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Most Admired CEOs: Villy Wang diversifies the creative industry

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When Villy Wang told her mother, an immigrant from China who raised Wang on her own in New York City's public housing projects, that she was quitting her career as a lawyer to start a nonprofit media company to address racial, gender and economic inequities, her mother's reaction was not what she had hoped for. "Are you crazy?" she said in Chinese. "You're going to give up a high-paying job for no profit?"

Fast forward to today, and Wang's crazy idea has produced results that would make any mother proud.

Founded in 2004 and located in San Francisco's Dogpatch neighborhood, Baycat brings to life the notion that every person's story matters. It has educated more than 4,000 youth through its suite of hands-on digital media courses and assisted in launching the careers of more than 200 filmmakers and storytellers.



LIPO CHING | SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS TIMES

Villy Wang, president and CEO of the nonprofit Baycat turns storytelling into careers to address inequities.

According to its website, 78% of its graduates are BIPOC individuals and 58% are women.

Growing up, Wang noticed the duality of her own world. She would accompany her mother to work in New York's sweatshops, yet also had a front-row seat to the epicenter of business as their home was in close proximity to the Manhattan Bridge and the capitalist chaos of Wall Street.

"My mom is very much the reason for my story, because she never read to me when I was a kid and she really was very ashamed of her own story being an immigrant, and being a single mom," said Wang. This experience of having to hide parts of oneself is something that she hears often from other first-generation Americans.

Baycat was a direct response to the cultural invisibility that Wang and her immigrant peers knew all too well. Part academy, part film and digital media studio, the nonprofit has built its reputation as a premier space for creators to experiment with narrative, boasting board members from Pixar, Google and YouTube.

"It's about everything from feeling invisible, not seeing myself represented in the media and coming from a mom who didn't see the power of her own story ... I feel like my entire life and why they existed, came to the revelation of me becoming a business woman and then a lawyer and understanding that there was a huge gap in those worlds from the world that I came from, which is your typical immigrant story."

The pandemic was an especially chaotic time for Wang. She was awarded a prestigious O2 Initiatives three-month sabbatical — scheduled to begin in February 2020. After meticulously planning her out-of-office dossier, as well as a trip to China and Italy — her husband is Italian — the pandemic struck. The stipulations of the sabbatical didn't account for a global pandemic, so Wang rode out her three months sheltering in place locally.

When the sabbatical was over in May, Wang was immediately back to work, though it was far from easy. "The first thing I did was cry ... I literally started sobbing because I felt everybody's pain and even

though we planned all this through, I couldn't help but feel like I abandoned my team. It was the hardest thing to do," she said.

Wang was always meant to be an artist, she feels. The walls of her room are adorned with several guitars interspersed between photographs, and her piano was just out of focus on our Zoom call — she was a concert pianist as a child. She's all too aware of the mounting economic constraints placed upon vocational artists, especially in high cost-of-living regions like the Bay Area. Baycat wants to reverse that trend.

"I knew what it feels like to be patronized," She notes. "Like, 'oh you want to be an artist? Go get a real job.' How do we actually create a pathway for young people who want to be in the creative filmmaking storytelling world — one of the most underrepresented, and the one with the most power?"

Through its inclusive courses, internships and workshops with professionals working for media industry giants, Baycat's answer to that question grows more resounding with each passing year.

Diana K. Murphy

Special Projects Editor

San Francisco Business Times

