

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

Latoya Lewis of EnventU is ready for the main event

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Emily Van Zandt, Associate Editor

Latoya Lewis loved event planning before she even knew what it was. As a high school student, she stayed busy, diving into logistics as junior class president. And then there was her first job in the music industry, helping Universal Music artists as they navigated sponsorships, shows and interviews. It was after organizing her sister's bachelorette party that Lewis knew she wanted to make the leap to events full time. Now, after spending seven years with D.C. events manager Andre Wells, Lewis is focused full-time on her nonprofit EnventU, an education program introducing underserved teens that helps introduce them to events-related careers.

What do you miss most about living in California? The weather. But even more than the weather, I miss the relaxed nature in California. People are very self-expressed in their attire, their look and image. I miss that.



Latoya Lewis, founder & CEO of EnventU
JOANNE S. LAWTON

What were you like as a kid? I was involved in everything. I was junior class president, I was a cheerleader. I was trying to take over the school. I was super busy and probably too serious. But I was doing logistics before I

knew I could make a career out of it.

What did you want to be when you grew up? As a really little kid, I wanted to be a zoologist. I loved animals, but then I saw that you had to be camping out in the dark woods. My first career was in the music industry. I went to school for that and started my career with Universal.

Biggest lesson you learned at Universal? Dealing with different personality types. The artists have their needs and specific way they want things done. The biggest lesson I learned was dealing with all types of people.

What made you switch from the music industry to events? There were a lot of changes in the music industry. I was there right as Napster had hit. The industry was trying to figure out what was next and what this new delivery method meant for the business model. Right at my five year mark they were doing layoffs every year. People were nervous every January. I started researching events and event management and realized you could get a degree in it.

Why had you always wanted to live in D.C.? I've always wanted to live on the East Coast. As much as I like the one season in L.A., I love seasons. I love the change. I love winter clothes and winter gear. I got to see D.C. when I was coming in to do courses for my master's and I loved it.

What events are you most proud of from your time with Andre Wells? Helping launch the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and to be a part of the Dream Gala was so special. It was a milestone. It's not every day a memorial opens. Personally, it was amazing for me to be a part of, culturally. It was the same with the (National Museum of African American History and Culture) opening as well. That was one of the last things I did with Andre. I really like to be a part of events that don't happen every year.

How did EnventU get started? The seeds were planted when I was at GW. I had to take a course about starting and managing your own business. It was a one-unit, very small course, but it challenged you to think about what your dream business might be. At the time, for me, it was an event-based community center. I put it on the back burner when I started with Andre, but in 2015 I started thinking about what I wanted my next steps to be. What did I want my mark to be? Philanthropy has always been very important to me. And I realized I could do a program. I looked at the old business model and started reworking it.

What did you see about the events community that you thought the students could benefit from? I absolutely love events. I love the variety of the industry. I love that you get to meet so many people. A lot of people know the event planner, but they don't know the suppliers — the audio-visual, the décor, the flowers, the catering. There are all these career paths available to students that they just don't know. Also, the industry doesn't have a nonprofit arm. Yes, we do lots of giveback events, but what about cultivating our next generation of industry professionals? That was lacking as well.

How did the schools react to your pitch for this program? They've been very supportive. In general, linking the real industry to the students and kids and teens — those partnerships are rare. Student might get to plan a bake sale or a car wash, but we're talking about a billion-dollar industry. There are all these huge opportunities, and we're trying to bridge that gap.

How has the program been going? Ballou High School was our pilot school. The concept is for the kids to produce real-life events. So we worked with Andre for one of his events, a corporate holiday party at the Hyatt in Bethesda. Over the course of eight weeks, we'd go into the classroom and have the vendors come into the classroom. What we'd normally do over email, we'd do in the classroom. The students got with their vendor mentor and planned the event. They're getting to choose. They made decisions on décor and the floral colors. It creates ownership. And then on site, they're helping set up and get that rewarding feeling. In spring of 2016

we produced an end-of-year celebration for Ballou High School. The fall of 2016 we did a concert in Woodbridge with 3,500 people.

Was there a moment or response from a student that has surprised you? One of my students who started from the very beginning with me, and is still with me, came with me to the location of our most recent event. I said to the group, "OK, you guys are going to be seniors, what are you going to do?" And she said, "I went to Ballou and I thought I would just go and do my time and leave. I didn't think there would be anything for me, but I joined EnventU and now I want to be an event planner." So, to change the experience for a high schooler is pretty powerful for me.

You just got your first board of directors. How will that help shape the program? I'm very excited about our board. They are top industry heavyweights and very respected. I respect them tons in the industry. With their experience and my passion, I know we'll take EnventU to great heights. I look forward to, over the course of the next three years, expanding to another two schools and really firming up our internship program.

Best advice from a mentor? I always say I come from the school of [Andre Wells](#). I learned so much from him and find myself saying a lot of the things he said to me. Overall, my parents are my biggest mentors. I'm very blessed to have them as parents and EnventU is a reflection of them. My dad always told me, when I've made it, that I need to reach back and help people.

What was the biggest change moving from the corporate world to nonprofit? It's really not my personality to ask for anything. I'm such a doer. But this has been a challenge for me, to ask for support. To ask for resources. To ask for you to see the potential in these kids. Every nonprofit has to ask. You have to engage people in your programs and when it's your heart and your baby, it's all personal. It's not so easy to separate it.

Was it scary to take this on full time? Yeah, it is scary. But with EnventU, I've always felt purposeful. You to have faith to open any business. It was time for me to have faith in myself and faith in what this could be. I feel like this is God's work through me. I am a spiritual person. And when you have that belief, you know it's going to be OK. I think any entrepreneur that tells you they haven't had to step out on faith at some point, they're probably lying.

What's your dream event to plan? EnventU's gala. I want to walk into EnventU doing their own gala at some place like the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium or some grand, 400- or 500-seated venue. I see a 16-year-old fixing the lights and a little me with their schedule. I want to see a completely student-produced event. I just want to sit down and be a guest and watch the kids. That's my dream.

What's something unique about events in D.C.? I think because the government is here, the amount of of conventions you do, of trade shows, is unique. Also, the level of logistics required when you have elected officials coming to your events. You can't have a full meal if a Congressional member is going to be there, it has to be priced a certain way. There's a better chance that the President might be there, and that's very unique.

What do you love most about living in Alexandria? That it's close to the city, but you get a little bit of escape. I'm a big nature person and I live across the street from a path. I can go and get disconnected a little bit. Alexandria can feel like a very small town in a lot of ways.

Hobbies? I need some! That's my problem, I work way too much. I love going to live music and shows. I'm a big Martin Lawrence fan. I have traveled and followed him to Nashville and North Carolina. I love comedy.

How many times have you seen him? I did four shows in two years. I went bowling with him one time. A friend of mine did comedy in L.A. and she called and said, "Do you want to go bowling with Martin Lawrence?" We

went in the valley in L.A. to some rinky-dink bowling alley. He was so chill and so not like his stage persona. I never got a picture, I didn't want to be that fan. I hope I never forget it.

Vacation bucket list: Bora Bora is on my list and the Maldives. Africa is on my list. I want to go on a safari and camp out under the stars.

Go-to drink: Right now, it's a bourbon sour.

Favorite music: I learned early on that there's only two types of music: good and bad. I listen to everything. When I'm at home and want to relax, I listen to the James Morrison Pandora playlist. I also love hip-hop when I'm angry or stressed and need to vent.

One artist you wish you could see live: I never saw Michael Jackson and it kills me that I never saw him live. And I want to see Stevie Wonder.

The basics

Latoya Lewis, CEO, EnventU

Age: 36

Education: Bachelor's in music industry at California State University, Northridge; master's in tourism administration, George Washington University

Residence: Alexandria

Family: Single

First job: Parking attendant at California State University, Northridge

Emily Van Zandt oversees features and special projects and event-related publications.