

LIVING THE OJAI LIFE
ojai
Quart

FALL 2017

THE STORIES WE TELL
How Kim Maxwell's 'Townies'
Podcast Brings Us All Together



THE WEIGHT OF WHIMSY
Shives' Art Drives Major Exhibit

DESIGN BY RHYME
Architect Takes On Treasure

OJAI MILESTONES
Museum, School Make Their Mark

WELCOME to the Neighborhood

'The Townies Podcast' Shares Ojai Stories with the World

By Jesse Phelps



When the sun exits over western peaks, drenching the Topas in rosé, it's easy to bask in another moment of Ojai exceptionalism. After a traipse down a mountain stream, or into a gallery filled with local plein air originals, or out of a theater having witnessed a talent-laden performance, it's easy to think that, yes, this valley is a crazy, special place. It is. And yet, in the immortal words of Donald Fagen, it's also a "town like any other."

When Kim Maxwell — she a progenitor of the Ojai Playwrights Conference and the former Theater 150 — launched The Townies Podcast this past spring, she captured that dialectic full force. Here are genuine stories — some fictional, some funny, some painfully personal — read by the writers

in an intimate space that, in truth, could only live in this place. And yet, as the name implies, the themes, the details and the truths embodied in each of these parables connect the teller and the listener, the student and the teacher, and maybe this exceptional town, to the equally wondrous outside world.

The 30-minute podcast is organized around diverse themes by co-producers Asa Learmonth and Lily Brown (Maxwell's daughter, who she calls "sharp as a whip") such as "Growing Pains," "Love, Am I Right?" and "We're Only Human." There are also a few special episodes that clock in at an hour. It's tonally eclectic; each episode starts with an opening sketch about the town (one in July playfully addressed the chairs-

along-the-avenue controversy) and features a local musical performance. The Townies Podcast drops a new episode every other Tuesday, and as of this writing, there were 15 asking to be explored.

The stories, and the occasional dialog or poem, are the result of a writing process undertaken by each student of a ten-week course taught by Maxwell at her eponymous downtown studio, culminating in a two-night performance run on Friday and Saturday nights. Tickets for those shows, Maxwell says, are just \$10, because "theater has become very expensive and very elitist, but young people and elderly people and people who live in the town need to have access to the live arts."

Maxwell said she never intended to create a podcast but a suggestion from "her dear friend's friend," Elizabeth Alvarez, started her thinking about radio, at least, after a reading one Friday night. "The next night when I came back, I sat in the back row and I closed my eyes," recalls Maxwell. "And I was like, oh my God, this needs to be a radio program."

About a year later, Maxwell saw a rise in podcasting and realized that it could be the perfect format. She started making recordings but she says she wasn't in love with the first generation. It took a moment of cultural upheaval to push her to make it happen.

In the lead-up to Donald Trump's election in November of 2016, Maxwell says, "I felt this gaping need. Not just here but nationwide, everybody not communicating, and feeling disenfranchised and left out and not heard and judged. It felt like empathy needed to be cultivated again. I think, and a lot of studies prove, that stories are the foun-

ation of the development of empathy."

When she heard former First Lady Michelle Obama ask what people would do as their part of the national dialogue, Maxwell says, "It got crystal clear for me. I don't know what my part is in the national dialog — but I do know what to do with 800-square-feet in the heart of Ojai."

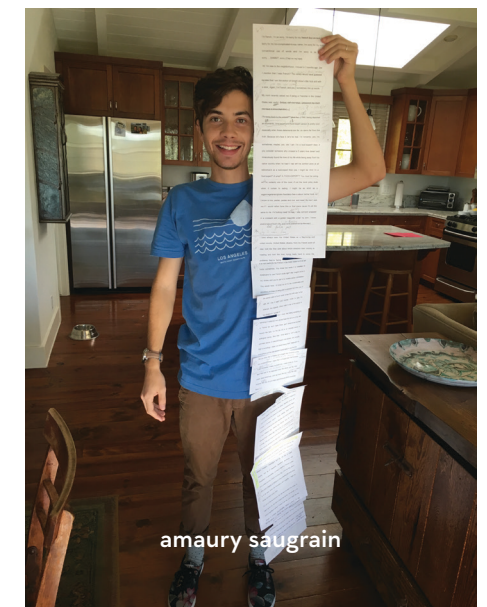
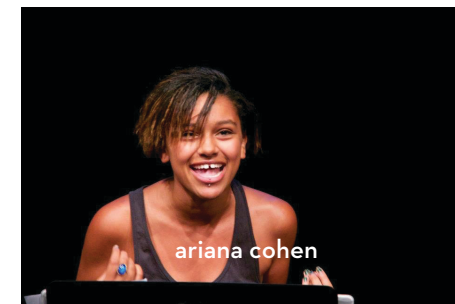
At her friend and co-contributor Rain Perry's suggestion, she took what she had to local sound wizard Ken Eros. He helped her transform the podcast into a professional-level production, and the rest is history. "He's just created layers and layers of interest and sound that we didn't have before," Maxwell says.

Working with her daughter, Eros and Learmonth, who originally came all the way from Bennington College in Vermont to intern at her studio, has been an incredibly special experience. "If any one of my dream team weren't in place," she says, "I wouldn't have a



podcast."

Given her political proclivities and her ability to create a safe space for expression, it may not surprise that many of Maxwell's students are women (Episode 8, "The Agency of Women" is one of the hour-long special episodes), and/or people of color. And while Ojai has an unfortunate and perhaps well-deserved reputation as a lily-white community, it's also a town in a county built as much on agriculture as tourism. Maxwell said it was important to her to make sure that a Latino population easily overlooked by some — and, bottom line, a wealth of minority perspectives — were given a forum and a voice.



"Social justice is unbelievably important to me, and also to my daughter," says Maxwell. "Most of the people who usually end up (at Kim Maxwell Studios) are change agents."

The majority of people in her class are "in transition," she says. "There's something happening in their lives: They have either recently empty-nested, or a husband or wife has passed away, or they lost a job, or they just graduated from college and there are no jobs available. In my teen class, it's the island of the misfit toys. It's just a place where you come and you share your story and you realize that you're just not so different from everyone else."

That feeling translated to the podcast's unveiling party at Topa Mountain Winery in March, an event attended by about 400 people despite frigid temperatures (for Ojai, anyway). It was the kind of thing that Maxwell, who grew up in Canada and then moved to Los Angeles before discovering Ojai, came here to find. It didn't take her long, even back then. "I felt like I flourished artistically, I felt like I flourished as an activist and as a political entity. I felt like I was living a much smaller version of myself when I was in LA," she remembers.

And that might be at the crux of what makes being a "townie" special, and one of the many reasons Maxwell is a perfect person to facilitate and



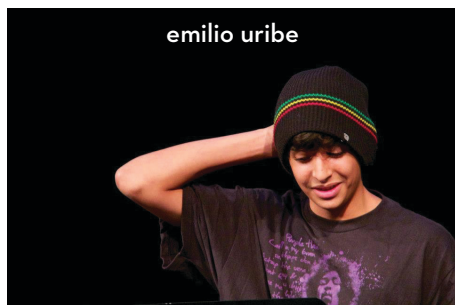
broadcast these small-town stories, that in the end make both teller and listener larger through the connection they form.

The podcast has a feel of community even within this community; it sometimes seems much like a window into your neighbors' house, if those neighbors lived in a performers' commune and spent equal time trying to make one another laugh, think and cry. "The real magic in here happens, one of my students calls it, between the chairs. There's just this amazing ensemble, this amazing community that builds over the course of ten weeks," says Maxwell.

Naturally, many of the pieces focus on drama and a love of performance. Just as many, however, delve into more personal topics, and many of these, such as "Siete" (Episode 8, "The Agency of Women," Litzzy's story of her mother's immigration to the US, have the power to conjure deep emotional responses in resonance with the performer's courage and honesty.

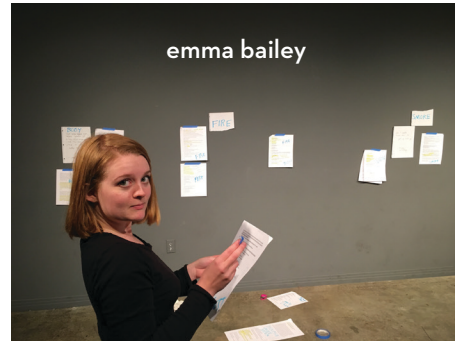
Some comedic highlights include local barista Megan Bergkvist's "The Whole Arbolada" (Episode 5, "Our Little Pleasures"), a hilarious story of what happens when a leisurely drive through the oaks goes terribly wrong, and Perry's story, "Wasted," (Episode 1, "This Life of Ours"), about the first time this well-respected, multi-talented performer got high as an Ojai teen.

Her students, of course, wax effusive about the time they have spent with Maxwell, and her ability to help them



conjure and open up. "The podcast is a little window into the magic," says Katie Rae Newcomer, who doesn't live in Ojai but is an "honorary townie" who has taken Maxwell's workshop for the past couple years and has already appeared three times in the podcast (Episode 2, "We've Got Problems," Episode 7, "I Hate It When You Come Home, Pt. 1," and Episode 11, "I Hate It When You Come Home, Pt. 2"). "I hope it encourages people to take the class (or something similar in their neighborhood), to take more risks, and to love their fellow man a bit more. Stories connect us. And I think we could all use a little more connection these days."

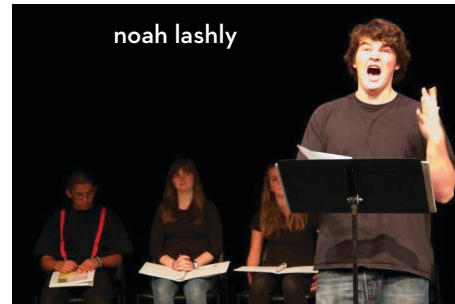
That connection, or mutual "permission" to be heard, to listen, and to connect, is Maxwell's primary aim, and judging by her students' words on-stage and off, she's succeeding. One person



who has flourished is 79-year-old, 50-year Ojai resident Kathleen Hellwitz, who started as a performance attendee before becoming a generous patron and the closing act in episodes 1 and 8 (so far). "Somehow, she puts ten strangers in the same room and, in the end, we have a common story to tell about life. It's done in a way that we are not shamed or embarrassed or afraid," Hellwitz says. "I'd been watching Kim work for about 25 years and become known as the front row lady, because for years I always sat there to watch her students perform. One day I told myself, 'you've got to get off your butt and do something here,' and I'm glad I did because I've never had so much fun in my life."

Perry, who also performs the podcast's theme song, agrees—and her story embodies the transitional element Maxwell highlights. "Kim and I have been working together since I first took her class back in the original Theater 150," Perry says. "I have been a singer-songwriter my whole

"Stories connect us. And I think we could all use a little more connection these days."



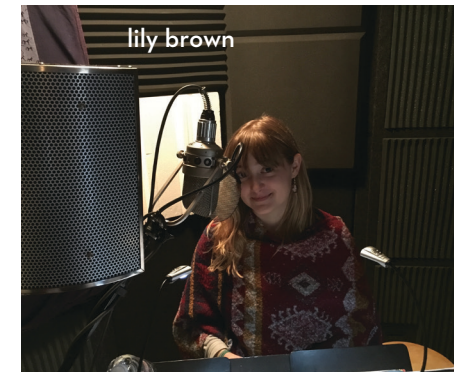
life, but at that moment I had young kids and I was trying to figure out who I was as a performer. I was in kind of a rut. Her class was a revelation. She taught me techniques I still use to connect with an audience in the places where we are all confused and tender, and those skills have seen me through all kinds of intimidating performance situations."

Newcomer says, "It was surprisingly emotional to hear my pieces for the first time on the podcast. It felt vulnerable, and it felt brave. I felt very proud of myself and the work I put into each piece (alongside the brilliant and amazingly reassuring Kim, of course). But most of all, I really felt proud of Kim and Lily and the dream they chased down. I am so excited for the magical body of work from our little studio home to be shared with the world. Everyone sounds so wonderful, and all the music is transcendent. It's just a delight to experience."

The podcast "has been a little bit of a dream come true, and I didn't see it coming," Maxwell says. "Good words are contagious."

Perhaps Perry sums it best when she says, "I think the podcast is wonderful. It's about Ojai, but it's about everybody."

Episodes of The Townies Podcast are available through iTunes and at thetowniespodcast.org.



KM Studio patrons, "Townies" podcast participants joined more than 100 theater groups across the country on Jan. 17th for the "Ghostlight Project," to light a light and make a

pledge. The event was inspired by the theater tradition of leaving a "ghost light" in a darkened theater, to light the way for a brighter future and shared values.