

You say that expectations were different for you. What were the expectations for you then?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, they want you to do well in school, and they want you to go on and be a nurse or a teacher because those were good occupations for a woman. Have a family, live happily ever after. Those were really the expectations for young girls at that time.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

And what did you think about that? Is that what your plan was growing up?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I didn't really have a plan until I first went to New York City at the age of 12. My mom and her girlfriend who had a daughter my age decided to take a little road trip, and we went to New York and the minute I hit New York at the age of 12, I knew this was where I was going to live. This was where I was going to go, and everything that I did from that point on was designed to get me there. I just fell in love with the city.

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I mean, my mother and her girlfriend couldn't wait to leave. It was so overwhelming, and we were staying in some horrible hotel in Times Square,

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filled with hookers. But for me, it was just absolutely fascinating. It was a big life. I could see having a big life in New York.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

So talk to me about that, how you made that transition from being in Buffalo to getting yourself to this new life, basically, in Manhattan.

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, I went to Buffalo State College because I couldn't afford to go to any of the other colleges that I was accepted- It was just going to be too much of my life paying back loans. So I thought I wanted to be a journalist and so I was disappointed in that, Buffalo State didn't have a journalism course. But I thought, all right, I'll just go and I'll get a teaching degree and then somehow I'll get myself to New York and I'll get a job on the New York Times. That was my idea.

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And along the way I met my mentor, Warren Enters, who was a very well-known theater director in New York and had decided to take a sabbatical and teach, and he wound up at my college and I wound up taking a playwriting course from him and got the bug that that's really what I wanted to do. So I got my teaching degree but the minute I graduated, I spent six

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months teaching and then saved enough money to move to New York, and then I was there for 12 years.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

So, what was your first job when you moved to New York?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

My first job was actually in public television, and I got a job working as a secretary for a part of PBS that sold programs to schools and other institutions. There weren't any DVD's at that time. So, it was all- That technology was first starting. And then I worked my way into a situation with Jac Venza, the legendary Jac Venza,-

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-who headed up the theater in America, a division of PBS. And I learned so much there because there were so many playwrights and wonderful film writers working there at the time. So, it was just one little step at a time, with no money, and... I didn't even have a phone the first nine months that I lived in New York 'cause I couldn't afford one. It was either food or phone. So, if you wanted to reach me,-

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-you had to leave a note taped to my mailbox in the lobby of my building in an apartment that I couldn't afford, but... It was an exciting time, and of all the

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things that have happened to me in my life, I still look back on that first year in New York as the most exciting year I have ever spent.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Why is that?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, New York just sort of saved me. The direction that my life was going to go in was that I would teach and get married and have kids and that would be my life. Fine. But I just had a bigger plan for myself. And New York, I feel like really invented me, in a way. It's just the greatest place in the world.

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And when I moved away it was not something I really particularly wanted to do, but I did because it was the right thing to do at the time, and I just recently come back.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

So, talk to me about the class that you took in discovering playwriting.

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I liked to write from a very early age. I remember writing a little essay in second grade about- for dental week. It was something about a tooth, I don't know. But my teacher raved over it and when you get that kind of feedback as a kid, it just kind of sticks with you, and then later on in high school, I would write parodies of the novels that we had to read. House of The Seven Gables and, you know...

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And it was my way of going in my room, shutting the door, taking out my little Smith Corona typewriter, and shutting out the rest of life, which was sometimes not that pleasant. I think when I got to college and I started to take this class, playwriting, I learned that I had an ear for dialogue, and it was so exciting to write something and then see your fellow classmates perform it and that I could make an audience laugh, I could have an impact that way.

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And I was pretty far gone at that point. That was what I was going to do. I was going to find a way to be a professional playwright. I was going to be the female Neil Simon. That was my goal. I didn't realize that you had to actually pay your rent and feed yourself, and young playwrights aren't really able to do that very easily, so I segued into public television as my first job and wound up working with playwrights, so it was just a great situation.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

So, you went from being a secretary to writing at some point. I'm wondering if you can keep talking about that transition.

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I was always writing while I was working as a secretary. I'd go home at night and I would work on things. And because I was working in the theater of America division, I was able to show my work to people like Lindsay Law and Bo Goldman and get some feedback. And so, eventually I wound up in a very experimental television division called the television laboratory-

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-and we were doing very, very interesting work there, and again, I was there in an administrative position, I was writing grant proposals. And they had raised money to do the first television movie, full-length television movie, for public television called *The Lathe of Heaven*. And they hired a very fancy Hollywood writer and he did a couple of drafts, and the director and the producers were very close to having to go shoot and were not happy with the script.

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So, they knew I was a writer and they said, "Just read this and give us some thoughts on it, What you think someone can do to improve this." And I took it home and I rewrote it. And that's the script they shot. And so, that was my big break. I got a Writers Guild Award nomination for that. And then I was told it's time to go out to Hollywood and get an agent and that's what I did.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

You make it sound really easy. And I'm wondering, was it really that easy for you...

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DIANE ENGLISH:

No, it wasn't that easy. I mean, getting to that point was not easy but... I'm always a person with a plan and I kind of had a plan, so I took advantage of the opportunities that I had in public television to work with certain people who helped me, and if there was an opportunity, I took it. I wasn't shy about it, and so, I think taking that script home and rewriting it was a bit of a bold move.

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And I wasn't sure how it would be received but I thought, "What the heck, I might as well." It was easier to just do it than give notes on it. So, yeah, but I had struggled. I had tried to get an agent before that and nobody wanted to know for me, but the minute that thing hit the air, then I was able to get an agent and move ahead, so...

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

So, talk to me about your early career in LA.

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DIANE ENGLISH:

In the category of lucky breaks, again, I was writing television movies for various networks and a few of them got made. And CBS was looking to do its first half hour comedy series that it could own, because the financial and syndication rules were changing and so they were allowed to own a half hour. And they wanted to develop something based on an idea that they had-

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-about a female district attorney in New York who was someone who tried very grisly murder cases and- based on somebody that they had actually knew existed. And so, they asked me if I was interested in doing this, and I wasn't. At that time, I wasn't interested in doing half hour comedy because it really didn't have a good reputation at the time. This predated Cosby and it was a lot of jiggle, what we call jiggle comedy,-

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-it just seemed kind of dumb and I didn't want to do it. And my then husband said to me, "No, you really should go and at least explore this." So I went to New York for 3 weeks, and I sat in the DA's office, and my tour guide was Rudy Giuliani because he was second in command to Robert Morgenthau at that time. And I... You can't make these stories up, the things that go in and out of that building.

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And I got very inspired, and then I wrote this show, a pilot for the show, but I had no idea what format, so I was writing for scenes to be shot outside and it was kind of a hybrid of what it should have been. And they seemed to like it, and instead of going to the pilot process, they just ordered six episodes right away.

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So suddenly, I was just thrown into this world and didn't know anything about it, didn't know what I was doing. So they wanted to preserve my voice as a writer but knew I didn't know how to make a show, so they assigned two seasoned producers to me, Saul Turteltaub and Bernie Orenstein, who had done *That Girl* and many other wonderful shows. And they totally showed me the ropes. I mean, these guys were my godfathers. They made me do everything, learn everything, sit in the editing room with them.

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They even made me do audience warm up once because they said, "One of these days, the warm up guy isn't going to show up and you're going to have to do it." I was awful at it, but I approached it as a teacher. So, I give them so much credit. They really showed me how to run a show, and I took all of that with me on to the next one.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

At this time, were there a lot of other women in these meetings that you were having? When you were talking about pitching shows...

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DIANE ENGLISH:

When I was starting out in series, there were very few women running shows. There were very few women in the writers room. There were very few women anywhere other than in front of the camera. So, there weren't a lot of role models to look to. And in a way, I was kind of forging my own way. But I have to say, I'm often asked this question.

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Are you the only woman and did find a lot of resistance? I was embraced by some wonderful men who really- Like Saul and Bernie Orenstein, Turteltaub, and people who ran Warner Brothers Television, people at CBS. They just helped me. And I know it's unusual, it's not the norm, but I got a good helping hand from a lot of great guys.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

After that, you were able to go on and work on *My Sister Sam* as an executive producer. Can you just talk about that and what that felt like?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

My show *Foley Square* had been canceled after 14 episodes. It was critically well-received but didn't quite catch on. And then CBS liked- they liked what I

did, so they had a new show called *My Sister Sam* with Pam Dawber and they had done a pilot and they felt it needed improvement and they wanted to bring a new team on to do the series, and they asked me if I would come in and run that show.

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Now, this would be the first time I'd be running a show on my own, so it was a scary proposition. And that first season was a lot of learning curve. I didn't have Saul and Bernie with me anymore, my great godfathers, and I was really going to have to do this by myself. And it was the first time I was hiring a team of writers and the first time I was running the writers room, and I made a lot of mistakes and I learned a lot.

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But it was a tough first year. Very, very tough. It's a hard job. It's the hardest job in show business. I don't care what anybody says. Running a half hour comedy is the hardest job in show business. And I never was home. And I would sometimes sleep in the office, the hours were so long, 'cause I was figuring it out, a routine yet that worked for me.

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And we'd be there at 9 AM for a read through and then did a lot of rewriting. Sometimes driving home at 3, 4 AM. And 2 or 3 hours of sleep and a shower, and turn around and come right back. And I did that for a year. And it was tough going. Very, very tough.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

What makes it so hard?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

You're dealing with a lot of personalities. You're putting on a play and filming it in front of a live audience every week. You have to have a lot of advanced planning. You have to know how to cut a show. You're breaking stories for upcoming episodes, while you are rehearsing and producing and rewriting the current episode,-

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-and you are also cutting and mixing the previous episode. So, it's a lot of work, and because the hours are so late and you have to go in the writers room and be funny and write jokes, it's really challenging.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

You said that it was a difficult year. Is there some particular memory that comes to mind, that represents how hard it was?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I think that there was some politics going on, as can happen sometimes. There was really somebody else who would have wanted to be running the

show, and so there was a certain division among the troops, and... That was a real eye-opening experience also.

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The other person who wanted to be running the show was a woman. So, it's like that old thing, "this town isn't big enough for both of us." It was ridiculous, and then we did make peace with it and the second season was much, much easier.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Was there a point where you felt like you turned the corner?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Yes, I think at the beginning of the second season, I had enough confidence that I knew that I knew what I was doing at this point, and that we could make a good show if we all worked together, we were all on the same page. And I had a lot of difficult conversations with people straightening them out, and just decided to really take charge of the situation and get it done. So, that was the turning point.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

And how did the show do?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Did great in its first season. In the second season, it began to falter because there was some pretty stiff competition that the show had not had on another network before. And by the end of the second season, I think the decision was made not to go forward with the third season, which I was okay with because I had another show that I wanted to do very badly called *Murphy Brown*.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

It's the perfect segue. So, tell me about *Murphy Brown*.

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DIANE ENGLISH:

*Murphy Brown* took place in a- It was a workplace comedy and they were kind of out of favor at the time. Nobody was really doing them and I was always very fond of workplace comedies. Murphy worked in a newsroom for a big network, like CBS, and she was a co-anchor of a magazine show called FYI. And we put the show together at a time when women like Diane Sawyer, Barbara Walters and Connie Chung were becoming almost bigger stars than the people they were interviewing.

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And that was really a big breakthrough, because at that time, there were no female anchors in the news and it was a struggle for women to maintain their position in that arena. And so I thought, well, this would be a really fun thing to do. Let's put her in there. We can make the show very topical. And we can let this character carry the comedy, rather than be the person who reacts to the funny thing that the men are doing.

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So that was my idea. Nobody had done political satire in a long time. So we had a workplace comedy, political satire, a rather rude woman at the center of the show who was going to carry the comedy, and she was just coming back from the Betty Ford Center when we meet her where she had gone for treatment because she had a big drinking problem. You didn't see much of that in the 80s, or before.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

So, how easy of a show was it for you to sell?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

CBS bought the show right away, off the pitch, but they asked if I could change her from a recovering alcoholic to somebody who was just coming back to work after being at a spa because she was very stressed out. And then they

asked if instead of turning 40, which Murphy was doing in the pilot, that she could be 30.

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So I said, “No, I think that would really change the whole idea of what I am trying to accomplish here and I don’t think so, but I’ll make a deal with you. Let me write it my way. And then if you don’t think that I’ve accomplished what I am telling you I think I can—making the character likable and relatable and all those things that they were afraid would not happen—then I’ll take another pass at it and do it your way.”

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So, said, “Okay.” In those days, they would give you your head; If you earned it creatively, they would let you take that risk. They don't do that anymore, but I wrote my version and then the writers strike, the 1988 writers strike, hit which meant that I couldn't touch the script. So if they wanted to shoot that pilot, they had to shoot my first draft that came right out of the typewriter. And that’s what they did. Another lucky break.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Now how did you feel the night before it aired? Were you nervous? Were you excited? I mean, what was going through your head?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

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Very nervous. It's opening night, really. I mean, you put so much time and effort into things, and by the time it aired, we had already shot six episodes and we felt pretty good about them, but you never know how the audience is going to react. And we came on the air in November. It was football season. We were Monday night at 9:00 going up against football and it took us a year. I think we were number 30 or 33 in the ratings for the first year.

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We didn't really crack the top 10 until the summer of our second season. So people who think that that show was an immediate audience favorite, but it wasn't. It took a while for it to catch on because it was a smart show. We weren't writing down to people and it became a word of mouth type of show. But the critics loved it, that really helped us, that kept us on the air. And then, we had gotten a lot of Emmy nominations, our first season,-

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-so then that made people want to tune in to see what other people were talking about. And eventually, instead of it just being mainly a female audience, we got all the guys too. As soon as football went off in December, they all came to see what their wives were watching. And then, we were consistently in the number 1, 2 or 3 spot.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

What do you think attracted people to it? Why did she catch on?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Women didn't see themselves on television in a very accurate way. I think women were looking for someone to relate to and they loved her. They embraced her. She was very accomplished. She was funny. You have to give a lot of credit to Candice Bergen because she would do anything for a laugh. And I think when you look like that and you are willing to take a pratfall, people love you for it.

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There were many reasons I think that people tuned in and I think sometimes just to see what she was wearing too. She looked great in clothes and we had every fashion designer throwing clothes at us which was really fun.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Now, talk to me about the Emmys. It was a difficult first year, but then, there are several nominations. Can you just talk to me about what that was like to find out that it was nominated for so many different categories and you, yourself, were nominated?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

The day that those Emmy nominations came out and we found that we were nominated for 11 Emmys in the first season, but we were only number 33 in

the ratings, we were shocked, thrilled. I mean, the flowers, the champagne, the whole show shut down for half a day. We were so excited because we had worked so hard and it was so nice to be recognized like that.

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And I personally was recognized for writing a pilot also. That script that came right out of my typewriter, untouched, that we shot without changing a word, was pretty great. And I wound up winning that Emmy also, so that was a highlight, a life highlight, I think.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Dan Quayle was a person who came up for Murphy, and I'm wondering where that came from? Was that from you, or the other writers? How did he become a target and why?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, I'm a bit of a political animal and so I had this platform every week, I tried not to abuse it, but I was horrified at the level of intelligence of our vice president and it was scary that he was a heartbeat away from the presidency. I don't think we could ever get away now with what we did then, but we handled some pretty serious topics.

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And obviously, I'm a well known liberal democrat and that's what my character was. And we had very smart writers, and we would have to almost predict what the headlines would be in advance because our shows were filmed 3 weeks in advance of when they would air. And we got pretty good at it, I would have to say.

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We sometimes really hit it on the nose. But it was amazing to me, looking back, that we were able to take a stand on so many issues and not be called on the carpet for it. And I think that's what happens when you are a number 1 show, or the number 2, number 3 show, they kind of look the other way because obviously the audience was embracing us.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

When you say you were nervous that he's a heartbeat away from the presidency, it's just- Why? What was it about him that made you concerned about him as a figure?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Dan Quayle was the male version of Sarah Palin. We all know who Sarah Palin is now, and Dan Quayle and Sarah Palin, in my opinion, have a lot in common. Their grasp of history is unusual. They mispronounce things, they misspeak.

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The famous Dan Quayle incident of being at a spelling bee and correcting a child for spelling potato inaccurately when in fact it had been accurate and his spelling was inaccurate... So, that's who was in the West Wing. That's who was in and out of the Oval office, and we just had had enough of that.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

So leading into when you decided that Murphy is going to have a child, can you just talk to me about how that decision came about?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I was searching around, in the third season, for a way of freshening up the show, giving her a challenge that she hadn't faced before. And what would be the biggest challenge in this character's life? Taking care of another person and being a mom. And Candice and I had talked about this and tossed it around from day one. Because Candice is such a good mom, she had a hard time imagining this character would go through life without having a child.

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On the other hand, I'm not a mom, and I did not have a hard time imagining that. But it seemed like a good idea at the time, and so we got her pregnant, and it was a storyline that carried us through that whole season. Was extremely popular, went into the fourth season. At the end of the fourth season, she had the baby.

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Episode 101, she had the baby, which was a very famous episode. And... I remember somebody asking me if I was concerned about conservative watchdog groups taking me to task on this because she was a single woman electing to have a child on her own. That was an interesting dilemma for Dan Quayle.

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Because he came out very strongly against this choice, but yet what was the alternative? Because his administration, the Republicans, were very anti-choice. So it kind of backed him into a corner.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

How did you find out what he said? And do you remember- If you could approximate what he said.

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DIANE ENGLISH:

He was making a speech in San Francisco, and he had not seen the episode, and in his speech, he was trying to find a way to bring attention to this new term that they were using because it was an election year coming up called "family values." And so, he decided that he would go after the most popular television character, and even though he had never seen the show, he essentially criticized her for making a "lifestyle choice."

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And making the decision to have a child just another “lifestyle choice.” And so, I was off the show, I was in my car, I was driving around, and my phone was ringing and my assistant said, “You better come back to the office. Every news organization is on the phone. They want a statement from you.” And I said, “About what?” And so she read me what he had said. And I went, “Oh god, alright. This was his revenge for all those Dan Quayle jokes.”

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One of my goals with the show was to blur the line between fiction and nonfiction, so we would often bring the real newsmakers onto the show and they would react with our characters as if they were real people. There was a poll, I think once Diane Sawyer left *60 minutes*, who should replace her, and there was a New York Times poll and Murphy Brown came in first. So, it was all working. So then, when Dan Quayle decided he was going to blame her for the fall of Western civilization,-

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-I was sitting there, going, “Am I in a film? Am I in a movie? This is just surreal.” And it went on like that. It became a huge issue about choice, about women in general, classes, what family values really means, which to me was very exclusionary. If you’re this kind of family, it’s okay. If you’re that kind of family, it’s not. And it did have an impact on the election.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

In what way?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Bill Clinton won. There were many years of Republican rule, and then I think that, for lots of reasons, it started to feel to the country that there was something unkind going on. And this was a fresh face, this was somebody new.

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“The man from hope,” you know, and it’s all sounding a little familiar, right? And then I got a telegram from president elect Clinton saying, “Thank you for helping,” and it wasn’t our intention to do that but, it kind of did.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

If you could just explain how you actually responded, that day that you heard about it and the press was waiting- they were waiting for you to say something.

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DIANE ENGLISH:

So, I go back to my office and I’ve got all kinds of requests for a statement. Dan Rather asked me to actually sit next to him at the anchor desk and open the show with him. And I called Howard Stringer, who is now Sir Howard

Stringer, who had run the news division at CBS for a very long time, and I said, “What should I do?” And he said, “Don’t be baited into anything. Just make one thoughtful statement and then back off and let everybody else do the talking.”

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So, the essence of my statement was if the vice president believes that a woman is not capable of raising a child on her own, then he better make sure that abortion remains safe and legal. So that- Then he- they did not know how to respond to that. The next day, Candice Bergen called me. She was in New York, I was in Los Angeles. And she said—and it was really early—she said, “Have you seen the New York Times?” And I said, “No.” She said, “Go down to the end of your driveway and get the paper.”

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And above the fold was a picture of Candice holding a baby as Murphy Brown and that statement, and then all hell broke loose after that. So, we really thought we were in a Preston Sturges film. We really did not know what had hit us. And we tried to lay really low but the debate raged on. It was a good one too. It was good that people were talking about this.

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You can sneak up on people when you’re doing a comedy. It’s not like you’re being forced to eat your broccoli or here, take this cough medicine. We’re not lecturing you. We’re just taking a subject and we tried to show both sides of it and bring out the humor, but our character always had a particular point of view. I made no apologies for that. I’m glad I did it.

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Sometimes people will say, “Well, you’re abusing- you would be abusing your privilege having this half hour.” It’s my turn, sorry. I feel if the other guys have the stage and the microphone for 12 years, then it’s okay for us to have a half hour every Monday to say the other side of things. I think it’s just easier to get a point across, sometimes, with comedy than with drama.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

You left the show for a while. Can you talk to me about that briefly, and then sort of, how it came to be that you came back for that final season?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I left the show after the 101 episode. It was always planned that I would leave after the end of the fourth season to start another show, and I started with my then husband, a company. We had other shows that we wanted to do and left my wonderful writing team in place to carry on. But I left them with a huge job, also. I left them with a character who now had a baby,-

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-and it was up to them to figure out how to integrate this child into a show that was so embraced by single independent women, and now suddenly she was a mom. So, there was a bit of a struggle with that. I came back in the 6th season to consult for a short time and then essentially, it had to go on its own,

and had many different executive producers and different characters coming and going.

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It went for ten years. We decided to do a tenth season, if I came back to the show and we could do something really kind of edgy. So, we made a decision to give this character, who always felt that she was immortal, breast cancer. And the Television Critics Association was just like, "This is not a funny topic. You will never pull this off."

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And... we knew that we could because, having done so much research with breast cancer patients, the humor is the savior, and finding the humor in a very dark situation is what people always told us kept them going. So, we knew we had a lot of stories and that was the way we ended it.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Do you remember any of the things in which you used, humor, to make breast cancer funny?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, I mean, breast cancer isn't funny but... when she had to face the possibility that she might have to have a mastectomy, she brought Frank

Fontana, her best friend, with her to the doctor's office to look at samples of breasts for reconstructive surgery 'cause she wanted the male opinion.

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And we got some really good- we got a wonderful scene out of that, because all the different sizes are in a box... and just went on like that. And we got a lot of important information across too, there was a big uptick in the number of women getting mammograms for the first time, and so, we think we actually were able to perform a bit of a public service at the same time too, 'cause if could happen to her, it could happen to anybody.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Do you remember that number? The percentage of women?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

We were told that there was a very large uptick in the number of women who got mammograms for the first time, in the 30% area. That's the power of television. It really sets you back on your heels. You think, "Wow." Use it for good and not for evil. You can really make a change, you can make an impact with a half hour comedy show.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

Your whole career, pretty much, you were focused on, it seems to me, advancing the image of women on television. And so I'm wondering if you could just talk about what you feel like you were trying to do, and to what extent, you feel like you've succeeded in that?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I never set out to advance the image of women on television. I just wrote what came out of me and what appealed to me, and the result of that was that I wrote television shows that had women at the center, that were independent and strong and vulnerable at the same time, and without going so far as to be preachy about it.

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It was really the way these characters lived their lives, that was the statement. But it wasn't something I sat down and said, "Okay, now I'm going to write a character who is going to smash through the glass ceiling." And first and foremost, entertaining, comedy, funny, but with somebody in the center who I feel I did not see very often.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Do you think the image of women in television is a little bit behind where we actually are in society?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I think television reflects what's going on in society for the most part. It doesn't really dictate to society what to be, I think it's reflective. But I'm disturbed by a lot of what I see on television, the reality shows, *The Real Housewives* shows... I feel like that's the Dark Ages, that we're going back.

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I don't see too many Murphy Brown's. I mean, the interesting thing is that ten years after Murphy had her baby, Jennifer Anniston's character, on *Friends* had a baby under almost the exact same circumstances. Single woman having a baby. Nobody said, "Boo." Nobody said, "Boo." So, it's a matter of timing too. But I do think we reflect.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Switching gears a little bit to the women's movement, because you were coming of age as the movement was growing, and I'm wondering, were you paying attention to it at all? What did you think of the women's movement?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I didn't read *The Feminine Mystique* when it came out. I was too young and uninterested, but there were rumblings. I mean, look at my mom. She had an ambition, she had a dream, she had a goal, and yet she was a homemaker who

was playing the role of the good wife and it wasn't what she was going to be allowed to do. And I looked at that and I went, "Oh. That's not right, that doesn't feel right."

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-You should be able to go off and do that. And why are my choices of career, these sort of careers that are supposed to be good careers for women? Why can't I be an astronaut—not that I want to be an astronaut, but—why didn't you see this, why didn't you see that?" It was just percolating, starting to percolate to the surface when I was in my early years.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

In 1968, there was a protest at Miss America. Do you remember it?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, not only do I remember it, but I wrote a 13 part series for HBO that never made it to the air, called *The F Word*, and it was about this movement, the feminist movement, and it was all stories that you did not know. Not the classic ones but- or a story you did know from the point of view of a different kind of character than you would expect to find in that situation.

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HBO didn't put it on the air because they didn't think any men would watch it. But, so I did quite a bit of research into that. I always loved the Miss America

pageant. I grew up watching it. It was always a big event in our house. My grandfather could always pick out the winner from the first 50—or maybe it was 48 states at that time—he always managed to pick. And so... it wasn't until later that I realized, wait minute,-

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-why are they parading around in bathing suits? What is this? It was an interesting time to be a girl, because there were so many images that we grew up with and incorporate into our cultures—women—that we then were seriously questioning.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

What about Roe v Wade, when that passed? Do you remember that?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Yes, I do remember when Roe v Wade passed. And I remember very vividly, friends of mine who had gotten pregnant in college, and what you had to go through in order to have an abortion—how dangerous it was, how frightening. I remember there was the go-to guy, who really was the coat hanger guy, and...

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You think about that time and when it passed, it was like, "Well, what took so long?" And it's under fire, it's been under fire ever since. Equal rights for

women, why would you not campaign for that? It didn't seem like having- The argument against it was that, "It's already constitutional. We don't need a constitutional amendment."

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And yet, there are women who are still struggling for equal pay, for equal treatment in sports, equal treatment everywhere, so yes, we campaigned for it.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Looking back now, do you think it matters that it didn't pass?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Oh, that's... whether it mattered that ERA passed or not. I think we have done a pretty good job of advancing ourselves as women without that protection. But I think symbolically, it was a blow. It felt like a failure when there had been so much momentum. And I worry about the up and coming generations of women.

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They don't really get what we went through. Take a lot for granted, I think. And I'm glad they have a lot more opportunity than I had, but I think it's important for them to know how they got it. And that's a big part of the story, that we weren't entirely successful and feminism remains a dirty word today.

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If you are a feminist, you aren't allowed to shave your legs. You can't wear makeup, you have to hate men. I mean, this is what I'm talking about when I say we didn't quite get the message across, and yet we managed to break through so much of that glass ceiling. It's exciting now to be on a TV set and watch how many women are in the writers room and how many women are directing, and producing and... Come a long way, baby.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

I'm interested in that idea of young women not understanding, because if you could just push that one step further, they don't understand, and that what? Why does it concern you if they don't understand? What's the danger in that?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, if our daughters never had a friend who had to have a back alley abortion, then they're not going to particularly get on the "we must save Roe v Wade" bandwagon. It's going to seem like a marginal issue to them, or irrelevant. But nothing could be further from the truth. I mean, that was a terrible dark time and...

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I think that it's something that comes up in every election. It becomes a big political football and I think there's a certain amount of ambivalence about it,

because the right to choose, and not have the government tell you whether you're going to have a child or not, it's just something that we really have to preserve and it takes a lot of persistence. You can't be ambivalent about it.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Oh, I totally consider myself a feminist, yeah. I mean, I don't go around wearing a t-shirt that says, "I'm a feminist." But, I think you are a feminist by your actions. I think a lot of men are feminists. I think people don't realize that they are. Again, it doesn't go to that old stereotype of, "You can't shave your legs, you can't wear makeup," and all of that. All of us who try to take down the barriers to human achievement are feminists,-

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-and it benefits men too, because everybody got stuck in a role that wasn't necessarily productive, and now men can stay home and be with their kids if they want to and women go out to work. This is all- We're the guinea pig generation for this. This is all experimental stuff, but the fact that it's happening is great.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

What's the most meaningful piece of advice you've ever received?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

I think the most meaningful piece of advice I've received is, "Don't worry if not everyone likes you." You can't please everybody, and if you try to please everybody, you are going to wind up making yourself miserable.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

What advice would you give to a young woman on the work-life balance?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, there's a lot of talk about how you live a balanced life if you're a woman with a big career... and I think sometimes living a balanced life is overrated. There are times in your life where you cannot live a balanced life, and you shouldn't. If you've got a dream and a goal, sometimes you've got to just go for it, because you make compromises, you're not necessarily going to get there.

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And then, there are other times in your life when you can step back from that and say, "Okay, now I'm going to relax a little bit. I'm going to live a little bit of

a different kind of life.” I don't think you can have it all, and I don't think you can be all things to all people. It's a myth. You can't. You have to pick and choose, and your life is a book and there are chapters in the book that you go through.

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And I had a very long set of chapters that were all about my dream of creating a hit television show, and then, there was a point in time where I stepped back from that. I went, “I'm tired. I think I deserve a break,” and my break went on for quite some time. I had to recharge myself. I wanted to reconnect with my friends. I wanted to reconnect with my family.

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And now I feel like I'm reopening yet another chapter, act 3, where I'm going to do some more work. And I have not been good at trying to make all those things happen at one time. I don't think anybody's good at it.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

How do you think things have changed in the business, from the time that you started till now?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

Well, I didn't look around and see a lot of women in the business in power positions when I first started, and now I do see a lot of them. I think it's

fantastic where at the Emmys this year, I think 4 of the 5 directing nominees for comedies were women. Wow, that was- That's unusual, but it's good. Little by little, one step at a time, it's becoming commonplace.

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TALLEAH MCMAHON:

Why do you think that is? Do you think that women shied away from leadership positions, or that the opportunities weren't available to them?

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DIANE ENGLISH:

That's a complicated question. I think it's a- there's a combination of both of those things. I think that the opportunities really weren't there for women. It wasn't normal to see a woman behind the camera, commanding a stage. At the same time, women were used to playing a certain role, and trying to balance motherhood and household chores and holding a job.

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And it just sometimes proves to be too much. So the women coming up the ranks with me, we all struggled with this whole issue of balance. The women still had the primary child rearing duties, did most of the housekeeping, meal planning ,and then had to go and work on a show with such demanding hours. Really hard to do.

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# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

We all needed wives, and I think some women just opted out of that. Just like, that's a little too much. But clearly, the support systems now are changing, and it's more common to see women in-

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And when I was at Warner Brothers, they began a day care facility for women working on the lot. They were the first ones to do it, and that was the beginning of seeing more people like me walking around the lot with a director's hat on or running a show. It's fun now to go and see how many of us there are.

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