

# growing up **LAEMMLE**

**B**ehind the scenes, Laemmle has been run by family members of four generations. From the oldest member of the family, 97-year-old Alyse Laemmle, wife of co-founder Kurt Laemmle, to Bob, son of co-founder Max Laemmle, and his son Greg Laemmle who run the business today, to siblings and cousins, to one of Greg's son's Ezra, I sat down with the family to find out more about what it was like to "grow up Laemmle." Whether born a Laemmle or married to a Laemmle, there isn't a single member of the Laemmle family that I spoke with that hasn't worked in the family business. From attending movies to serving popcorn to running the offices, almost every member family has "done their time."



Kurt & Alyse Laemmle

## **When did you work at the theatres and where?**

### **Bob Laemmle:**

I started working at the theatres at fourteen and I would accompany my dad to the theatres in Highland Park usually on the days when there were kiddy matinees. Being that I was relatively large for a fourteen year old, my job was to stand in front holding a flashlight and to try to keep the kids sort of in order...I was the unofficial bouncer.

### **Mimi Laemmle Reisbaum:**

I remember they used to have kiddy matinees during the war years. I have recollections that they used to hand out bubble gum, which in those years was just a real treasure. And I remember keeping one piece of bubble gum for weeks at a time. I then worked at the Los Feliz theatre on and off from the age of thirteen to twenty-one in concessions and some cashiering.

### **Yvonne Ascher:**

What I remember more than anything else was going to the movies on Saturdays and laughing or crying with 300-400 other kids. I physically remember that kind of crowd emotion and just loving it. Also, every Saturday night my mom and dad would dress up to greet people at the Westwood theatres. They would work the night ticket-taking and my mom would sometimes come home with stories about who she saw in line. When I was nine or ten years-old my first job was working in the theatres, cleaning up after the kiddy matinee. I worked at the Monica in high school and in the office for a year helping with the little flyer.



Alyse, Sandra, Susan & Kurt Laemmle

**Raquel Shantal (Bob Laemmle's first wife):**

I started going, especially Saturday nights, with Bob and I worked the box office. As a matter of fact, I nursed Greg in the box office while I was selling tickets. I remember that we took him to screenings when he was maybe ten days old because at the Los Feliz, they had the "crying room," a soundproof seating area next to the projection booth where people could sit with children and not disturb the rest of the audience. I could stay with him so that if he cried we didn't disturb anyone.

**Alyse Laemmle (Kurt Laemmle's wife):**

Even during the Depression, there would be lines around the block at the Franklin on Saturdays because everyone would get out of the house to forget their troubles.



Dani, Max, Tara, Ari & Jay Reisbaum

**Greg Laemmle:**

I'd just turned fifteen when I started working at the Monica. There was always a little bit of extra attention put on me because they knew I was family.

**Jay Reisbaum (Bob Laemmle's nephew):**

I started working at the Los Feliz when I was maybe thirteen or fourteen.

**Susan Laemmle (Bob Laemmle's first cousin):**

One thing I remember is that whenever we would go out to do something, we would always stop by the theatres on the way home to see what the gross was for the night. When I was older, I worked at the Los Feliz. I especially loved selling sophisticated Toblerone candy along with popcorn.

**Tish Laemmle (Greg Laemmle's wife):**

I worked at the Royal briefly on Wednesdays for several months. Actually, our first date was at the Royal. Greg and I saw the movie *Opening Night*, which neither of us liked. So we pretended the first date didn't happen and went to the Landmark and saw *An Angel at My Table*. We both loved that movie and decided to lie and say that was our first movie.

### Deborah Blum

(Kurt Laemmle's granddaughter):

My first job was at the Monica and it was a lot of fun. I loved working there. We also loved going to see the films.

### Jacob Laub

(Bob Laemmle's grandson):

My mother [Yvonne] always talked about how everyone did their duty in the ranks of staffing the theatres and it was just a rite of passage for any family member. I remember my summer in between high school and college when I worked at the Monica. I ate a lot of popcorn and I tried all the different toppings. I also remember the last three minutes of a whole bunch of different movies, such as *March of the Penguins*, because that's all you would really see. I also think that I must have listened to the song *Wild Horses* 150 times that summer, as it seemed to be the first song that played after every movie ended. ❖ A lot more was expected of you if you were a family member. But, if you did your job, you were treated no differently than anyone else. What I found interesting about working in the theatres was the rhythm of it. You had periods where you were working really hard and then you kind of chilled and hung out with the staff, ate popcorn, read a book.



Warren Blum, Rachel Fletcher, Esther & Deborah Blum



Gabriel, Tish, Nadav, Greg & Ezra Laemmle

**Growing up, Bob said it was common for him to see celebrities like Agnes Varda, Jacques Demy, Pauline Kael, Peter Bogdanovich, Leon Belasco and others attend movies. But, they never received special treatment or free tickets.**

### Bob Laemmle:

We did not coddle celebrities. They would stand in line outside the Regent Theatre just like everybody else. It was never really a problem - people respected them, they didn't hassle them. I remember very clearly one time when somebody came into the theatre and drew a lot of attention, and I had no idea who the person was. It was a TV star but he came in handing a ticket along with the other 400 people that were waiting in line.



**Jay Reisbaum:**

It was a business. People would call and say, “I’m so-and-so’s assistant; I need special passes, access, entry, whatever,” and it was like, “That’s not what we do.”

**But, from time to time, someone famous would come to the theatre that caught their attention.**

**Raquel Shantal:**

I remember selling popcorn at the Regent and thinking “My God, I’ve just seen the most beautiful blue eyes I have ever seen in my life.” Only later did I realize that it was Paul Newman.

**Yvonne Ascher**

(Bob Laemmle’s daughter):

I remember when Wilt Chamberlain came to the theatre and I was amazed that he was much taller than my 6’5” dad.

**Jay Reisbaum:**

I have a vivid memory as a fourteen year old of Raquel Welch coming into the Los Feliz.



Yvonne Ascher, Leonard, Aaron & Jacob Laub

**David Ascher (Bob Laemmle’s son):**

I remember Kareem Abdul Jabbar coming to the theater and the 6’ 7” tall ticket-taker had to slowly arch his neck up to look at Kareem’s face.



Bob, Michelle, Tish & Greg Laemmle

**And sometimes the Laemmles themselves were considered celebrities.**

**Bob Laemmle:**

I remember that I was sitting in the back row at the Music Hall before the movie started and there was a person at the end of the row that had a coat and a bag and everything on a seat next to them. The theatre was full and there was somebody coming in and wanted to sit in that seat. The man refused to give up the seat and I got up and I told him, “You have to come outside with me; I’m kicking you out of the theatre.” And he said something to the effect of, “You can’t do that.” And I said, “Yes, I can. I own the theater.” And he said, “YOU’RE Bob Laemmle? I always wanted to meet you.” I still kicked him out of the theatre.



Mimi, Bobbie, Bob & Max Laemmle

### Tish Laemmle:

I can't even tell you how many times I've been with Greg where people have found out that he's Greg Laemmle, President and CEO of Laemmle Theaters. A couple of times people have literally bowed down but most of the time they say, "We only go to Laemmle Theatres." And then they continue with, "Oh, and your popcorn is terrible." \* Ninety-five percent of the time, people are blown away by what the theatres have done for the city of Los Angeles, and it's a huge sense of pride for me. Once, we went to the Town Center in Encino and the manager asked Greg if he wouldn't mind spending an extra minute meeting one of the newer employees who had never met a Laemmle before. He came

out and was shaking; he was so nervous and honored to shake Greg's hand. I remember being so touched that someone would feel that way about us.

### Was it expected that family members would work in the business?

#### Bob Laemmle:

When I was growing up, we only had the one theatre, the Los Feliz. I worked there while I was going through college. But my dad wasn't an easy person to get along with and I never anticipated that this was a business that I would go into. But, in 1961, while I was working at the bank in a managerial program in the lending department, I had to take care of running the business (making phone calls, ordering things, having all the contacts), while my parents made a six-week trip back east. This is not in the days of cell phones, computers or any type of contact, so I couldn't really call on him for advice. There's a big difference between working at the theatre selling tickets, selling concessions, cleaning up and stuff like that, and the behind-the-scenes of running a business. That was the part that I never was really exposed to. I realized that I'd better know what was going on, because it may happen that I have to take over." \* My dad and I talked about it and he decided that I could come in as a junior employee with basically the same salary as I was making at the bank so that I didn't have to incur a loss. The idea was that we would start looking for a second location and we decided to expand to Pasadena.

#### Mimi Reisbaum (Bob Laemmle's sister):

I worked in the theatre to supplement my income while I was getting my credentials. But, I didn't want to work in the business and instead became a Special Ed. teacher.

#### Raquel Shantal:

It was expected of Greg since he was born. I heard it from Grandma Laemmle a lot. I think to her, the Laemmle tradition had to continue. But, I did not like the idea because I saw a lot of conflict between Bob and Max. I didn't want that for my son and besides, I thought that Greg was such an intellectual, I could see him with a Ph.D.



Ezra, Greg, Gabriel, Nadav & Bob Laemmle

### Greg Laemmle:

From what I can recall, my going into the business wasn't really talked about when I was growing up. I knew that at one point someone had offered to buy the theatres and for a variety of reasons my father had declined. I guess maybe somewhere I thought that placed an obligation on me to keep it going. But it was also an opportunity because I was interested in education and using film as a way of building community.

### Yvonne Ascher:

I don't think it was ever encouraged for me to work in the family business. But it is a part of who I am. Even after I left L.A. and moved to Monterey, the first thing I did was to seek out the same community up here and I got a job at the independent theatre as a cashier and then I was an assistant manager.

### Jay Reisbaum:

We all had very close relationships with our grandparents and I always had a love for the business and great pride in the fact that Laemmle was so highly regarded. I have always loved film and took some film classes at UCLA. But my sense was that my grandmother was not very excited about me going into the business, so I needed to find my own path. I went and got a Master's Degree in real estate development and came into the family business offering a different perspective.

## Who is next to take over? Will it stay in the family?

### Tish Laemmle:

Gabriel just announced he's going to be a film major. And both he and Ezra have expressed interest in running the business. Our third son, Nadav is the only one who made it one hundred percent clear he wants nothing to do with it.

### Ezra Laemmle (Greg Laemmle's son):

I am actually studying film. Right now its critical theory and I am going to work my way towards production. Cinematography or lighting is where I would like to start.

### Jay Reisbaum:

My oldest son just graduated college and is working in the film industry but he wants to focus more on the production.

## What does It mean to be a Laemmle?

### Bob Laemmle:

Growing up, I had no context of a historical meaning to it. I wasn't aware of the significance of who Carl Laemmle was until I probably got to adulthood. My dad and his brother were the first of our generation to go into the exhibition business.



### Yvonne Ascher:

There was a sense of pride in what we did, what the family did, and what we brought to the community. My dad is passionate, and some of the values about how you run a business I learned from watching him and now Greg. We would have discussions about how you ran a business, what was important in business, how you tried to grow your business, and how you marketed your business. The willingness to try to distinguish yourself and stay true to your mission and the value of loyalty to employees was something that was always stressed. Those were definitely life lessons and core values in what makes a business able to last for seventy-five years. Yes, product is part of it, but it's also branding, loyalty, identifying your audience and giving back to the community.

### Greg Laemmle:

"Okay, beyond survival, what does it mean to be a business?" Power gives you the opportunity to do things but maybe at the expense of others. I'm not interested in that. On the other hand, influence is something that can spread. I think Laemmle has a great opportunity to be influential beyond its power, in spreading a love and an appreciation for cinema culture.



David Ascher, Greg Laemmle, Yvonne Ascher, Bob Laemmle, Jessica Laemmle & Michael Ascher

### Memorable Movies?

#### Bob Laemmle:

The power of *Battle of Algiers* moves you and engages you. And, I fall in love every time I see *Jules and Jim*.

#### Mimi Reisbaum:

*A Man and a Woman* is one of the most memorable films. Recently *Amour* is one of those films that leaves a lasting impact as it explored the issue of growing older and mind-boggling devotion.

#### Yvonne Ascher:

I saw *Annie Hall* a hundred plus times because I was working in the theatre then, too. But there were certain scenes I'd go in every night to see.

#### Jay Reisbaum:

I saw *Swept Away* at the Los Feliz about 150 times. There was also *Seven Beauties*.

#### Greg Laemmle:

I saw *Battle of Algiers* when I was a sophomore at Cal and realized that the world was grey and nuanced, not black and white/good and bad.

#### Deborah Blum:

In the heyday in Westwood, I remember seeing both *Annie Hall*, one of my favorite films, and *Rocky*. I remember going with my friend to see *Rocky* and we spoke for hours afterwards, dissecting every scene. I think it was my first experience analyzing a film.



Gabriel, Tish, Ezra, Nadav & Greg Laemmle

### Ezra Laemmle:

There are two films that stand out to me. One is *8 1/2*. It's not necessarily my favorite film but you could pause it at any given moment and the light and dark balance is just phenomenal; the lighting is perfect. And the camera work is unbelievable. The other film is *Once Upon a Time in the West* – it's just magical.

### Jacob Laub:

I was obsessed with dinosaurs and *The Land Before Time* was one of my favorite movies.

- Written by Allison Levine

## Reflections by Rabbi Susan Laemmle, Ph.D.

In 1987, I returned to Los Angeles as a newly ordained rabbi headed for a Hillel post. Just before ordination, I'd gone back to my maiden name – the name of which I'd become so proud that it was worth the pain of spelling and respelling it. Soon cousin Bob [Robert Laemmle] sent me a family pass and I tapped into my ancestral bounty.

Since then – at Valley College and USC, within Jewish and general LA circles – when people hear my last name, the frequent reaction has been “I love the theatres so much!” People speak of Laemmle Theatres with the reverence and depth of connection usually reserved for family, undergraduate college or religious institutions.

Indeed, I have been struck by the commonality between Laemmle-presented cinema and religiously-organized gatherings. In both settings, people come looking for meaning, a broadened outlook, an increased capacity to handle their lives with resilience, a heightened sense of humanity.

Time and again, I explain that my late father and uncle founded the theatres after selling film for Uncle Carl. Year after year, our family convenes to celebrate Jewish holidays. Past and present intermingle, and we look into the future with hope and gratitude. *Bis hundred und twanzig*, Laemmle Theatres – may you live to 120, and beyond.