

➔ Nancy Bennett says the STEAM Carnival will be a "live, populated, interactive technology spectacle."

Under the High-Tech Big Top

Nancy Bennett (CFA'80, COM'83) is building a new kind of carnival to inspire children

EACH MORNING NANCY BENNETT leaves her home in the Hollywood Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles and drives 10 miles to a job that most desk jockeys would covet. Her office is a cavernous studio in a 5-story, 4,500-square-foot brick building that once housed the Edison power plant, where she's surrounded by an industrious band of entrepreneurs, inventors, engineers, programmers, designers, roboticists, and game developers. There's also a physicist. And one former circus performer and champion whistler.

Bennett, a former entertainment executive and television producer and director, and this team of technonerd are known as Two Bit Circus, a think tank that will never be confused with the Brookings Institution, but whose latest project may be just as relevant. The project, STEAM Carnival, is a reinvention of a traveling amusement show, aimed at sparking an interest in science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math—or STEAM—among children. So far, the group has conceived and built more than 40 interactive games for the carnival, which they plan to roll out in Los Angeles and San Francisco in 2014, and expand to other cities in 2015 and beyond. The games combine nostalgia with 21st-century wizardry—lasers, robotics, and electronics.

Her job "is everything you want in your workaday world," says Bennett (CFA'80, COM'83), who, as executive in charge of production, has many roles, including overseeing video, film, and game production, developing content for TV and web, shaping Two Bit Circus' communications and business development, and lining up investors. "It's Willy Wonka meets Q's lab in 007 meets *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, with a German expressionist twinge of mechanical engineering."

Bennett, who also teaches in the



AMANDA FRIEDMAN

College of Communication Graduate Program in Media Ventures, says her experience brings something that was missing to the team. "I have a lot of start-up, management, and creative and production skills, acquired tools—some really refined, some learned by the seat of your pants."

The daughter of a physicist who taught at Yale for 40 years, she was a tinkerer at a young age, taking apart her father's tool kits, learning how to solder. Music came easily, too, particularly the French horn. In high school, she participated in the Boston University Tanglewood Institute,

a summer training program for aspiring musicians. She studied with several Boston Symphony Orchestra horn players while earning a degree in music at the College of Fine Arts.

But much as she loved playing music, Bennett felt the tug of a different career. She wanted to write screenplays and make films. Two months after graduation, she gave up the instrument, and three years later, earned a master's at COM. Since then, she has held several positions at the confluence of entertainment and technology. She cofounded the company Zeitgeist, which produced music videos, including the B-52s' "Love Shack" and the Beastie Boys' "Hey

WEB EXTRA
Watch a video about the STEAM Carnival at bu.edu/bostonia.

ALUMNI NOTES

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Ladies,” and she helped found the home video and audio books divisions at Atlantic Records. She became producer, director, and head of production for Atlantic’s music video division and later was senior vice president for creative and content development at MTV Networks. In between, she launched bitMAX.net, a digital video asset management and distribution company.

In 2010, she founded Squarepushers, which develops creative arts games for smart mobile devices. One of the programs she’s working on will teach users the fundamentals of music, like pitch, notation, melody, and rhythm.

“In my career arc,” she says, “I’ve always found that if you love something and you’re

playing with it and exploring it, sharing it with others is how you learn.”

Bennett joined Two Bit Circus a couple of years ago after meeting cofounders Brent Bushnell, an engineer and entrepreneur whose father, Nolan Bushnell, founded Atari, and Eric Gradman, a circus performer and champion whistler who’s also an inventor and roboticist.

Her desk—actually a chef’s prep table that allows her to stand—is situated near a 20-foot-by-20-foot platform that divides the office. On one side are desks and game developer workstations; on the other is the machine shop. Two Bit Circus employs about 25 people, plus freelancers as the projects dictate, and they work collaboratively amid a consonance of sound: hip-hop, jazz, or classical music playing all day, backed by the buzz of table saws and the whine of hydraulic lifts.

Last April, the company launched a Kickstarter campaign to raise money to build games for the STEAM Carnival. (Bennett directed the video.) A little more than a month later, it had reached its goal of \$100,000, raised from more than 1,100 contributors.

Bennett and the Two Bit Circus team envision the carnival as a “live, populated, interactive technology spectacle.” When kids toss rings onto a milk bottle, they detonate a small—and contained—fireball. “It’s a modern spin on old ideas,” she says. In another game, players sit in a rolling chair while laser meteors are projected onto the floor. With a handheld mobile device that acts as a firing tool, they “explode” the meteors, all while trying to avoid being struck. The games have an educational component. Pixel Toss, for example, is a multiplayer game that uses projection mapping to stimulate kids’ practical understanding of geometry.

“There is a passion for the circus as an icon in our culture, and game play is certainly a part of that,” Bennett says.

The STEAM Carnival will offer educational materials, including kits that allow children to create their own high-tech games and that will be introduced into school curricula.

Bennett says the carnival “is an opportunity to get kids engaged and inspired by what can be done, so that we help ignite the next generation of scientists, technologists, engineers, artists, and mathematicians.” And it’s not a bad place to work. “These guys are the nicest, smartest, most fun, happy, accomplished, supportive people I’ve had the pleasure of working with,” she says. “It’s just a blast.” *Cynthia K. Buccini*

the Scottish Ballet. She traveled to Scotland as a Marshall Scholar in 1985 to pursue a PhD in dance.

ALEX W. THOMSON (ENG’85) of Pittsburgh, Pa., was elected to the 2013 executive committee of Houston Harbaugh. Alex heads the firm’s corporate department.

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CHRISTIAN BECKER (ENG’87) of Burke, Va., a naval flight officer and aerospace engineering duty officer, has been promoted to rear admiral. Christian received the Department of the Navy Acquisition Professional and the Intelligence Community Major Program Manager of the Year Awards. He is the deputy program executive officer for Enterprise Information Systems in Arlington, Va.

MARGARET DALEY (LAW’87) of River Forest, Ill., was named cochair of the Better Government Association by its board of directors. The association is a nonpartisan government watchdog organization. Margaret is a managing director in the Chicago office of the financial advisory and investment banking firm Duff & Phelps.

THOMAS LEHRICH (SMG’87) of Washington, D.C., joined the Federal Maritime Commission as counsel to the managing director. He works on the nation’s ocean-borne shipping agenda. Previously, he was chief counsel to the inspector general at the US Department of Transportation and assistant chief counsel for the Transportation Security Administration. Thomas and his wife, Debbie, have three children. You can email him at thomas.lehrich@gmail.com.

MATTHEW PHILLIPS (CAS’87) of Diamond Point, N.Y., published *Everything but Snakes: The Story of an Impossibly Glamorous, Manipulative, Sex-Obsessed, New York City High-Society Matron* (iUniverse, 2012).

MASHA (MARC) SAVITZ (CFA’87) of Los Angeles, Calif., writes that she is in the process of securing distribution for her documentary *Red Reign*, about the persecution of practitioners of Falun Gong in China. Masha writes that the film exposes the forced organ harvesting from these prisoners of conscience. Watch the trailer at www.redreignfilm.com, and learn more about Masha’s related organization at www.thetruthour.org.

JANET R. YOUNG (GRS’87) of Gloucester, Mass., published two young adult novels with Atheneum Books for Young Readers in 2012: *My Beautiful Failure*, about a teen boy who volunteers at a suicide hotline and falls in love with a troubled caller, and *Things I Shouldn’t Think*, about a babysitter whose

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