Dr. David C. Munson, Jr.: Hello, RIT alumni and friends. This is again President Dave Munson. Today I'm in Los Angeles, which is the latest stop on my alumni Tiger Tour. Joining me today is Thomas J. Connor, Jr. a 2011 RIT alumnus and Vice President of Creative Marketing at the Walt Disney Company. A 30-year veteran of the entertainment media marketing industry, Tom currently oversees the marketing for Disney ABC domestic television, the in-home sales and content distribution firm responsible for the Walt Disney Company's Disney and ABC branded television properties. Prior to joining Disney, Tom was the Senior Vice President of Programming and Creative at Premier Retail Networks, a leading digital media company specializing in in-store video marketing solutions and Founder and President of TAG Media, a strategic brands solutions company.

Prior to founding TAG, he spent 12 years at Paramount Pictures Television, serving as the Senior Vice President of Marketing and Creative Services. Tom was responsible for the creation and execution of marketing campaigns for all of the studio's television properties including well known television brands such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Frasier*, and *Entertainment Tonight*. He also planned strategic advertising alliances with U.S. retailers such as Target, Best Buy and *Entertainment Weekly* magazine. Throughout his career, Tom has won numerous, prestigious, creative marketing awards, including a CLEO award and an ADDY award. It is an honor to be speaking with you today Tom, and thanks a lot for joining me.

Tom Connor: Well great. Great to be here and to share a little bit of my history and a little bit of what's going on in our industry.

Munson: Well terrific, let's get started with some questions. As I mentioned before, you are a fairly recent alumnus receiving your BFA in film and animation from RIT just seven years ago, but that was long after you had already established a successful marketing career. What made you want to finish your degree and why did you choose RIT in the first place?

Connor: First of all, I wish I was as young as you thought I was when you looked at my graduation date. However, like many students towards the end of my time at RIT, I ran out of money. I was in a situation where my family wasn't really able to support me to finish school. But most importantly, I was very close to graduation and I really only had just a small amount of credits to finish up, but what I wanted to do was just get out and work, which is really what I needed to do. Fortunately, at that time I had some contacts. I had a cousin who worked in
advertising in Boston, and she helped me to get started. I started out at the bottom of the bottom. I was a production assistant.

**Munson:** Yeah, yeah. What is it that led you to RIT as a youngster? How did you end up choosing RIT?

**Connor:** That's kind of an interesting story Dave because I originally started at Rhode Island School of Design. I was interested in photography. I had always been interested in the arts, but I also kind of had that technical brain that goes along with it. I applied, got accepted. And I am from Rhode Island originally, so it was a pretty easy local thing for me.

**Munson:** RISD is certainly a fantastic institution.

**Connor:** It is. It's an awesome school, and at the time I was thrilled to get in, and I started. As most arts colleges go, there's a lot of fundamentals that you have to cover. And I was a photographer, so I had never done any drawing or painting or any of these other things that are necessary. Really got a great foundation in art at the school, but what I realized after about a year, year and a half into it, I really wanted to be a professional photographer. I wanted to be someone who would have a job when they got out of college. And I just didn't feel as though they had the right programs for me. There was really only one photography major. It was essentially a fine art major. And I didn't really know where the path was going to take me.

**Munson:** Didn't see how that might lead to a career, I guess.

**Connor:** Exactly. And so, after a year and a half, I made somewhat tough decision to stop going to Rhode Island School of Design, and then, kind of, the hunt was on for what are the best photography schools out there. At the time, RIT had multiple majors in photography. There was photo illustration, there was photo journalism, there was professional photography, there was photo science. There was all these different majors. So once I stumbled upon it and read up on it, because you know back then you couldn't just open up your phone and start searching for colleges, I went and I visited and I like the campus and I just liked the whole work study approach. It was a very career focused approach, much like a trade school would be, but really for a craft, and that's what I was looking to do.

And I'm really glad I did because it was night and day between the two schools. But much to my surprise, I thought I was going to a very heavy technical school, heavily focused technical school, and what ended up happening is I realized that there was so much more. Even though I was in a creative major of sorts, while I was at RIT participated in the theater department there, I was able to make a couple documentaries. And even back then, and you know I look back now and I look back at my time at RIT, the flexibility of the professors, the trying to find out what it is
that you’re really trying to accomplish, what you want to do in your career, they made a lot of things easy for me.

Munson: Okay, great.

Connor: They had independent studies, it was just, even back then, a lot of flexibility.

Munson: So how did that really lead into your first job? Were there things that you learned at RIT, or skills you acquired that helped you be a success early?

Connor: Yeah. I think, first of all, the training was all very real world. There will a lot of people from industry. You know we were spending time over at Kodak. You know we were borrowing film. They had this program where they would give film to students, and so we were working closely with people who were actually working in the business. And I think that's always been one of the hallmarks of RIT—

Munson: Yes it has.

Connor: Is that they have a lot of faculty who are either recently out of the business, or even, like myself who are now teaching there, still in the business. And so that really prepared me. Also, believe it or not, I worked as a dorm director, which sounds like not the most exciting thing in the world, but, you know, there’s a lot of managerial skills that come with that and people skills. But, I did get a good strong education. At that time the film and television major was being formed. There isn't a TV major anymore. And the chair was starting up a program, and I took every course I possibly could. I shifted over my time there from photography to moving pictures and television. And that was really where I found my life.

Munson: Wow. That really led to I think a number of things that you've done over the years. I know you've had a lot of successes. What do you consider to be your biggest success, or maybe some of your biggest successes?

Connor: Well when you work in marketing, I didn't have any real formal training in marketing, but again, looking back on RIT and what it gave me, it really gave me this ability to have great reasoning skills, at the same time to be able to balance working with creative and how to communicate about creative. So I kind of fell right into that and I would say that probably what I consider to be my biggest accomplishment is in an industry where you're either very creative or you're very technical, I've been able to mostly walk that line through almost my entire career. At early times in my career I looked at it as being a little bit of a disability in a way in the business
that I was going into. However, those two things combined together, and finding that balance, has really been one of the things that I think has been, you know, my biggest accomplishment and being successful in the career.

**Munson:** Well that's great to hear because RIT certainly tries to walk that line and bridge the technical side and the artistic side.

**Connor:** I've certainly, I mean I've worked on a lot of great shows. I mean I've had, I'm probably one of the few people in the entertainment industry that can say they've worked on both *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

**Munson:** Okay.

**Connor:** Sometimes those two universes actually just don't quite come together.

**Munson:** That's right, yes.

**Connor:** You're either on one side or the other for the most part.

**Munson:** Okay.

**Connor:** So, that's been exciting. I've worked on marketing a lot of great films, a lot of great TV shows, and some of which are still around and they're still seen on Nickelodeon or something like *Entertainment Tonight*, which was one of the shows that I worked on when I was at Paramount Pictures. To this day it's still on. And back then, that was a show where there was nothing called syndication at that time. It didn't exist. So at Paramount, we bought satellite dishes for all of the TV stations to carry the show—

**Munson:** Oh my golly. Wow.

**Connor:** So they could actually take the show live every day.

**Munson:** Wow.
Connor: So, things have changed.

Munson: Well that's neat. If we look on the other side of the coin, what do you think are some of the biggest challenges that you've faced in your career?

Connor: I think most of the challenges are...Well obviously, you know, with most businesses there's deadlines, and there's lot of differences of opinion. And I would say that the biggest challenges always come as a result of disagreement. When you work in a creative industry, there are a lot of big egos, a lot of people who have very strong feelings about how something should be. And I know this exists in other industries, but however it exists in other industries you just sort of magnify it by, you know, by 10 and that's what the entertainment industry is like. And so I think the biggest challenges have been around getting people on the same page. I would say there are executives who have to be presented to, and pitched, and plans put together that they're going to get behind, but then you also have to get talent. Very often talent like, I don't want to mention any names, but big name talent who have a vested interest in the show or the product that you're working on, they also have very strong opinions about what they want.

And often, when you work in marketing, you find yourself right in the middle where a lot of disagreement and having to find some common ground to be able to move forward on. So I'd say that's where most of the challenges come from.

Munson: It's interesting that that kind of challenge extends beyond just the production of say the movie or the TV program, and even into the marketing.

Connor: Yeah.

Munson: Well speaking of marketing, a marketer in your space, which is an ever evolving with television, you see lots of changes in technology, types of media, types of delivery, and what have you, how do you keep up with all the changes and what do you see over the horizon? What kinds of issues, and maybe even opportunities, do you think you'll be facing in the future?

Connor: I think the biggest challenge, in the media business especially, is it's very heavily influenced by consumer behavior. There's constant change in the way people consume media and consume entertainment, and how those experiences play out.

Munson: Yeah, now there are more choices.
Connor: There absolutely are. There's always, you know, more choice is for most people a good thing. But the other challenge is there's just a massive amount of disruption. There's a massive amount of disruption in the business. You know we see new technologies coming in all the time. We see new ways of delivering content changing constantly. So you take those two things together and you really do have to be flexible, you have to see what's coming, but you also can't ignore the things that work and that are successful, you know the legacy businesses. A perfect example is, you know, Blu-Rays and DVDs, that's a, you know, physical good. The sales of those have been declining for quite a while and the reason is it's so much easier and more convenient to purchase something online and get it right away or to stream it. And so you don't want to cannibalize one business for the other, so you have to keep them both floating at the same time until its time has run out.

And when you work in a media business like a Disney, it's all about distribution. It's about making sure that anyone who wants to experience something or watch something can do it when they want to, where they want to. And so for a studio, we own the content, so it's really about finding the platforms and selling to them. The biggest things that I see changing is this whole idea of over the top, which you may have heard, but pretty much it's consumers are no longer wanting to pay that cable bill or that satellite bill and so people want to be able to watch things directly much like a Netflix does. And up until now, most of the studios have sold their content to various platforms like Amazon and Netflix, making money off of that, but really Netflix and Amazon had the relationship with the consumer.

Where the whole business is going now is the people who own the content are going “Well wait a minute, why do we need the middle man?”

Munson: Right, delivered direct.

Connor: Yeah, so now the delivery is really direct. That's a significant change. In some ways, it's significant because, you know, perhaps some of these companies that are delivering this content directly, they may not be very good at that. Netflix is really good at that.

Munson: Yes.

Connor: So there's also that that comes along with it too.

Munson: Okay, okay. A little different kind of question, what advice would you have for students or fellow alumni who are looking to break into the very, very competitive entertainment industry?

Connor: Well there are a lot of competitive industries. I think one of the most difficult things about the entertainment industry is you can take two people with exactly the same skills and one will be successful because they were in the right place at the right time, and the other will
not. And the best advice that I can give is, first of all, don't worry too much about what your first job is. And everybody, especially, you know, there's a lot of pressure when you get out of college to find a job. People who want to work generally will find a job. That's been my experience. Not to put too much pressure on yourself that whatever that first job is, is going to be the be all end all.

Munson: Right, it doesn't have to be the perfect thing to start.

Connor: Yeah, because the truth of the matter is opportunities happen all the time in the entertainment business. And the most important thing is being someplace where that opportunity can happen to you.

Munson: Okay, yes.

Connor: So if you're holding out for something, that perfect job or whatever, it's not really the best way to start.

Munson: Okay.

Connor: And you've got to be able to start at the bottom. You don't come out of school knowing everything.

Munson: Right, right. You need some experience and you have to wait for that opportunity sometimes, yeah.

Connor: Exactly. And that's a hard thing, especially, you know, with the pressures of the cost of college and all those things to, you know, want to really get going right away. Lastly, you know, the entertainment business is still largely an apprenticeship style business, you know. You need to learn from people who you work for. You need to learn the ropes. You need to learn how to work with others. You need to learn how to have conversations, how to pitch your ideas, how to have somebody tell you your idea isn't good and still, you know, move on. And so, all of those things are the kinds of things you learn in your first job.

Munson: Well that's great advice Tom. Another question, kind of a fun one, is that one of the shows you worked on at Paramount happens to be a particular favorite around our campus, and
especially with our provost, so are there any interesting insider tidbits you could share with our listeners about your work with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*?

**Connor:** Well first of all, I remember still to this day very clearly all of the trepidation and excitement that was around the launch of that show. The original had been like this odd cult hit, and Paramount at the time had the good fortune to make the decision to try it again. And you don't catch lightning in a bottle often more than once, but they had a lot of money to spend and they had a lot of resources, and most importantly Gene Roddenberry was involved in it. He was just a fantastic leader, you know. He was very inspiring. And he knew what the fans of the original show liked.

So I remember walking on, watching them building the sets and going "Gosh I just can't believe." It took up like four sound stages on the Paramount lot. Most of the good memories that I have of the show were just being able to share our ideas about how we wanted to launch the show, keeping it true to the brand of *Star Trek*, which was, you know, really something that people cared about. And then also just, you know, when you're able to sit in front of Patrick Stewart, you know, and at the time, I was 28 years old. Here I am a 28-year-old guy sitting in front of Patrick Stewart—

**Munson:** Yeah, what an opportunity. How exciting.

**Connor:** And going “Hey, here's the campaign I want to do and what do you think of it?” So those were the things for me that were really incredible.

**Munson:** Great.

**Connor:** And it had really great success, still does.

**Munson:** That's wonderful Tom. One last question. As an alumnus, you have stayed connected to RIT in a number of ways. You've served as an adjunct professor teaching remotely to RIT students, but based here in Los Angeles. And you've also served as a member of the university's entertainment advisory board. The question is what advice would you have for fellow alums on how to best remain connected with RIT?

**Connor:** That's a great question. Clearly for me, it is something that I just feel is really important. I think the best way to stay connected is to not feel as though when you leave the university that your learning is over, and that you've moved on, and that the things that you've learned are yours, because in a lot of ways they're not. And the truth of the matter is there's a lot of young people that work in my office, and so I'm seeing people come out from other
universities that are working, and seeing the kind of education they get. So my suggestion is find a way to get involved. I mean for me, getting involved started out as “Well, you know, maybe you can come up and just do a little workshop with students?” You know, it went in steps, you know, but it went from that to teaching, you know, three different courses now over the course of eight years. I usually teach one or two—

Munson: For which we're very thankful by the way.

Connor: Yeah, which is fantastic. I mean I get so much out of it. I think that's the other thing. You don't think you're going to get something back out of it, but you really do. You see the minds of young people who are looking at this business completely differently than I am because they are the consumers, you know, largely of it today.

Munson: Yeah.

Connor: I mean I think whether, I mean obviously the amount, the commitment that I have is perhaps larger than a lot of people would be willing to do, but I think, you know, the other thing you can do is just reach out. Be willing to share your perspective.

Munson: That's true. There are plenty of folks on campus to talk to. We have alumni chapters all around the nation, so there are many, many ways to get involved.

Connor: You need to, the school needs to hear from alumni. They need to hear what's going on in the industry—

Munson: We do.

Connor: ...from people who care, or have a vested interest. And you know, it's something that I hope, especially in my area, in the media and entertainment area, with RIT can grow even more. I know it exists in some other areas in college.

Munson: We're working hard on this.

Connor: I know you are.
Munson: Well Tom, thank you so much for your time today. I look forward to seeing you when you're back on campus and I also want to thank our listeners for tuning in. As always, go Tigers!

Connor: Go Tigers!