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## Interview with Sierra Lyman, Warped Tour's Director of Nonprofits

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## Interview With Sierra Lyman, Director of Nonprofits for Warped Tour

By Rachel Hawkes



Beloved by concert-goers since 1995, the Vans Warped Tour is the longest running music festival tour in the United States. Though it is about to embark on its final season, the Tour's reputation of community outreach and fostering its young performers and fan base remains strong. In Fall of 2017, Kevin Lyman, founder of the Warped Tour, visited the University of the Pacific campus for a day of lecture and discussion. He was joined by his daughter, Sierra Lyman, the Director of Nonprofits for Warped Tour. The two shared their professional experiences with students and answered questions about festivals, touring, and the music industry.

As a senior Music Management major with an interest in live music, I was delighted to have the opportunity to chat with Sierra during her visit. Sierra, having graduated from

college in only 2017, is not far removed from student-life. I wanted to further discuss her position in the music industry, so she agreed to do an interview for *Backstage Pass*.

Along with her job as Director of Nonprofits, Sierra's expansive resume includes DJing, work with numerous music festivals, two internships, and freelance graphic design work. Sierra has a foot in both the design and music world, and is currently working in both. Sierra's experience both as a professional and as the daughter of Warped Tour founder Kevin Lyman have given her a unique perspective on the music industry.

**You are a recent graduate from the graphic design program at Loyola University.**

**However, you have spent a good amount of time working in the music industry with your experience on the Warped Tour. Do you plan on incorporating music into your career?**

Right now I'm currently working as a personal assistant for a woman who does all of the catering at the big festivals and venues in LA, so I still plan to keep doing music. I've also been working as a VIP assistant at an EDM festival in Ohio called Lostlands and down in Los Angeles at a country festival called Driftwood. The music industry is pretty cool because of how broad it is to work in. People either think they are an artist manager, playing music, or recording. You don't realize what little things go into putting on a show or festival.

**What was your perception of Warped Tour as a child? Did you realize your dad's career path was unusual or did you think he had a boring "dad job"?**

I knew that it was unusual because he was gone a lot. I realized that a lot of my friends didn't have dads that left all summer. But I did know that I was lucky because a lot of my friends' parents didn't come home for dinner every night. My dad made sure that when he was home, he had dinner with us. At a young age, Warped Tour was a place where I got to see my dad and my friends. My birthday is in July, so we always threw my birthday party at the Pomona Warped Tour Show. So until I was about 13, Warped Tour was just where I had my birthday party or saw my dad and family. Around 13 or 14 I would go to the shows with one of my best friends. We wouldn't even go backstage or anything; we just stayed in the crowd all day and avoided everyone I knew. It's funny, sometimes I realize bands like My Chemical Romance were on Warped Tour, and my mom will say "Yeah, that was in 2003, you were like 8. You're not gonna remember it." I forget how young I was when it was happening.

### **How did spending your summers on a tour bus affect your teenage years?**

I started on the road when I was 16. I was pretty lucky because you usually have to be 18 to go on the road for liability, but my dad was out there with me. I lived on his tour bus my first year, which was pretty nice. My second year I lived on a tour bus with 18 different people on it, while the average bus has 12 people on it. Those two years before college helped me learn how to live with roommates, but it also frustrated me. You also learn how to manage a lot of different personalities. For two years, I was on a bus where the majority of people hadn't toured before. A lot of them were fresh out of school. Learning about those personalities, being around different kinds of people... you learn that you have to get along. It was difficult, but fun. In college I lived in an apartment with three other people and thought "I could live with 18 people really easily but now I live with three and they're difficult? What is this?"

### **What made you decide to go to college instead of continuing on with Warped Tour?**

I really wanted to go to school because growing up in California, I feel like I lived in a bubble. A lot of people think California is the best place to be, the only place to be, blah blah blah. But there's so much to this world outside of California, and touring really gave me that perspective. I wanted to go to school, I wanted to move out from my parents house, I wanted to experience something different and meet a lot of new people. I've always been super academically inclined, and I don't think I was ready to give up going to class or the learning environment. I think there's something very special about the knowledge that you share in a college campus, the conversations you have, the perspectives you get.

**Now that you've worked in the business and been behind the scenes, is it hard to just step back and be a fan/consumer of music?**

Yes. I think the last concert I went to where I wasn't working was last Valentine's Day. I went to see Joyce Manor at a bar down the street from my house in New Orleans. It was such a good show. They're playing in LA soon and I want to go see them but I don't know if I'm going to be working another show so I can't buy tickets yet.

And I definitely feel it with festivals. A lot of my friends right now are about 22 or 23 years old. They're all going to the festivals and camping and having fun. I haven't even tried to go and enjoy a festival since I was a freshman in college. I end up feeling like I could be doing something or working. I'll see something and think, "Oh this could be done better, this needs to be done like this." I don't want to say I'm jaded with festivals, I just want to help improve them.

I really like to go see movies. It's a good difference from going to see live music. I know nothing of how movies work, so I can just go enjoy them and watch them.

**What are you listening to?**

I really like The Front Bottoms and Joyce Manor. When I was in high school I wanted to rebel against that Warped Tour music, so I listened to a lot more hip hop and pop just because it was different. Most kids listen to punk rock to rebel. Recently I've been listening to new and old pop punk bands and starting to embrace that. I drive a lot because whenever I work as a runner or personal assistant, I'm in the car. I've been using Spotify's Discover Weekly to listen to music and I've discovered a lot of songs and bands that I've liked through that.

**I guess I'm behind the times, I haven't listened to Joyce Manor.**

When I was in New Orleans there was this really big DIY punk scene and I'd always go to house shows. There was a really cool record label called Community Records and a lot of my friends were involved with that, so I really like the DIY punk sound. Joyce Manor is a bit like that. I love New Orleans because you have that really big jazz scene. All of the punk bands I knew would throw in a horn section. I thought that was crazy.

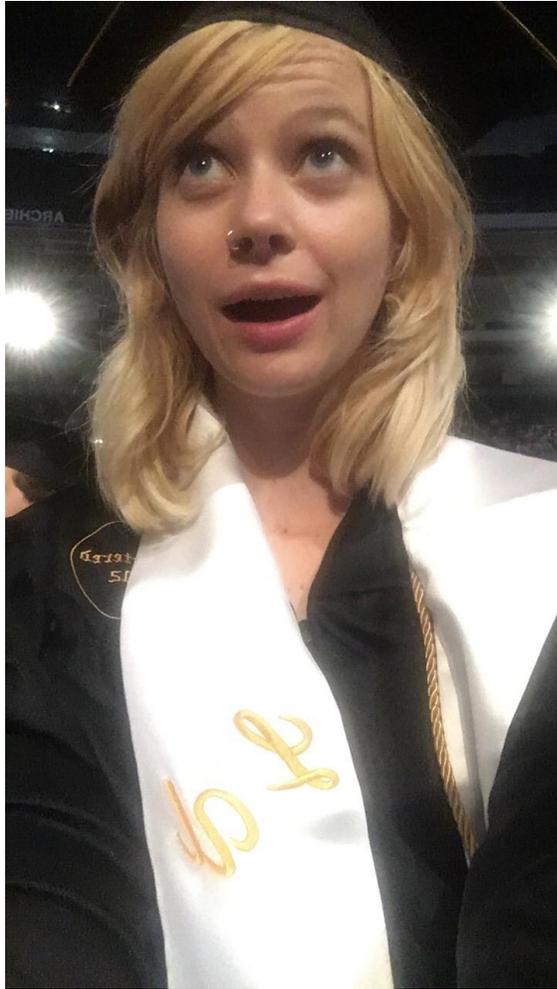
**Do you think that because of the surplus of jazz musicians in New Orleans, the music evolved to embrace that?**

You can't go anywhere in New Orleans without hearing jazz. That was the cool thing about Loyola- a lot of people from out of the city moved there... maybe they were from New Jersey, where they listened to a lot of pop punk. But then they go to Loyola to study guitar, because of the big music program. Because they were surrounded by jazz, they started to bring that jazz into their music too. It's a neat collaboration down there.

**How did you become the director for nonprofits on the Warped Tour? Was it a job that you pursued?**

I started out selling \$2 schedules in the parking lot. I had my booth that I set up every day and sold schedules, sunscreen, and markers as a sort of general store. I did that for two years. One of those years I DJ'd on the tour which was a lot of fun. They had a silent disco, so that was a cool thing to do. I met a lot of cool DJ artists out there. All of these other artists would do an hour or two set every day and then just hang out and make music. But I was working at the same time, so I would go do my hour set, eat lunch really quickly, and then run back and do the schedule stuff.

It was fun though. A lot of people came to me thinking it was an information booth and would field their complaints to me, so I got a lot of customer service experience. Sometimes people just want to vent and they don't know who to vent to so they vent to whoever they can find. A lot of the times that was me. I liked it, but I felt like I could be doing more. I knew I had more skills than just selling stuff. I met this woman, Jessie Owens, who was the Director of Nonprofits at the time and she said that she needed an assistant for the next year and offered me the position. I've always cared about giving back and charity events. I actually started DJing because my school was throwing a high school dance and all of the DJs wanted \$400 down before the dance even made any money. We were just trying to raise money for charity, so I decided that I'd just DJ. I've always had a place in my mind and heart for giving back in nonprofit work. So I did a year with her as her assistant and at the end of the year she said, "Oh yeah, by the way, I'm not coming back next year. You're going to do it now." So that's kind of how I started doing the nonprofit stuff.



**It sounds like you found that job pretty organically. Do you ever have trouble disassociating from your dad and proving your own value?**

Yes. The first year I went to Warped Tour, a lot of people said things like, “Really Kevin? Is she actually going to work hard? She’s a little too young. We work long hard days.” Plus having a bus spot on the tour is pretty expensive. So there were a lot of people that doubted me. But I pushed through that and at the end of the summer people thought, “Wow, she actually did it”. And it was really cool to be acknowledged by Jessie and hired by her. She didn’t check with Kevin; Kevin didn’t tell her she

had to hire me. Coming up with the job at Coachella, I feel like a lot of people aren’t sure if I can do it or not. But I know I can do it. It’s a production managing job, which is similar to the nonprofit job and the catering job, but on a whole new capacity.

**Warped Tour is known for being run by women, which is unusual for the industry. What has been your experience working as a woman in the music industry?**

I think it might have been unusual in the early 2000s, but now a lot of the key positions in festivals are held by women. I think that there are a lot of opportunities out there for girls. But on Warped Tour, and in any capacity of the music industry, if you’re a girl, you have to prove yourself. Not only to the men out there, but also to the older women who paved the way for the

younger women to be out there. I would say the generation above me definitely had a harder time. My generation really has to prove ourselves to the older generation.

It's harder with the stagehands and the fans. I'll go out with my friends who are workers on the tour and they won't even tell the Uber driver that they work at Warped Tour because a lot of time the drivers will respond with, "Oh, what band are you sleeping with?" That's the frustrating thing. I think that our society in general doesn't view women in the music industry as seriously other people in the industry view them. I think that there is a long way we all have to go. We need to hold each other accountable and not be afraid to speak out because no one's gonna look down on you. And that's what I feel on Warped Tour, trust in each other to do what's best for everyone out there.

**You started working for Warped Tour during a pretty tumultuous time for the music industry. Did you notice Warped Tour changing because of this?**

During that time I noticed that the younger audience were weirdly exposed more to what a band looked like than what they sounded like. People were able to start looking online and seeing, "Oh this band is really cute, oh and I guess their music is good too." I think the smartphone and social media generation has really made it hard for a band to make it if they are thought of as unattractive.

You can't go to a show without seeing a whole bunch of smartphones in the audience. I remember when we had our Razor flip phones. I was looking through my old hard drive and I found a picture of some band. It was so grainy that I couldn't even tell you what type of stage it was on, what band it was... I thought, wow, do people really look back at their phones and look at all of the pictures?

Recently we did the Warped Tour cruise, which was a lot of fun. And it was also really interesting because there was no access to social media. We were in the middle of the ocean, the boat had terrible WiFi, and Wifi was really expensive if you wanted it. So it was really neat to go back to the concert experience where no one had their phones out.

**Where do you see the future of live music heading?**

I hope people still see a value in live music in the future. I think that there's this feeling you get that is irreplaceable. One of the cool things about New Orleans was that I could walk down the street and see one of the coolest jazz players and just sit there and listen. But that also jaded me. When a band comes through the town and they charge \$60 for a ticket, I really don't want to pay because I could just go on a walk and see amazing music for free. Also, as a college student, I don't have \$60 for that- it's the beginning of the semester, I need to spend it on books. I think that to keep live music going, we need to keep it more affordable for younger generations, for our generation, and just for everyone. In big arena shows, tickets are insane with prices starting at like \$150. I feel like we're charging so much. Some people can pay \$300 to go camp at a festival, but a lot of people can't, and that's really excluding them from live music. It's difficult and we need to make sure live music is accessible to everyone, old and young, and I don't know who that falls down on. That whole thing with Taylor Swift... "If you purchase more merchandise, you get put in front of the line to buy tickets." Those are ways of alienating your fans. I think we should do more underground music. If you're a college student and you find out a band is coming through town and they don't have a show, figure out how to contact them and say, "Hey, my friend has a house, could we do a backyard show? We can offer you whatever we make at the door". I think we need to come together as different music scenes and support people who are really trying to build their career instead of supporting the one hit wonders.

### **What are your thoughts on Warped Tour ending?**

In my personal family, I think we've all had a feeling that it was going to end soon. I was surprised that last year wasn't the last year. But you couldn't just end it in September, you have to go out one more time and give people warning. But I think one of my friends actually put it the best way: "How cool is it that Kevin is at a point in his life where the thing that made him famous is the thing that's holding him back?" Warped tour is a big beast in itself and it takes up a lot of energy and a lot of time. I'm sad about it ending, but also kind of happy. I think it should end on a good note instead of just fizzling out. Everything that is around for a long time will fizzle out at some point.

I've developed a lot of relationships with people who have come out to Warped Tour year after year, and even invite some of them out as my own guests. They're some of the most positive people. A lot of them I have met through nonprofit organizations, and I'm really bummed that I won't see them every summer.

I think that there's a really good community that stands behind Warped Tour. I don't think we are going to lose it, but we are going to have to work a lot harder as a music community



to keep that family vibe going. If it wasn't the last summer, I probably wouldn't have done it this next summer. It definitely changed my career path. Last May, when we didn't think it was the last summer, I thought that I was going to go work at a design studio. I was still doing some interviews, but they needed

my commitment. And I had to leave for three months in the summer. So that's one of the things that is changing my career path. Instead of having a steady job, I'm hustling a bit more and working several jobs.

### **Any general advice for students graduating with a creative degree?**

You can't just rely on your degree. You need to rely on internships you've had, connections you've made, and the portfolio you've built for yourself. A lot of people I know get their degree, and then think, "Now what?" because they never did an internship in college.

A degree is amazing. It helps you learn a lot, but you're not going to really know how to do things until you've actually done them. And that's what internships are really great for. Get up and go for it. A lot of people my age are nervous to go to that job interview, speak to the

promoter of that venue, show up at a design studio... Nerves aren't a bad thing, but they shouldn't hold you back. Older generations have such a weird perspective on our generation, and I think they see it as impressive when you just show up and introduce yourself. Learn all of the negative stereotypes of your generation and work to make sure those aren't a part of your life.