

WINTER 2016

Creative Living

Inspiration for the Northwestern Mutual Community



MASTER STORYTELLER

INSIDE AMC'S HIT
FACTORY WITH
CHARLIE COLLIER

PLUS:

ARTISANAL FLAVORS

THE GENX FACTOR

MENTORING 101

A Conversation with

BY PETER BALISTRERI

Charlie Collier

Don Draper, Rick Grimes, Walter White—these characters' names are mentioned regularly around water coolers, on social media, and at dinner parties across the country. Some of them have even become part of popular culture lingo ("This isn't a democracy. It's a RICKtatorship!").

For almost a decade, AMC has been invading our households with original programming that has us binge-watching, discussing, even debating. Shows like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Walking Dead* have led an amazing evolution for the brand. But how? And why? President and general manager of AMC, **Charlie Collier**, a Northwestern Mutual client, says it's all about distinctive storytelling, trusting your creative, and taking risks. He talked to us about how he approaches his job and why he's been so successful at keeping us entertained.

CL: How did you get your start? What attracted you to the career and the industry?

CC: I always loved television and media in general, and thought it would be great to work in the industry I cared so much about. What I loved was the union of business and creative.

CL: What advice would you give to people who want to follow in your footsteps?

CC: You have to be passionate about storytelling and surround yourself with people who appreciate not just one piece of the puzzle, but bringing them all together at once. Stop and appreciate how rare creative excellence really is—and respect it when you find it.

CL: What are your passions outside your work?

CC: First of all, it's my family—my wife and four kids. That's why I work so hard. That's what it's all about. Beyond my family life, everything from golf and tennis to some side businesses I'm very excited about. I have an interest in a minor-league baseball team. I'm also part of a startup company in the golf space called swingOIL that's really building momentum.

CL: How did AMC reach its new distinctiveness?

CC: What we've done at AMC is try to embrace more of a premium television notion, of television more eclectic, by design. It's a consistent through line of quality storytelling. We are still the largest 'movie network' in the country. Unlike vertical networks

like Bravo, Food Network, or HGTV, for instance, one night on AMC you'll see an eclectic lineup of original programming and the next night you'll see something completely different, which is distinct from a lot of very successful basic cable.

CL: What prompted you to go into this format? Was there resistance?

CC: My bosses, Josh Sapan and Ed Carroll, had a vision to take AMC into original programming. This was a transformational moment for our business and our brand. We knew we wanted to very much put distinction above everything, including even ratings. So it was actually the opposite of resistance; they led the charge.

To stand out in a world with this insane amount of



“Stop and appreciate how rare creative excellence really is—and respect it when you find it.”



original content that has grown over the last 10 years, and the proliferation of channels, we needed to think about what it would take to differentiate us. We all agreed we'd try to do fewer, better shows and that we'd lean into projects that were the types we thought could stand seamlessly side-by-side with some of the greatest movies of all time.

CL: What makes viewers care about the characters on your shows at such a deep emotional level?

CC: There's a level of authenticity in storytelling that has emerged over the last decade-plus that allows viewers to get to know these characters in a way we used to rely on films for. Two or three hours of storytelling have been replaced with possibly spending a decade with some of these characters. If I refer to a Don Draperesque moment, most folks know what this means—and not just to fans, but, to some degree, anyone who's been a student of pop culture over the last decade. Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould [*Breaking Bad*], Matt Weiner [*Mad Men*], Scott Gimple and Robert Kirkman [*The Walking Dead*], and John Wirth [*Hell on Wheels*] and so many others we've been lucky enough to work with are some of the finest storytellers in any medium, building stories that really resonate over the long term.

CL: What do you want people to love about AMC?

CC: I think the greatest compliment we get is when people tell us they never thought they'd watch a certain type of show and now it's one of their favorites, and the only reason they sampled it is because it was on AMC. So, during the launch of *The Walking Dead*, we'd hear from *Mad Men* fans who said, "I'll never watch a zombie drama." The value of the AMC brand is people know we're going to lean into the story and the character in a way that attempts to make it meaningful and, as we say in our tagline, make it "something more"—certainly something more engaging, something more compelling, something that truly elevates the story.

CL: Have there been any setbacks or surprises?

CC: If you meet someone in my chair who hasn't had setbacks, they're either brand new to the chair, not being truthful, or not taking big enough swings. We're doing work with some of the finest creative minds in the business, and, of course, even they've had ups and downs along the way. Our job is to nurture them and elevate them and, when we find something that really resonates, to make sure it reaches the heights that often are elusive if you don't both take and support that big creative swing.

Milwaukee writer **Peter**

Balistreri is an unapologetic zombie show fan.

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ABOUT THIS MAGAZINE

Creative Living's editorial mission is to bring you thought-provoking articles and inspiring ideas to enrich your daily life. In each issue, we also provide helpful tips and tools to help you achieve financial security.

This exclusive quarterly magazine is a reflection of the Northwestern Mutual community, with advice and vision from the people we serve. We encourage you to join the conversation and share your story with us.



Meet My Mentor

Some years ago, I moved halfway across the country to take a job in Boston. It was the first time I had the word “director” in my title, and I was both exhilarated and terrified that I was actually going to be in charge of a department. The non-profit I joined had a wise, humane, and hilarious woman some 20 years my senior as executive vice president. A Midwesterner, she was, like me (a Washington, D.C., native), bemused by Boston’s wait-and-see attitude to newcomers. She became my sounding board, my court of last resort, my shoulder to cry on. In short, she became my mentor. Even now, I mentally refer professional decisions I make to her, whether inside my head or through a phone call to the apartment where she and her husband live in retirement. What were her secrets? She let me make mistakes; she stood up for me when I was right; she knew when to laugh; and she kept her eyes, always, firmly on our association’s educational mission.

We know you’ll enjoy meeting the mentors we profile in this issue. And if you’re a member of Generation X, we hope you’ll welcome the reconsideration writer Autumn Latimore—a Gen-Xer herself—offers of this sometimes overlooked cohort. I know I won’t underestimate them again—and I don’t even need to check with my mentor to confirm that wisdom.

Catherine Ann Grace

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Cover: Charlie Collier at his office in the AMC Networks building in New York City

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The new **Personal Insurance & Investments** login on **NorthwesternMutual.com** makes it easy to monitor cash flow and see your complete financial picture all in one place—all while making it easier to work with your financial representative to develop and maintain a comprehensive financial plan.

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Review your policies & accounts, planning & savings potential



Account Aggregation

Consolidate credit cards & accounts to see your complete financial portfolio



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Go paperless & use EFT to pay an insurance bill

