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Executive Profile

She's an animated entrepreneur – and she's coming to a campus near you

Marina Martins, CEO, Pigmental LLC

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As a girl in Tanzania, Marina Martins didn't have a ton of digital entertainment options. She'd watch snowy episodes of "Bewitched" on stolen signals and an English movie every few years. She was introduced to stage plays when studying in England and fell in love. A philosopher and storyteller at heart, she opted for a filmmaking career in L.A. and gravitated to digital animation. Now, she brings her studio to Gallaudet University.



JOANNE S. LAWTON

Marina Martins, shown here on the Gallaudet University campus, plans to teach a course, hold a film festival and offer apprenticeships.

Your introduction to theater: When I was in England, I was studying science and living with students in London. We were actually at the theater three times, four times a week. I joined the British Amateur Theatrical Society there and got to produce stage plays there. I fell in love with it and abandoned all pretense and flew to L.A. to learn.

Why move Pigmental to D.C.? I never intended on D.C. I was setting this up in Los Angeles. I was offered an opportunity to take this company to New Mexico, and it was a very generous, financially supportive offer. But the artists I was working with were not very keen on the idea to relocate to New Mexico. So I said no, and we were continuing on with our L.A. approach. Pierre Bagley, whom I had known in L.A. as a director, had become the director of the motion and television office here in Washington, D.C., and I happened to be telling him about Pigmental, my new animation company. He said come to D.C., and I sort of laughed. I had never been to D.C. I only knew it was in the north and was very cold. I spoke to the artists and people around me, and I found the artists were actually quite interested in relocating back up to the north. Here was an environment infused with all the things I loved and I thought were important to storytelling — multiculturalism, museums, architecture, great food, all sorts of things I thought were vital aspects to stimulating fresh creativity.

Why locate to Gallaudet University's campus? I was a keynote speaker with the economic development something-or-other. One of the key developers at JBG heard me speak, and I met him after the talk and scolded him because there was a building I really, really wanted for Pigmental. Robin, who was in his company, is a very, very insightful lady, and she basically seduced me with what they were doing at Union Market and set a meeting with the Gallaudet folk. I went home that night and thought about it and realized it would be insightful to engage with the Gallaudet students. Animation is a really visual, emotional storytelling. To communicate without words requires a visual emotional stimulus. We formulated this idea that we would teach a class, and they would teach us, and they invited me to come on campus and set up my office there. And I couldn't say no.

Your first story you loved: It began with books in Africa. A book I remember so vividly, "Island of the Blue Dolphins." I remember reading about the tidal wave that occurs in that book — it was one chapter. It has impacted me in terms of my fear of tidal waves ever since. Aspects of different books stay with me.

Biggest current challenge: Too much to do, not enough time. How to continue to engage the community to complete these ideas that we have formulated together that will, I think, establish Washington, D.C., as a creative hub — and then maintain it.

What do most people not know about animation? It's a collaborative form of storytelling. It's a group of people that comes together to perform the characters, actions and dialogue and create the look and the world. As a writer, I'm more used to imagining that space in my head and converting it into story. But animation requires collaboration in multiple art forms.

Your favorite animation growing up: I was at a British boarding school in Africa growing up. We'd get a movie now and then. I remember one combination of animation and live action that I thought was really exciting: "Mary Poppins."

Your favorite animation today: There are so many shorts that are unbelievable, that can impact you in a short amount of time with a story. "Inside Out" was very interesting to me because it allowed you to understand yourself in a way that was so simple and so effective. I love the impact that "Inside Out" has had on adult audiences, actually.

What is the one thing you'd like to teach apprentices about the trade? To never forget the passion they entered the field with, to always carry that with them. As we do things in our routine, we sometimes forget the magic. Sometimes technique overtakes emotional impact, and I think emotional impact is more important than technique.

Most interesting project: Working on the project, "Kong," which was a co-production between Pigmental and Aquamen. One of the partners

is Chinese and one, Korean. There were a tremendous number of challenges to understand and execute a story that really reflected the expectations and vision of all the parties. It's a continuous drive to understand humanity in its very cultural aspects.

What's the most surprising thing you've learned about a famous person you've worked with? The director, Robert Wise, who's no longer with us. If there's anyone I could call a mentor, it would be Robert Wise. What I learned from him was that you tell the best story you can. And you don't know the outcome, the audience will tell you the outcome. His "The Sound of Music," when it was completed, it was not considered a blockbuster film by the studio at all. But the audience found it. In a way, it taught me humility, which as an artist in the entertainment industry, is a valuable perspective.

Your favorite place on Gallaudet: The quad. When I was growing up in Africa and I was at boarding school, I would miss home. Sitting in the quad was important to me. It was where I centered myself and allowed myself to permeate into the space around me.

Favorite place in D.C.: It depends what I'm doing. If I'm writing, I sneak to the Bayou Bakery in Eastern Market and stuff myself with freshly cooked beignets and espresso. I'm not a routine person. I'm still discovering D.C. I feel I could be here a couple of lifetimes and still explore.

What are you like to work for? If you asked me this question a few months ago, I would have said pretty easygoing. But somebody I've known for years, in the nicest sort of way, she said to me, "You're a bit of a control freak," and it stunned me. I have to think about what she said. I think I'm true to my vision so much that I'm really not true to reality as much as I should be. I think that's something I need to learn to improve upon. I think I'm very transparent in my emotions, and I want to create a family. My expectations of people are more about who they are than necessarily what they can accomplish. And that doesn't make me the most efficient boss.

Hardest lesson learned: I said this to my daughter once: People will be your greatest inspiration and your greatest disappointment. I've learned that to be true.

Biggest missed opportunity: I have always worked for myself. I have always led or driven a project or a company myself. I have never worked in a corporate environment. Perhaps if I had in a period in my life, I would be more knowledgeable about the expectations of staff, or people who work with me.

Movie you wish you made: I could give you dozens and dozens. I'm going to pick one, which is a family film. I'm a mother of four, and I love the concept of family. I'm not the best at it, but I do enjoy it. One of the films that really impacted my decision to come to Hollywood and make films is "E.T." It wasn't about a space creature. It was a story about the relationship between this boy and this character, and the emotional connection and the commitment they made to each other. It could have been any other character, and it still would have been that impactful. I wanted to tell stories like that, stories that resonated across all audiences and all cultures that were not pretentious, that allowed you to emotionally experience a kind of love that I think would do well more practiced in our world.

Your earliest memory: I'm in a flat in the city I was born in, Dodoma, Tanzania. I have a monkey for a pet. I can feel his hug.

Guilty pleasure: I only indulge it every couple of months, but it is a great cigar with a smoky, peaty whiskey.

Favorite celebrity: Honestly, I think Spielberg. He's transcended all forms of storytelling and been willing to experiment with difficult stories, as well as stories that easier to assimilate. And I think that takes courage. It's not a very forgiving industry. It's quite fickle. But he's sustained, and he's set standards.

Personality in high school: High school for me was very different. I went to boarding school when I was 8, and then I went to what in the

British system was secondary school in Africa, to a school that really academically was still struggling to find an average standard for students. It was very, very hard for me to integrate because I was bored out of my mind, so I always got into trouble. So, I left school when I was 12 to 14, and I tried to do a correspondence school. Then I spent two years that I should have been in high school for reading. My mother had a library, and I read every book in there. Then I taught myself and my parents sent me to England.

What did you want to be when you grew up? I was going to be a doctor. I did get a place in King's College medical school in England. I started there and realized very quickly that wasn't what I was or wanted to do, much to my parents' chagrin — which they handled very well. I didn't learn until years later how disappointed they were. I flitted around, went to Manchester Business School. My professor said you should just do business.

Favorite book: Changes with my experiences. Three books that work together for me, that were very informative and impactful in understanding humanity and the future of the human race: of course, "1984," Orwell; "Brave New World," Huxley; "Looking Backward," Bellamy. The three together fascinate me.

Favorite hobby: My absolute favorite thing in life is to cook a meal and sit down with my kids. We can be at the table for a half-hour to three hours, we just never know. It just depends on where the conversation evolves. We'll badger my youngest son to step off the table and make some brownies and talk until they're done.

Favorite movie: "E.T."

Favorite place outside of the office: There's an alley in Zanzibar that I remember when I was a teenager. I can still smell the cloves and still feel the texture of the white-washed walls. Zanzibar evokes all sorts of stirrings in me.

What do most people not know about you? I'm shy. I love talking to people, but I'm quite shy about my own personal life and personal feelings.

Pet peeve: The aspect of humanity that I don't understand is just sheer meanness. I really don't understand a deliberate desire to be mean.

What's on your iPod? Well, I don't have an iPod. But my favorite music changes as you grow up. Van Morrison's "Moondance" is one that always stops me, and I need to listen to that song. It invokes such imagery for me. No matter where I hear it, I pick it out from background and I just stop.

The basics

Marina Martins

Title: CEO, Pigmental LLC

Education: Degree in physics and philosophy minor, Bedford College (England)

Residence: L.A., D.C.

Family: Parents, sister, four kids

First job: With my cousins in Africa, we put together a variety show and charged relatives extraordinary amounts to watch. We charged them money for beer. We made quite a bit and went to the movies. We did circus acts on a mulberry tree.

Vandana Sinha

Assistant Managing Editor/Print
Washington Business Journal

