

# BEVERLY HILLS

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DINA MERRILL  
AND  
TED HARTLEY  
*A Good Partnership*



et fighter pilot, graduate of the Harvard Business School, film executive, actor—Ted Hartley has enjoyed a spectacular life, as has his wife, Dina Merrill, daughter of E.F. Hutton and Marjorie Merriweather Post and star of more than 25 feature films.

Yet, for them both, there's nothing like the present.

"When you look forward to your life, and try to imagine what it will be like in five or 10 years, you'd want it to be like this," says Hartley.

"It's great, challenging, scary, exciting, loving: just the right amount of insecurity and just the right amount of hope."

Currently, their lives are devoted to overseeing and continuing the legacy of RKO Pictures. Hartley serves as Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, and Merrill serves as Vice Chairperson.

Together, they have forged a good partnership.

"We support each other," says Merrill. "If he has a bad day, I can make him feel better, and if I have a terrible day, he'll say, 'Let me help you.' It's wonderful."

That mutual consideration and respect puts them both on solid ground when facing the inevitable struggles in running a film company.

"When discouraging things happen, you realize that it's not going to be that way forever," says Hartley. "One of the exciting things about life is that you know it's going to change, whatever is going on."

"That gives life a little zest, that bittersweet aspect of life that I find so fascinating. If you don't like how things are going, just wait a minute."

It must be hard for them not to like how things are going, however. RKO is enjoying a resurgence. Although its 100-year history claims such seminal films as *Citizen Kane*, *King Kong*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*, RKO has been re-energized by Hartley and Merrill, who took the reins

of the company in 1990.

RKO now has a slate of bigger budget features and independent films in active development, and Hartley is enthusiastic about the company's future.

"Making movies is unpredictable in a wonderfully old-fashioned way," he says. "To use modern terminology, it's basically analog. You start one place in the process and work through it, always with more or less the same challenges, the same problems, the same unpredictability, and the same high hopes."

"A producer friend of mine once said that the most exciting time for him in making a film was just before the cameras rolled for the first time. The actors are there, the cameras are there, the crew is there; there hasn't been a single foot of film shot. It's all glory and hope."

Considering their backgrounds, it isn't surprising that Hartley and Merrill find storytelling to be a major theme running through their lives.

"Dina and I communicate with stories," says Hartley. "It's much easier using parables and anecdotes to get your point across. When you go out to dinner or meet with friends for a drink, inevitably, the most fun thing is the stories you tell each other."

"Brilliant or pointed remarks are more to show how brilliant you are or how clever you are rather than sharing, and sharing is a metaphor for teaching—for improving our lives and other's lives."

To put an exclamation point on the subject of stories, the two have developed the Hartley-Merrill International Prize for Screenwriting, and The Story Project, two programs that emphasize the value of good storytelling and the positive impact it can have on our lives.

"The Story Project was born out of a desire to have the opportunities of life that we all have available to more people," says Merrill. "Reading and writing are the doors and

windows into life, and The Story Project creates incentives for people, mostly young teens who don't see any incentive for learning, to read and write well."

The Story Project aims primarily at improving literacy in the inner cities, using filmmaking as a subject.

"We thought that the best thing for these kids would be to trigger their imagination," says Merrill. "And how do you do that? Well, what do they love? TV. Movies. So we had the idea of bringing in people from the industry—writers, actors, directors, production—to talk to these kids and tell them that they can do it, but that they have to be able to read and write and tell a story."

And while that may sound like a lot of fun, Hartley is quick to point out that the Story Project is more than a nice afterschool program.

"We've developed a syllabus with the aim of raising the competency of students," he says. "We established standards, we test them at the beginning of the program and at the end, using standardized tests. We've found, on average, over the course of a year, that the kids raise their grade point average by one whole point. From an 'F' to a 'D,' from a 'D' to a 'C.'

"That gives them a whole world of opportunity. It opens windows. It's improving every aspect of their lives."

The Hartley Merrill International Prize for Screenwriting is another avenue the two use to support and

encourage better writing, providing a forum for writers throughout the world to bring their work to the attention of the film community.

Originally designed specifically for Soviet writers, the selection process is now open to screenwriters throughout the world.

"We've had some hair-raising stories come out of these countries," says Merrill. "Very real human interest stuff."

This year marked the 10th anniversary of the prize. At a gala cocktail reception at the Writer's Guild Theater, Poland's Piotr Weresniak and Romania's Nae Caranfil were announced as this year's winners. Ten countries were vying for the prestigious awards, which were handed out by directors Ivan Reitman and Luis Mandoki.

The screenwriting prize, The Story Project, running RKO pictures—it looks as if neither Hartley nor Merrill show any signs of slowing down. Which is just the way they like it.

"You have to be on your toes," says Hartley. "The trick is working close enough to the edge so you never get completely relaxed."

"And if you get completely relaxed, you better do something that's a little more ambitious, or scarier, or audacious."

It's hard to imagine what could be more ambitious than the life these two are leading now, but whatever that life is, it's a safe bet it will be mixed with just the right amount of insecurity and the right amount of hope.

—PETER LEFEVRE