Kelly Richmond Pope
Revolutionizing teaching through real-life education and filmmaking
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Kelly Richmond Pope is one very busy woman: professor, author, filmmaker, education innovator, speaker, forensic accounting expert—and that’s just the start. “I’m probably the only accounting professor on the planet with a documentary on Netflix, Amazon, Google Play, Direct TV and 20 other cable outlets, and a TED speaker.”

Kelly is an associate professor in the School of Accountancy and Management Information Systems at DePaul University in Chicago. She teaches forensic accounting, managerial accounting, financial accounting and ethical leadership. She is recognized as an expert in the forensic accounting field and has conducted seminars and talks around the world on the topic.

Outside of the classroom, she works on fraud and white-collar research and serves as a consultant to companies.

Kelly’s niche method of teaching relies more on incorporating real-world situations into the classroom to resonate with students, rather than rely on boring, textbook instruction. This teaching approach prompted Kelly to become an education innovator, producing original content in the form of documentaries and starting her own digital education media company.

It all began with a serendipitous interest in forensic accounting. Kelly says she became intrigued after a student wrote a paper on it. “I love that it is a blend of accounting, auditing, finance, psychology, criminology all rolled up into one field. And if you are a little nosy, this could be the perfect field for you.”

After that, she decided to leave academia and work for KPMG in their forensic accounting practice. There, she worked on anti-money laundering engagements, insurance fraud investigations and fraud risk management. “Some of the best ‘accounting stories’ are rooted in fraud and everyone loves a good story.”

In September of 2012, Kelly delved into her filmmaking career by creating and producing an award-winning, educational, white-collar crime documentary called Crossing the Line: Ordinary People Committing Extraordinary Crimes.

Following the success of this documentary, Kelly decided she would create a proprietary platform that would collectively house her documentary and other real-life e-cases. “I was dissatisfied with the boring, non-engaging, outdated, expensive content available to students, so I decided to develop the content I felt students deserved,” she said.

Kelly founded Helios Digital Learning in January 2013. Helios Digital Learning is an education media company that uses actual, real-life cases to teach students and professionals about ethical decision making. The site, www.heliosdigital.com, serves educators, corporations, governments and even the entertainment industry with a “suite of specialized products and services designed for individual, small group and large audience interactions. Stories are a powerful way to communicate and motivate, [which] has a profound impact on learning.” These multimedia
e-cases focus on real-world dilemmas, which takes learning out of the classroom and into practice.

In the meantime, Kelly was asked to join an author team to co-author, A.B.C.’s of Behavioral Forensics: Applying Psychology to Financial Fraud Prevention and Detection. The book was published in September 2013.

In April 2017, Kelly gave a TEDx talk at the DePaul University TEDx event. Little did she know that this talk would go viral. Due to its popularity, TED pick up the talk and Kelly became an official TED speaker, along with other world-famous thought leaders. Her TED talk, “How Whistle-Blowers Shape History” has been viewed over 1.2 million times. “Carrying the TED speaker title has definitely opened the door to new opportunities, including one to write my own book, which I am currently exploring,” reveals Kelly.

Later that same year, Kelly would release her very popular second documentary, All the Queen’s Horses, which chronicled the largest municipal fraud in U.S. history, involving Dixon, IL treasurer and comptroller, Rita Crundwell, who embezzled upwards of $50 million from the municipality. The film won the HBO Spotlight Award for Best Documentary at its world premiere in August 2017. Soon thereafter, Netflix came calling. “My award-winning documentary was extremely popular and successful,” Kelly notes. “It was the number one documentary on iTunes, Google Play, Amazon Prime and Direct TV. Netflix approached my distributor, Gravitas Ventures, with a licensing deal in all English-speaking territories.” Netflix released the documentary on July 10, 2018.

No one would expect someone of Kelly’s ambition and drive to not have anything in the works for the future. And sure enough, she’s already working on something great. “I am currently designing and working on an “edutainment” educational and entertaining) curriculum for introductory accounting, auditing and forensic accounting class. The name of the curriculum is Red Flags Edutainment. The first session, When We Prey will be out this fall.

When We Prey is based on a true crime embezzlement case that occurred in a small Lutheran church. The learner will have the opportunity to review and investigate real-case documents including invoices, checks and bank statements to solve this mystery. “Our signature edutainment curriculum will allow the learner to place themselves in a real-world ethical dilemma and use their decision-making skills to solve a problem. This is a hunt-and-find game where small discoveries uncover substantial challenges resulting in significant wins,” states Kelly.

Using real-life, interactive digital teaching tools as part of her curriculum also includes reviewing interviews she’s had with felons. “I tell students all the time, ‘Your idea of what you think a white-collar felon is, really isn’t the reality.’” Kelly says. “Most of the people I interview are really nice, everyday people. They could be anyone walking down the street. My biggest point to my students is this: ‘This could be you. If you think that it can’t be you, you will be more likely to make one of these mistakes, and I will be interviewing you later in my career.’”

By Cathy Demetropoulos

ALL THE QUEEN’S HORSES
Directed and produced by Kelly Richmond Pope

Winners: HBO Best Documentary, Martha’s Vineyard African American Film Festival 2017