

EPISODE 715

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:34.6]

FT: Today's guest is no stranger to film and TV, Emellie O'Brien has worked on The Amazing Spider-man 2, Showtimes Billions and the CBS drama Madam Secretary. She saves production teams tens of thousands of dollars, maybe more with a unique job; eco supervisor. Let's just say you're not going to find any plastic water bottles on Emellie's sets.

Welcome back to so money, everyone. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Today's guest is Emellie O'Brien and she's making waves in the film industry with her company Earth Angel. After receiving a film degree at the prestigious NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Emellie started to notice that many film crews were anything but eco-friendly on set.

She began her business as a way to educate and inform producers and crew members on how to be sustainable, from starting recycling and composting programs to donating unused food to charity. Today, we'll talk to Emily about her beginnings, supporting herself as a teenager, including paying her way through NYU and how she built her business from scratch.

Here's Emellie O'Brien.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:45.3]

FT: Emellie O'Brien, welcome to So Money. It's great to connect with you.

[0:01:49.6]

EO: Thank you so much for having me.

[0:01:50.9]

FT: I want to learn all about your brilliant business. I love your story and you're only 29 and already you have figured out a way to make an impact in the world and to utilize, leverage your skills as a producer. You went to NYU Tisch School, probably thinking you were going to pursue film and television the traditional way and you did everything but. Now you're helping producers on set to keep their sets more eco-friendly, reduce waste, leave a smaller footprint. Tell us how you came up with this idea and this plan and also where did you get your entrepreneurial spirit?

[0:02:30.4]

EO: Absolutely. Yeah, so really my journey began while I was at NYU at Tisch, because I was very motivated to study film and TV in the first place, because I really wanted to help create socially and environmentally conscious content. Then shortly after graduating from film school and entering the professional entertainment industry, I had this awakening if you will where I kind of realized that although we tend to be a very sort of progressive industry in our content, we aren't always as progressive in our practice.

I really felt compelled to do something about our industry's waste epidemic. We're very unique, we're very circus-like, we exist somewhere for a very finite amount of time and we bring in tons of people and resources and then we disappear. Of course, there's just a natural wasteful element to that. I worked with a producer. I actually convinced a producer to hire me as at the time we were calling it an environmental steward.

I got to work on the set and I really had a interesting time trying to change practices of folks that had been doing their jobs a certain way for many years and definitely got some backlash and pushback in certain areas, but you know what happened was folks really started to come around to this idea of, oh there's somebody on set all the time and they're responsible for overseeing our show's environmental impact.

People really responded to that, that level of accountability really elevated everyone's awareness, because you know we're a collaborative industry. Nobody makes a film or television

show alone. This has to be a collaborative effort. I find that that behavioral change piece of getting everybody involved and aware is really that the key to shifting the dialogue. It was actually on that set where I got the nickname of earth angel. People started calling me that on walkie-talkie.

When I finally did decide to transition from a freelance sustainability consultant to forming my business, it was a no-brainer what I was going to call the company, because still to this day when I walk on set people don't actually know my name. They just call me earth angel, which is fine. It's a great brand awareness thing that we have going for us. Yeah, that's how it all got started.

[0:05:07.1]

FT: I want to talk more about your convincing efforts with producers and how you're growing the business, but first going back to something I asked earlier which is your entrepreneurial spirit, is that what led you to film in the first place? Because I feel like in order to pursue the showbiz industry, you have to be able to create and want to create and that is a big part of entrepreneurship.

[0:05:28.9]

EO: It absolutely is. I do attribute a lot of my entrepreneurial spirit to my creative spirit. My mom was an entrepreneur. She started a mortgage company with two partners and so I was raised by an entrepreneur and by strong women also. I was always taught that if you want something, then you should just go for it. If you see a void, if you see something missing then fill it.

Definitely being in film school and the techniques you're taught, the history and the language, but putting it all together that's all on you. Then you know to see it through all the way to post and everything, that takes a lot of motivation and self-determination. I found very quickly that I really thrived in in those creative environments where you know I could be the logistical piece that put everything together which was why I was drawn to producing and I minored in producing when I was at Tisch.

I helped all of these different pieces come together. Yeah, it's definitely something that it is required to have ambition and that motivation to just go for something when you feel like there's a there's a need.

[0:06:56.4]

FT: You're working on big shows, shows that I watch. I don't have a lot of time for TV, but I do actually watch some of the shows that you are working on including Billions on Showtime, HBO's vinyl CBS drama Madam Secretary, which actually some of those shows film in our neighborhood. It's really cool to watch as they're unfolding some scenes. You've worked on The Amazing Spider-Man 2 movie, which I believe earned a really huge title, right? Is like the most eco-friendly set in the history of sets?

[0:07:28.2]

EO: It was the most eco-friendly blockbuster in Sony Pictures history.

[0:07:33.0]

FT: Well, I think that's still pretty amazing. Now looking back, convincing that first producer wasn't simple. Your story is inspiration for anybody listening who has an idea, you know there's a need for it you know that it could do well, it has potential, but at the end of the day all it takes is that first person, that first client, that first business to say, "Yes, I'll take you on." From there of course, you can build more and more of a name for yourself. What was that first going to market experience like and how did you ultimately convince producers that this was worth investing in? Because look, there are budgets and you would look at a movie's budget or a film's budget and laugh sometimes at some of the things that they're spending their money on. How did you make it convincing?

[0:08:24.2]

EO: I think the important distinction is that I started out as a freelance consultant. I think for producers, it was a lot easier for them to say, "Okay, I'm going to allocate the amount of money I

would allocate to a production assistant, let's say, to this person and this is their role.” That was what I did for several years before I started the business.

Transitioning into that, that I'm now a vendor, I'm not a crew member, that was a lot more challenging actually, because I think that producers – most producers are very aware of this issue, the fact that we're wasteful and that we spend a ton of money on wasted resources. I'm sure that it's not necessarily something that people are – you're educating them and by the way did you know you make a lot of waste? Like people are aware. It's just that they're under the gun so often to make these projects, to deliver them on time and in budget, that this just isn't their primary focus.

By me coming in and saying, “You don't have to worry about this. I'm going to worry about it for you. Then by the way, it can actually save you money down the road reducing your waste bills.” The fact that we eliminate plastic water bottles and our sets saves in the tens of thousands of dollars depending on the size of the show. I started really focusing on the cost-benefit analysis of everything and showing well by doing X action, you can yield Y results. It has this monetary savings benefit to you too. That's when the wheels started turning and folks are really starting to pay attention.

[0:10:11.1]

FT: Yeah, the numbers don't lie and especially if we can show that there is a cost benefit and that there's going to be a return on the investment. So smart. Tell us some before and afters, like what were producers in Hollywood sets doing before you arrived and what changes do you make and how much – what are some of the biggest cost savings?

[0:10:34.1]

EO: I think the biggest chain honestly is the fact that we have essentially created this department. It's like a new department. We call ourselves the eco department and we're most well-known for Earth Angel is the fact that we recruit and train and staff and supervise these eco-production assistants that work on all of our shows.

There is this level of accountability that's really heightened on all of the productions and I think that's the key for us getting these results, these real tangible quantifiable results. Previous to us there are certainly other organizations looking at this and folks who were aware and working on this. There is an organization called the PGA Green, which is a committee of the Producers Guild of America. There's all of the major studios joined in on this effort and they created unified best practices lists and a carbon calculator and green vendor guides.

This type of information was out there and available, but I find that in a situation like production where everything is just chaos all the time, without somebody there implementing, overseeing and working through the challenges with people, a lot of these resources just don't get utilized and the tools don't get utilized. That was what I was noticing.

Then the other side of it that I think really started to transform was the level of reporting and analysis that we were starting to really expand upon. We have some of the most robust reporting capabilities right now than we've ever had and I take a lot of pride in that in terms of just about anything related to a production's environmental impact. There is the carbon footprint, there's how much waste was diverted, how much water was consumed, how much paper was used.

We are constantly pushing the envelope in terms of accuracy and analysis of data, because we know that at the end of the day you can't manage what you don't measure. We're really trying to again show these people the numbers, because that's really the universal language that so many people speak in terms of trying to promote better practices.

[0:13:04.0]

FT: You can't manage what you don't measure. Everybody got that? Monday motivation for you. Tell us a little about your financial philosophy. I'm curious do you have a money mantra that maybe correlates to your passion for being eco-friendly?

[0:13:22.7]

EO: That's a great question. I don't know that I have a money mantra. I know that I have always been someone who has managed my money very well primarily, because I never had a lot of it and so I had to. NYU is not a cheap school, so you can imagine the amount of student loan debt that came out of attending a university like that. I think, honestly that's been one of my biggest strengths as a small business owner. I didn't go to business school. I for the longest time didn't know what a balance sheet was or a cash flow statement. All of that I had to learn and teach myself.

Slowly it's become something that's become less scary to me. I've gotten more and more comfortable with it. I have always just been very, very conscious of what I spend and how I spend it. I think that's also very much a product of me graduating, going to college in and then graduating in this like post-recession environment, where so many people my age just did not have the job security, that former – previous generations did.

I think that's a lot of why I think we're seeing so many Millennials kind of drawn to entrepreneurship, because it's like, “Well, if the jobs aren't there, we're just going to make our own.” I think that's always how I've looked at it. I've supported myself financially since I was 16 years old and I've always worked all the time, like since I was a little kid in my mom's office. I was answering phones in her office for her. I've just always had a really strong work ethic.

I think that that is definitely reflected in my company's values and the core values that we've built, because I think that's honestly why people respond to us so well is they know that we're down in the trenches with them on set. We're literally digging through the trash. This is about as real as it gets. With that comes this this level of respect and whatnot.

[0:15:46.3]

FT: How was it that you were financially supporting yourself at 16? Was that by choice was that a circumstance?

[0:15:54.0]

EO: I mentioned my mother was a – she owned a mortgage company, then of course the housing crisis happened. Unfortunately, my mother lost her business. At this point, this was a single-parent income. We really struggled financially for a long time. Then of course, in the midst of all this I went to a very expensive university as I mentioned.

I knew that it was me who was going to have to pull my weight and if I did choose a really expensive university, it was going to be on me to make those loan payments. I just really accepted that responsibility. I knew that the promise of going to a prestigious university like that was going to be something that would be one of the most important decisions in my life, and I think it has been, but it certainly come with a lot of sacrifice also.

[0:16:57.9]

FT: How did you support yourself? How did you get yourself through college?

[0:17:01.7]

EO: I worked a lot of summer jobs, different types of jobs as a barista, as a babysitter. During my time at NYU, I worked as a nanny during the summers in East Hampton and Fire Island. I got free housing for the summer and was also getting paid and that was my – that money that I made over the summer was my spending money while I was in college. I've just always – if I needed more money, I took on another job. I took on another side hustle. That was really the way it worked for me.

[0:17:41.3]

FT: You're an example of someone, a young person who experienced both sides of the recession where you had a parent go through it and experienced it through them then you yourself. How has that perhaps impacted you and your friends in terms of how you spend and how you see things that are relatively traditional like investing in the stock market, buying real estate? Has that really changed your perspective on things?

[0:18:09.8]

EO: It has changed my perspective. It worries me, to be honest. I think that a lot of folks who had a similar experience as mine really suffer from this financial trauma, if you will, because we just aren't familiar with the security, I think that other folks have felt. I always like to think that it's definitely informed my environmentalist motivators as well, because I don't like to spend money on things that are just going to get wasted.

I think that's a really interesting trend that we're seeing in the market where people are spending more money on experiences rather than consumer products and we're seeing market trends that are showing that people want to spend money on products that are socially and environmentally responsible.

I think that's a really interesting trend that's going on and I think is in some ways has been really informed and motivated by the recession and what folks are feeling terms of these fears around financial instability. I know a lot of people who feel like we don't know that we'll ever own houses, or us city dwellers cars, or they're delaying the choices to start families and things like that.

I think it has a huge socio-economic impact that we probably won't even fully understand for many years, but certainly I'm really excited about the way that it's shifting the economy in hopefully a more sustainable direction.

[0:20:01.8]

FT: Well I'm sure you still have big goals and big dreams, I think that the American dream is still well and alive. It's just different for everybody and it's evolving. This brings us to a question, a good question from our sponsor Chase Slate. They want me to ask this of all of our guests and I love it. It's what big-ticket item are you currently saving up for that's important to you?

[0:20:25.0]

EO: That's a really good question. Business, or personal, or either?

[0:20:29.2]

FT: It can be anything you want, just something that is on your radar that you have your eye on that prize.

[0:20:36.2]

EO: Interesting. Well, I really have my eye on the prize of hiring another employee, because I'm juggling so many tasks right now and wearing so many hats. I would say in terms of the business world I really want to give people more jobs, that's high on my priority list. As far as personal goes though, I would just say travel. If money was no object to me and I know the environmentalist in me shouldn't be saying that and talking about putting more greenhouse gas emissions in the air by flying, but I do love to travel. My sister just had a baby and so I have a beautiful baby niece that I want to see as much as I can. Yeah, family and really that's what my personal financial goals are about.

[0:21:37.3]

FT: If we were to take a peek at your personal life, how does your passion for sustainability show itself up in your life? What are some things and practices that you do that are different from others that we could all learn from?

[0:21:50.2]

EO: Well, I try to live by example and have as close to a zero-waste lifestyle as I possibly can. In addition, it's funny, anytime I get a new roommate I have to sort of give them the tutorial of all of the different bins that we have going on at any given time. It's not just your standard here is the metal glass plastic recycling, here's the paper recycling.

I have a completely separate container for my soft plastics, a separate one for electronics, a separate one for my old textiles and then just like my donations box of stuff that is perfectly reusable, but I've moved on from. Definitely you can see that in my zero-waste lifestyle for sure. I bike to work most days; it depends. Yesterday given the snow being an exception. I do love to bike.

I try to support local you know companies and especially when it comes to food as much as possible, I'm typically at my farmers market every single Sunday and used to take my compost there every Sunday as well, until we got municipal composting bins in Brooklyn, which is very exciting. I was super stoked about that. Yeah, I would say those are those are the biggest ways that I try to practice what I preach.

[0:23:23.5]

FT: How has living in New York influenced you in terms of wanting to do better as far as sustainability goes? I interviewed Lauren Singer, also an NYU grad, I believe, who is the founder of Trash is for Tossers, and she's also an advocate for zero-waste living. Do you know her?

[0:23:42.2]

EO: I know of Laura and I follow her on all the social media. I'm actually a big fan of her. I'm a little bit jealous that you got to interview her.

[0:23:51.1]

FT: Yeah. I mean, I think you guys should be best friends or something. I mean, it seems like you have a very similar passion. Since knowing her and you and now, you're both have experienced New York life and is it harder, easier to be to live a sustainable lifestyle here? I mean, there's so much trash everywhere. On the other hand, I think that we have a lot of innovation as well that would allow us to be living more simpler and cleaner lives.

[0:24:19.2]

EO: I agree I think that's it's both. We have incredible access to lots of resources. The fact that I can walk two blocks to my grocery store is not something that you get in the suburbs, right? That's a different kind of experience. I don't need to drive there. That being said, space is much more limited here. For some folks maybe who don't have access to municipal composting and they don't necessarily have the option of doing a backyard compost pile, or don't have the

option of let's say purchasing more in bulk to prevent packaging, because we don't have the place to physically hold these things either.

Certainly, I think one of the biggest ways that people can cut down on their footprint is what is with transportation. The fact that we have an incredible transit system here and most people don't own cars, that is an enormous reduction in your personal carbon footprint. Yeah, there are pros and cons, I would say certainly. The fact that we live in in such an incredible city where there's events and workshops and tutorials and you know just things like that always happening, the awareness and the availability of resources and information I think is much higher. There's the cons to also.

[0:25:55.3]

FT: I'm curious if you've ever connected with Leonardo DiCaprio, because he's huge on the green movement?

[0:26:00.8]

EO: I get that question all the time. Let me just put it out there, Leo if you're listening I'm dying to meet you and talk to you.

[0:26:10.5]

FT: He films a few films every so often. I mean, I feel like he knew about you. You'd be very busy.

[0:26:17.3]

EO: Yeah. Our goal has been to connect with Leonardo DiCaprio since the founding of this business basically. Yeah, he's a UN ambassador on climate change. He made the documentary Before the Flood. It's all about climate change and its impacts and effects around the world. He's such an incredible advocate. Certainly we want to tap into resources like him and other really strong activists in our industry, because that alignment is perfect.

It's funny you asked, because we actually started this ambassador program. We just launched it in the fall of last year, and basically it's a way for the actors who we've worked with who have seen our work and understand the value of it and appreciate it and really want to support it, it's a way for them to endorse us in a more official capacity. We've got a pretty small group as we just launched it, but we have Megan Boone, who's the lead actress of the Blacklist. We have Griffin Newman, who's the co-star of the new Amazon series The Tick. We have Emmy award-winning Bobby Cannavale, as well as Lauren McCrostie, who is a UK-based actress.

We are very interested in expanding that initiative so that we can get more and more actors involved in this conversation too, because I think like we just saw with the Oscars and Frances McDormand speech about –

[0:27:51.1]

FT: [Inaudible 0:27:51.8].

[0:27:52.9]

EO: Exactly. We're like, "Well, right after your Inclusion Rider should be your Green Rider." I think it's important for people to understand those connections. Sustainability is just as much a social problem as it is an environmental problem, and we need to be all having this conversation and understanding these issues to strive for a more progressive industry.

[0:28:18.2]

FT: Have you thought of going into other kinds of workplaces? Films are one area that need help, but what about big pharma, or schools, or – I mean, there's so many ways you could tackle this.

[0:28:34.9]

EO: There's a lot of ways. You're absolutely right. If you look around, there are sustainability movements in each of these industries in some form or another. I think what makes Earth Angel

so well-poised to service entertainment specifically is because for myself coming from film school and being knowledgeable of the production industry, I could already speak that language of production.

I think that sustainability really has a big messaging and communications issue. I think everyone's aware that at this point hopefully, knock on wood, that you know climate change is real and is happening. Yet, people don't feel compelled to act and do something about it. That to me, that's a failure of communications. The fact that I could speak this language of production basically just made me a translator, if you really kind of look at it that way.

I was able to create solutions that worked for this very niche circumstance. Not to say that big pharma and schools need help, but they certainly do. I think the fact that we are specialized is one of our biggest strengths and is why the industry has taken to us, then perhaps maybe some other outside sustainability consulting agency or something.

[0:30:15.0]

FT: Well, if you're listening listeners and you want to maybe follow in Emellie's footsteps, but towards a different industry, I think there's a lot of room for growth. Take a page out of her playbook. Don't steal anything, but do be inspired. You're such an inspiration Emellie.

I'd love to rap by having you finish some sentences. This is our So Money fill-in-the-blanks portion of the episode, starting with if I won the lottery tomorrow the first thing I would do is _____.

[0:30:46.8]

EO: Hire so many more people.

[0:30:49.0]

FT: Yeah. You seem like you're stretched thin Emellie. Where can we apply to work for you? Is there a website and e-mail address?

[0:30:56.2]

EO: Yeah. Our website is earthangel.nyc. There is a contact form on there mainly for people who want to join us as eco crew members, but also you know just internally we're always looking for help. Yes, that's our website earthangel.nyc.

[0:31:16.2]

FT: One thing that I purchase that makes my life easier or better is _____.

[0:31:21.5]

EO: Oh, that's a tough one. One thing I've purchased that makes my life easier or better. I would have to say, I know this is terrible but my phone. I just do everything on my phone now. I hate that people are becoming phone zombies, but it's just true. It is what it is.

[0:31:43.2]

FT: Don't fight it. All right, when I donate I like to give to _____ because _____.

[0:31:52.2]

EO: I typically donate to the ACLU these days, because I think that they are in dire need of our help given our current political environment. When I don't feel like civil liberties are at an immediate threat, I do a lot of donating to local environmental organizations and other conservation organizations as well.

[0:32:17.1]

FT: Fantastic. I'm also an ACLU supporter.

[0:32:19.6]

EO: Nice.

[0:32:20.3]

FT: How about this? One thing I wish I had learned about money growing up is _____.

[0:32:26.0]

EO: I wish I had learned more about investing in general. It's still a topic I think that is confusing to most people and feels very inaccessible, so that's something I feel like I could have learned more about.

[0:32:40.7]

FT: I hear this a lot from the ladies. Parents, tell your daughters what compound interest is and how to get in on the stock market. Although, it's hard it's abstract when you're a little. I do think that just starting to use the language at home in some way, reading the business section of a newspaper together, or following a stock together could be a way to just get introduced in there, and when you're older you're not so feeling like you are in the dark.

[0:33:18.0]

EO: Absolutely. I agree.

[0:33:19.1]

FT: All right, last but not least I'm Emellie O'Brien, I'm So Money because _____.

[0:33:23.6]

EO: Because I am a badass female entrepreneur.

[0:33:26.9]

FT: Yeah, Emellie. By the way, when are you going to make your first movie or next movie? Do you still have aspirations to be a producer?

[0:33:34.6]

EO: I still do have those aspirations and they are very real. I don't know. I don't have the answer to that question right now. I think that we're so laser-focused on taking earth angel to the next level, but now that I've graduated from the Goldman Sachs 10,000 small businesses program, of course that's only a matter of time, so then I can go on to whatever other ventures that pique my interest. Yeah, we'll see. Time will tell.

[0:34:05.7]

FT: All right, we'll be keeping an eye out for you. Thank you so much for stopping by and congrats on everything.

[0:34:11.3]

EO: Thank you so much for having me.

[END]