

Monica Brady of VUniverse

Hall T Martin: [00:00:04] This is the Investor Connect Podcast Program, I'm Hall T Martin. I'm the host of the show in which we interview angel investors, venture capital, family offices, private equity, and many other investors for early-stage and growth companies. I hope you enjoy this episode.

Hall T Martin: [00:00:23] Well hello, this is Hall Martin with Investor Connect. Today I'm here with Monica Brady, co-founder of VUniverse. VU by VUniverse is the go-to app for today's streaming entertainment world powered by a personalized algorithm. VU provides programming recommendations based on individuality as well as engaging, fun, and insightful features that connect users with every corner of the streaming universe. As a subscription app, VU protects user privacy and security, and unlike free navigation apps that trade on personal data, VU saves users time and frustration with the convenient platform for discovering and surfacing the best streaming programming available. Monica, thank you for joining us.

Monica Brady: [00:01:00] Thank you for having me.

Hall T Martin: [00:01:01] Great. So, what was your background before joining VUniverse?

Monica Brady: [00:01:06] Well, back in 1999 I started the Golden Trailer Awards with my sister and the Golden Trailer Awards is the "Oscars" for Motion Picture previews. So the trailers, the "Oscars" for trailers. And, we started that in 1999, I'd just graduated from Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, and I had enough money to put together to shoot a trailer for a feature film I wanted to film. And, my sister and I went around looking for who does trailers, who does a really good job of that. And so, we looked around and they're not credited anywhere at the end of the film, not credited at the end of the trailer, not credited anywhere. So, my sister said, "Well, there must be an award show for them", and we looked around, there wasn't, so we started that from an idea to now a global property in the entertainment industry as executive producer of that and we're in our 21st year. So, very exciting on that.

Hall T Martin: [00:02:03] Great. So, what led you to start work in the streaming entertainment space and the current app that you're doing now?

Monica Brady: [00:02:10] Well, I'm also a filmmaker as well as a commercial producer, and my sister is a commercial producer. We got into the streaming world based upon the need that we saw - it was twofold. One, I sat down one night and I wanted to watch a comedy and I sat down, I had dinner already and I didn't know what I wanted to watch. So, I sat there and I went through my HBO, I didn't see anything in the comedy section. I went through Netflix, I didn't see anything there. And then I went back to our show, the Golden Trailer Awards, and I looked at the comedy section and I saw Game Night. So I was like, "Oh, Game Night". Now I'm in Amazon at this point time, I'm 27 minutes into this search and I see that Game Night is on Amazon for \$8.99, and I've already wasted all this time. So I said, I'm just going to purchase it now just so I can enjoy the rest of my night. Then two days later I found out it was free on HBO. I just didn't want to go back through all my services and see if I had it anywhere for free. And I realized at that point in time that nobody had a vested interest in seeing me not make that purchase except for myself. So, I was talking to my sister and we had been both feeling this pain point and we had had an idea way back before all these (OTT) over-the-top services were out there in 2011, about sending a trailer out to people one a day so that they knew what to watch. So, we started that idea merging with a channel guide for the streaming world and that's how we came up with VUniverse.

Hall T Martin: [00:03:40] Well, you know the streaming entertainment world is really a hot space now. What's your advice for people investing in this space? What do you tell them to do before they write that check?

Monica Brady: [00:03:49] Get in while you can is what we tell them while they're writing the check. It is a hot space and it's an ever-growing space, and unfortunately, we find ourselves in the pandemic lockdowns, but fortunately, it has created it for a lot of streaming which is great for business and the pipeline just keeps filling up with better and better content. As my friends are back in production now in Los Angeles and it's like you can't even rent a camera out there because the basic economics, supply equals demand, and there's a huge demand for great content and what we say is we're in the golden age of television and we're just going to head into the platinum age of television because based upon data, we know more and more what people want to watch and so,

there are more creators, content creators are more and more informed of what that is. So, exciting times ahead. So, get in while the going is good.

Hall T Martin: [00:04:45] Great. So, how do you see the industry evolving from here?

Monica Brady: [00:04:48] I see more OTT over-the-top services, so more of your Netflix, your Hulus, your Amazons, your HBOMaxs. There will be a coming together like where Disney bought out Fox and created their huge library. There will be some of that, but there will also be, there's long tails. Like so, in the music industry there was a long tail of music that there's an audience far enough out there on the long tail. So, there'll be more niche channels and the like, like that, so there'll be more to organize. There'll be more content to let viewers know about. So, I see more content coming, I do see, so people always talk about cable bundling and how the cable providers bundled packages together and they would bundle, say the NFL Network with another channel that they wanted but you have to get this whole 10-pack. Then there was the great unbundling. And now we find ourselves in the place where you get - as the individual - to choose which services like Netflix, HBO, Amazon, Hulu, you get to choose those because those are the ones that you go to. But there will be more niche ones as well, like Britbox, I love British programming, I could watch it all day long. So, there'll be more niche like that, or a tennis channel or those kinds of things so you get to pick and choose. But nobody, nobody out there is better at making a bundle than the individual. So, for example, myself, I like The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, I like to watch football, and I like Tyler Perry movies. Nobody out there in the world was ever going to put that combo together and throw in Ozark for good measure, and then you've got the Monica-Brady package; it's the individual who does that. So, I think we're in the age of the individual with their choices and the community of that individual. So, say tonight, I want to watch that with my sister in Ohio, I want to watch the rest of Ozark so we can go to do that together.

Hall T Martin: [00:06:41] So, how fast is this sector growing now that we're in the pandemic and it seems to be accelerating?

Monica Brady: [00:06:46] It's accelerating very fast. We've seen exponential growth from the time of the lockdown, which is unfortunate. It's an unfortunate time in the world that so many people are at home, but thank God that there's the ability to entertain everybody because if we didn't, there's books, but nobody seems to read anymore! So,

I'm looking over at my library and I'm like, "Yeah, I guess I could be reading", I'm streaming. And our Chief Revenue Officer, Rick, always makes out this great point. He's always like, "When did bingeing become OK?" He's like, "Everyone's like a binged Ozark. When did that become OK?" And I'm like, "I don't know. It's not like I'm bingeing over there." So, it's growing exponentially and it's been growing, unfortunately, with the lockdown, but I'm just happy that people have good content to watch, so, to keep everybody entertained and to keep that level of sanity. So, yes, the growth is amazing right now.

Hall T Martin: [00:07:41] Well, and so how many companies are engaged in this in some way, shape or form? The streaming space, the Hulus, the Netflixes, and then all the apps and all the tools that go in and around it. Seems like it's expanded dramatically.

Monica Brady: [00:07:54] There are over 100 OTT over-the-top - you know what OTT stands for - there are over 100 of those services to navigate and that's just going to keep growing. So, it's always interesting. So, we call ourselves the Channel Guide for the Streaming Universe and TV Guide came around in the '50s, in the '50s, when America had only three channels to navigate - three, one, two, three - ABC, NBC and CBS. So, three channels to navigate and they wrote a whole magazine around that. So now with, and then cable came along and you had the 300+ channels that promise of 300+ channels, and then you had your channel guide. And now, we have all these OTT services, and then the average consumer can't keep up with - Friends got pulled from, that contract was up with this service and now it's over here on this service. The average consumer doesn't know to follow a contract, or know who created that, or know who the rights fell to. So, the need for our service is even greater as these rights and stuff become more available and get tossed up into the air as to where they land, and we have never had at any point in time the ability to access anything film since 1874 for film or television. So, we have that ability now and that's a lot. That leads to overwhelm and that overwhelm leads to needing a channel guide. And that's what the VUniverse is, that's the problem we solve, and it's felt by most every American.

Hall T Martin: [00:09:26] Absolutely. It's tough to find things on the streaming, but as a guide yourself, what's the challenge you find in running a business in this space in the current time frame?

Monica Brady: [00:09:36] Well, it's funny. I thought it was difficult to film an independent film, feature-length film, I thought that was the most difficult thing I would ever have to do in my life. And then, trying to run a tech company in a pandemic, well, that's a whole new challenge. So, the most difficult thing is that in the beginning of the pandemic, funding, everybody got a little skittish on what was happening next. I mean, it was unprecedented times and people didn't know lockdowns, we'd never experienced anything like this before. So, funding is always interesting. And it was right before the lockdowns, VUniverse was one of the five finalists. Sorry, let me start that again. So, right at the beginning of the lockdowns, VUniverse was one of five finalists at this year's South by Southwest Innovation Awards for AI and Machine Learning. And we were all set to go, we had our booth, we were ready to go win it because there's only five of you and that all got stopped. So, that was a blow to the whole funding chain and all that. And, 2020 started out with such great promise in all that world, and then you just start dealing with the things that come your way and anybody out there who's listening and has dealt with this year, it's like once one thing happens you pivot, and then you just keep going until you find the next thing that's going to come at you and, the year has been so crazy that no one could have seen any of these coming; it's just been unprecedented. So, the thing is just to keep going, the challenges are the funding, and I'm working from home. From our homes, that's been a challenge too, especially with a team, but in this day and age, it's a lot better than it would have been a couple of years ago, but that's been a challenge. Missing your co-workers, missing that camaraderie, missing that sharing of ideas, I find that has been a challenge. And yeah, just those are the two big ones I see right now.

Hall T Martin: [00:11:38] So, tell us more about the VUniverse and how it fits into the landscape, and exactly what you guys do.

Monica Brady: [00:11:44] Yeah, so it's a simple onboarding process. It asks you to write ten titles and then the algorithm starts learning more about you and your likes and dislikes. So, we call it the channel guide for the streaming world and it takes all your OTT platforms, your Netflix, your Hulus, your HBOMax, your Amazons, and it puts them in one place, so you know what you have to watch and where you have to watch it, so you don't end up spending money that you didn't have to because you had it on another server.

Hall T Martin: [00:12:13] Well, great. And so, what's unique about it in the sense that you have a _____ office engine, I should say. Exactly what is that doing for us?

Monica Brady: [00:12:22] So it's bringing back that water cooler effect, it's bringing back that human element. The problem with algorithms is that a computer is assigning 1s and 0s to human emotions. In our algorithm, it brings in behavioral science and archetypes that start helping make decisions that make a recommendation based upon who you are. So, in the water cooler days, or in the break room days, or just when you go out and see other people, you have, they're vetted in a way. There's things that you like that are similar. So, getting a music recommendation from somebody, if you don't like their music choice, you don't take the recommendation. Same thing with a movie. If somebody told you to go watch a movie and it was bad, you're not going to take the recommendation again. So, our algorithm combines that human element and brings back that ability for the behaviors that are indicative of the human species to help make recommendations to the viewer so that they're not wasting their time on something that is not, that they're not going to like. I find that a lot of the algorithms on these platforms, A, they're biased to keep you within the platform and that's their job. So, you always have to go with what the algorithms, who created the algorithm? --I'm just laughing because that Slack sound is going to be on the thing. I gotta turn off Slack, sorry, that's, any investor in tech will understand what that sound just was. ---But the algorithm takes into consideration the human side of recommendations and the human side of emotions and makes recommendations that are actually pertinent to the viewer so that you don't end up wasting your time. The algorithms within silos of the OTT services serve the purposes of that streaming platform, and as they should. I mean, that's their job in a way. So, you have to see that the algorithm is biased to who created it. So if it's created by say, OTT service, then it will be biased to that. It always goes to who created and what they created it for. We at VUniverse, we believe what you watch is your business, helping you find what to watch is ours. So with our platform, it's a simple SaaS platform, and that takes away the bias towards serving you up ads and serving you up unwanted content and only serving you relevant content.

Hall T Martin: [00:14:40] So, if I put in three or four shows that I like, it's going to tell me what other shows I would like or how much do I have to put in before I get a meaningful recommendation out.

Monica Brady: [00:14:49] You have to put ten titles and the titles in the beginning are polarizing on purpose, it's either you love them or you hate it. There was never any middle ground on these movies. So, it's fun in that respect and then you'll actually want to keep reading titles and the more you rate titles and give them tags, the better the algorithm gets to know you and make better and better recommendations.

Hall T Martin: [00:15:10] Well, my next question is, is it a free app or do I pay for it, or how do you monetize this whole thing?

Monica Brady: [00:15:15] We are a SaaS platform, so we're a subscription-based service and there'll be a \$1.99 for an individual plan and a \$3.99 for a family plan, and that will allow you to have up to six users in a family. So, that's how we monetize it.

Hall T Martin: [00:15:31] That's per month?

Monica Brady: [00:15:34] Correct.

Hall T Martin: [00:15:35] And how do you keep track of, or how do you get access to all the things that are streaming out there? Do you have relationships or partnerships with Hulu and Netflix or whatever? Do they give you the list or do you do a Google-like search on streaming and just find what's there and then categorize it yourself? How do you manage that?

Monica Brady: [00:15:52] We have relationships and we get the API from many different sources so that we're the most up to date on all the stuff that is out there and available. So, it's many different sources and our deep ties within the industry has allowed us to make those connections. So, it's a very insular industry, so 21 years in the business has afforded us some great intros into the key players.

Hall T Martin: [00:16:16] And so, where do you go from here? You launched the app and then what?

Monica Brady: [00:16:20] We launched the app and then we have a great promotional campaign lined up behind the launch of the app. And we have, we're going to build out

our community features, that's going to be a big component of the app and that would be like a Phase II. It'll be the sharing, it'll be the, you can earn badges if you're a super watcher, the gamification of the whole system. So, we're excited about the community aspect and we're excited about all the other features that are going to make our platform so super sticky that people come back over and over again and it becomes the go-to place for the streaming universe.

Hall T Martin: [00:16:55] Well, great. Well, in the last few minutes that we have here, what else should we cover that we haven't?

Monica Brady: [00:17:00] Just the other thing to cover is that we just believe at VUniverse that it's time to stream smarter. Time is your only non-recoverable asset in this life, and so, you should not be wasting your time trying to find what to watch when our app can help you do just that.

Hall T Martin: [00:17:15] So, Monica, can you tell me more about the company and how it's comprised?

Monica Brady: [00:17:19] Oh, yes. VUniverse is a female and minority-founded company headquartered in New York, a Delaware corporation. We're looking for qualified investors to help us get to the next level to bring our beta launch to the market.

Hall T Martin: [00:17:36] Great. So, how best for listeners to get back in touch with you?

Monica Brady: [00:17:38] They can contact us at, well, they can contact me at monica@vuniverse.com and or, we just set up an alias, so invest@vuniverse.com and our telephone - oh, we just got a new telephone number today. Sorry, sorry Hall. I should have had that ready to go. Do people use telephones?

Hall T Martin: [00:18:02] We'll put that in the show notes and want to thank you for joining us today and hope to have you back for a follow-up soon.

Monica Brady: [00:18:08] Yes, I had a great time. Thank you.

Hall T Martin: [00:18:12] Investor Connect helps investors interested in startup funding. In this podcast series, experienced investors share their experience and advice. You can learn more at Investorconnect.org.

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