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Kwame Amoaku is the new director of the Chicago Film Office under Mayor Lori Lightfoot. When Amoaku was a locations manager, he handled high-pressure tasks.

ON LOCATION

Kwame Amoaku discusses his path to city's film office director, from photo lab to 'Chicago Fire' locations manager

BY NINA METZ

Last October, as Richard Moskal was preparing to retire after 23 years as head of the Chicago Film Office, I asked about the wildest request he fielded during his tenure. He told me about an idea floated (and then later abandoned) by Michael Bay during the making of "Transformers: Dark of the Moon" that would have recreated a stunt from the 1980 Steve McQueen movie "The Hunter" in which a car zooms off the parking deck of one of the Marina City towers into the river.

Bay wanted to do it with multiple cars — *on fire*. When I told the story to Kwame Amoaku, who took over as the director of the city's film office earlier this month, it prompted a knowing laugh. "But that's what you have to do," he said. "You have

to take these requests and think them all the way through and figure out: 'Is there a way to possibly do this?' And sometimes the answer is no. But you've got to at least try. I mean, the sheer logistics of making these productions work inside of a working city is a daunting task."

All of that becomes even more complicated when the number of projects in town increases, as it has on the TV side over the past few years. With 500-plus scripted shows available on one format or another each year, studios are in need of shooting locations that have available studio space and offer film incentives (Illinois offers a 30% tax credit) and it's possible Chicago could see an even higher uptick in series based here.

While the state film office focuses on job creation by helping to bring TV and movie projects to Illinois, the city film office has a different mandate: Primarily as the on-the-ground liaison between productions and the city itself — everything from street closure permits

to coordinating extraordinary requests (cars aflame launched off Marina City, say) that involve sign-off by various city agencies.

Getting buy-in from those agencies can be a challenge. "Their job is to make sure the city keeps running and anything that looks like it can stop that, they're going to push up against, absolutely," Amoaku said. "But it's now my job to let them see that, yes, this could be an inconvenience, but we can make it work."

(Jamey Lundblad, the chief marketing officer for the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, was present during our interview Monday.)

Amoaku comes to the job with a number of years experience on the other side of that equation, as the location manager for NBC's "Chicago Fire."

"I started with the show Episode 2, Season 1. The seventh season (which wrapped this past spring) was my last."

Turn to *Film*, Page 3



CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Soapbox speaker Ellen Lee presents "A Korean Rapper's Question: Malicious Comments vs. Freedom of Speech," during the Bughouse Square Debates in Chicago's Washington Square Park on Saturday.

What's 'The Big Deal'? It's summer in Chicago

This city, for all its pains and troubles and inequities, can look pretty good in certain places and one of those was from the huge third-floor windows in an office in the Cultural Center. It was Friday afternoon and there was Grant Park across Michigan Avenue, filled with people moving and kids of many colors soaking in the water pouring from the park's giant fountains.



RICK KOGAN
Sidewalks

This was the view from the office of Mark Kelly, who has been the commissioner of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special

Events since 2016. "The transition between mayors was a bit insane," he said. "But I was never nervous about my job because I feel the

Turn to *Kogan*, Page 3

Field Museum's Emily Graslie set to host national TV series

Her 'Prehistoric Road Trip' for PBS will be produced in Chicago

BY STEVE JOHNSON

Emily Graslie, YouTube star and the Field Museum's Chief Curiosity Correspondent, will host a new national PBS series exploring the geology and vast fossil history of her native South Dakota and surrounding states.

"Prehistoric Road Trip" is being produced by Chicago's WTTW-Ch. 11 and will be three one-hour episodes spanning, Graslie said, "about 2.5 billion years. Just half of Earth's history, that's all."

PBS was set to announce the show Monday at the annual Television Critics Association press tour in Beverly Hills, Calif.

Slated to air on the national PBS prime-time schedule in summer 2020, the series will combine Graslie's personal history — her family's farm in western South Dakota is less than six miles from the spot where the Field's great fossil T. rex Sue was discovered, she said — with the story of life on Earth across the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming and Nebraska.

In press release-speak, it's an "immersive adventure" in which



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Field Museum's Emily Graslie films an online video in February 2017 about Mexican gray wolves at Brookfield Zoo. Graslie next moves from YouTube to a national TV audience with a three-part series on PBS.

"Graslie will uncover and discover the history of North American dinosaurs, and other prehistoric creatures, including ancient fishes, mammoths and early mammals."

"I want people to re-examine the relationship they have with the natural world, with fossils," Graslie said in a phone interview from her hotel room on a rare day off in shooting the series. "I would love for people to walk away with a sense of wonder and awe for geology, because it's

amazing. And I really would love people to have a sense of deep time."

Other Chicagoans to host national PBS series this decade include University of Chicago fish paleontologist Neil Shubin ("Your Inner Fish") and "Wait, Wait ... Don't Tell Me!" host Peter Sagal ("Constitution USA").

The Field hired Graslie, now 30, back in 2013 on the strength of her YouTube series. "The

Turn to *Series*, Page 3



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Emily Graslie's next move is from YouTube to a national TV audience with a three-part series on PBS.

Series

Continued from Page 1

Brain Scoop," subtitled "Adventures in Taxidermy, Biology and Natural History" had 140,000 YouTube subscribers and developed a passionate following especially among women and girls interested in science.

Now based at the Field, among the nation's leading natural history museums, "The Brain Scoop" has grown to 510,000 subscribers as Graslie, in a series of videos typically running about 10 minutes, explores topics ranging from "Why did King Tut have a flat head?" to "The Amazing Laser" to "Beetles, Mites, Cockroaches, Oh My!," an exploration of the museum's insect collection.

With Graslie as executive producer, host and star, "Prehistoric Road Trip" will preserve some of the tone of "The Brain Scoop," which puts her passion for learning about science at the forefront.

But it'll be "more polished," she said, including being shot in 4K resolution. "This is the biggest thing I've ever done in my life," she said.

Where "Brain Scoop" episodes are usually made by her and a videographer, on the PBS show, "we've got myself plus six working on it. By the time we've done, we will have been filming for eight or nine weeks. We have a drone. That's awesome. But at the heart of it, it's still me. I'm leading the charge in terms of the tone I want to capture."

The series is a coup for WTTW, as well. "It's very important to us," said Geoffrey Baer, the program host and producer and the channel's new vice president of original content production. "A lot of the national programming tends to be bi-coastal, and we're sort of forgotten in the middle of the country. We want to be sure we put a stake in the ground and are contributing to what

people across the country are seeing?"

Added Baer, "Emily is just a treasure."

The show began with a conversation that included Graslie, then-WTTW chief content officer Dan Soles and Field CEO Richard Lariviere in the latter's museum office in the fall of 2017.

"Dan throws me this question," Graslie said. "If I could make an hourlong documentary about anything, what would I do? And of course I hadn't really thought about it, but I had to have an answer."

She drew on her family history and the West and they took a concept for a documentary hour to PBS in January 2018. "I start giving this pitch: 'Western South Dakota has an amazing fossil record, and I'm from there, and I miss it, and I want to bring a camera crew.'"

The PBS executive responded, according to Graslie, "We'd like you to think outside of one state, and we'd like you to do three hours.' So this is just the best problem to have, right?"

PBS chief programming executive Perry Simon, in the news release Monday, called the series "unlike anything we've presented before" and stressed Graslie's "unique talent with an amazing and dedicated YouTube fan base."

For her part, Graslie said, "It's really important to me that this be a public broadcasting role. Occasionally I have been approached by major cable networks to do shows, but PBS is the one for me. I grew up on South Dakota Public Broadcasting."

After several more weeks shooting in the west, she said, they'll do the final expected shoots back in Chicago at the Field, which is scientific consultant on the series. "You can't make a dinosaur documentary without filming Sue, of course," she said.

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Kogan

Continued from Page 1

work we've done here speaks for itself and it has been good work."

He's an interesting guy, Kelly, in part because he is not a person who rose to his position by knocking doors as a precinct captain. He accepted his DCASE job after more than three decades as an administrator at Columbia College. The work he has been doing with his DCASE colleagues has resulted in many interesting and some innovative things. "I think we've been able to take DCASE from being a dynamic special events presenter," he said, "into being a dynamic organizer of the cultural landscape of the city."

He has only met the new mayor a few times. Nothing formal, but rather such things as a walk with one another through Taste of Chicago.

This Saturday he will be wandering the 800 block of S. Desplaines Street, taking the measure of one of his latest creations. It is called "The Big Deal" and it is Kelly's attempt to inject new life into what has been for the last decade the Maxwell Street Market. "The Big Deal" will be 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday; more at maxwellstreetmarket.us.

"During the first week on this job I was informed that the city was closing the market and I said, 'Over my dead body,'" Kelly said. "I wanted to keep it and make it a cultural mecca again."

Of course, the original Maxwell Street market did not call itself the Maxwell Street Market. It was an area spreading out from the corner of Maxwell and Halsted Streets and from the 1880s into the 1990s was a human quilt of various immigrant groups. People lived and worked there, many of them at the marketplace that also attracted others from across the city, to buy and to sell things, to play and listen to the blues, eat food and in other ways taste new cultures. Vibrant and wild, it was an essential piece of the city. But in the early 1990s the University of Illinois-Chicago gobbled it up.

"I can still remember seeing it for the first time," said Kelly, a native South Sider now in his mid-60s. "I was with my dad, maybe 9 or 10 years old, and it was cold, not bitter winter cold but there were fires burning in big garbage cans and people huddled around them to keep warm. And all around us activity. We were in the middle of this wild



CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Soapbox speaker Daniel Epstein presents "At Least the Witches of Salem Got a Trial" during the Bughouse Square Debates in Chicago's Washington Square Park on Saturday.



Audiences on the lawn in Chicago's Washington Square Park listen to the Bughouse Square Debates on Saturday.

and gritty expanse, a scene like nothing I had ever seen before. I have never forgotten that, and I remain emotionally connected to it."

He well knows that it is not possible to recreate the past, but he is determined that the Maxwell Street Market has a vibrant future that acknowledges its past. "There are vendors who have been there for 40 years and we want to honor them," he said. "We have formed partnerships with various groups and organizations, gotten a grant, are featuring a new beer made especially for this event, and music, lots of music on two stages, and the food, the food. (Famed chef/restaurateur) Rick Bayless has said the market has the best Mexican street food in the country."

It is likely the new mayor, Kelly's boss, might be there. She gets around and last Saturday there she was in Washington Square Park, across from the Newberry Library for the Bughouse Square Debates, an annual gathering of voices, opinions and occasional craziness.

The original Bughouse Square debates were not known as the Bughouse Square Debates but were wildly informal affairs. From the 1880s into the

1930s, people came to the park and stood on soapboxes or crates and spoke of their passions, theories and philosophies to anyone who would listen. Some were famous and smart (Carl Sandburg, Emma Goldman). Many others were anonymous anarchists, poets and preachers. Some of them were, frankly, nuts.

The debates came back to life more than 30 years ago thanks to social historian and author Arthur Weinberg and his wife, Lila, a historian, author and teacher. For years Weinberg served as the event's emcee, and after his death in 1989, others filled that role, most prominently and exuberantly author/activist Studs Terkel, who had spent some of his formative years listening to the soapbox orators. He wrote of that time in one of his many books: "I doubt whether I learned very much (at the park). One thing I know: I delighted in it. Perhaps none of it made any sense, save one kind: sense of life."

Mayor Lori Lightfoot was there for the presentation of the John Peter Altgeld Freedom of Speech Award, named for the Illinois governor who courageously pardoned the anarchists wrongly convicted of

the 1886 Haymarket bombing. It was given to Derrick Blakley, who recently retired after an admirable 40-year career as a journalist, most of it on television.

The mayor had a few thoughtful words to say about this event and about the bloody anniversary of the city's 1919 race riots, which was the topic of a later and enlightening on stage discussion between Natalie Moore, the talented WBEZ-FM reporter and the author of the stunning book "The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation," and Charles Whitaker, a former editor at Ebony Magazine and the recently named dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

The mayor had to leave before a variety of speakers took to their "soapboxes"; she had other public events scheduled on this typically busy day. So, she missed orations from people on such topics as "Cannabis is Good for Your Money, Health, and Taxes" and "On Being Black in America." She missed the presentation of the award for best speech, which went to attorney Scott Priz, whose topic was "Trump's Camps are What We are as a Nation, but It's Not What We Have to Be."

I have been attending these debates for decades and, since Terkel's death in 2008, have served as emcee. Until Saturday I had never seen a mayor show up, let alone say, as Lightfoot did on this sunny and hot day, "This is a great city, we all know this. But we have many things that hold us back... Our work to create a more equitable and just society has to continue."

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Film

Continued from Page 1

He said his most complicated ask of the city was for last year's season opener.

"We were at the old Hard Rock, which is now the St. Jane Hotel in the Carbon and Carbide Building (and we turned it into) a towering inferno. That was a huge negotiation with the building itself because the hotel was just in the midst of opening at the time. Then all the businesses on that street, the hotels, the restaurants, the parking garages. I had to take a lane of Michigan Avenue, which can be disastrous in itself, but we made it work.

"We stayed there for several days and shot an amazing sequence. We had people rappelling out of windows, we had smoke, we had fire. We had 10 fire trucks driving down Wacker and huge aerial shots. It was beautiful, it was like a huge big budget movie and I was proud that we were able to pull that off just for episodic television. So that's an example of how the city can work with productions in order to get these high production value shots, but not shut the city down."

The film office is part of DCASE and commissioner Mark Kelly said that when former director Moskal retired, he left "tough shoes to fill and we undertook a serious search, but Kwame's name kept coming up again and again. If you know anything about being a location manager,



JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Chicago Film Office Director Kwame Amoaku takes a break at the Chicago Cultural Center.

that's a high-pressure job of bringing everything together and making sure it happens. So he is going to be a great addition."

Moskal agrees: "He has the temperament and the discipline but also the experience — he's a bit of a unicorn in that he's fully versed in what film production is all about, but he also really knows what it takes to sort of grind the gears of city government to make things possible."

Amoaku's varied background in the local TV and film scene took root in college, he said. "I went to school for cinematography at SIU (Southern Illinois University), so behind-the-camera was always my passion. It was what I wanted to do. Acting came as a happy accident and something I could do to make a living."

His resume includes small roles in TV and film that shot locally: "Early Edition," "Barbershop," "Prison Break" and more recently "Chicago Fire."

"But at the same time I was also a production assistant. I started from the ground up and worked my way through the system, becoming a member of the Directors Guild and moving up through the ranks. I'm a die-hard Chicagoan, born and raised here, mostly on the South Shore. I just have a real true love and an affinity for the city, but also the film business. It's almost like a family. So when Rich said he was leaving, I felt it was an opportunity for me to step in. I bounce between a lot of different worlds: The commercial world, the independent (film) world, the feature (film) world, the episodic

television world. And those worlds don't necessarily intersect all the time."

And yet the Chicago Film Office has to service all those areas.

"Exactly. So I've been one of the few people who's moved through all of those worlds in my travels in the film business, not only behind the camera but in front of it as well."

How did he transition into locations manager?

"I used to work at a photo lab in Piper's Alley. This was before I started acting, this is before I was a production assistant, this was before anything. Back in the old days, when you'd take pictures, you'd take them to a one-hour photo lab. All the location managers used to come to the lab I worked at, so I met a lot of them back in the day. And one of them had been

assigned a rap video. He asked me if I wanted to come with him and knock on some of these doors and that was my first experience doing locations.

"It's an interesting position because there's no locations class in film school. You have to have certain skills sets that lend themselves to the position. You have to have a familiarity with the city, but also be able to look at a script and see it cinematically. So it's helpful to have a cinematographer's eye or a director's eye to be able to interpret scripts for real world situations and then marry those two things together.

"Also, the gift of gab is definitely something you need. You've got to be able to walk up to a person's door and say, 'Hi, you don't know me from Adam. I want you to let me into your house so I can photograph everything and then I'm going to come back with about 250 people and we're going to set your house on fire.' You have to convince people of that, and that takes a great deal of skill."

But crews aren't really setting someone's house on fire, are they?

"Sort of! I'm not going to burn your house down, but I'm going to set your house on fire. So it's about convincing them that you're not crazy (laughs) and you're not a pyromaniac who's going to burn their house down. But taking that first step — of allowing you into their space to photograph it — is big."

Amoaku has given some

thought to how TV and movie projects affect people who work and live in areas temporarily blocked off by filming and said he wants to "better integrate these productions — basically this entirely new industrial force — into the city's neighborhoods so that people can see the benefit of it and that it's not just an inconvenience.

"People think of the movie industry as a bunch of rich Hollywood people. But in fact the industry here has been a huge boon for the blue-collar working class citizens of the city. It's not necessarily about the marquee stars. It's about the blue-collar people that are getting these jobs. And these are life-changing, car-buying, house-buying jobs that people are getting. So it's not just a question of rich people coming here and making you move your car.

"The film office has worked very hard to improve notification for the residents, to give people a clear line of communication between themselves and the production companies so that we'll know what concerns they have.

"As a city, of course there are always things we could do better. There are things the production companies could do better. But I think we're definitely in a direction where we realize the importance of keeping the neighborhoods with us, so we're doing things to get ahead of that so we're not getting these nuisance calls."

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