



STORYTELLING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ACTION

LEVERAGING DOCUMENTARY FILMS
TO STRENGTHEN LOCAL MOVEMENT BUILDING

A STUDY OF THE *PUTTING FILMS TO WORK* INITIATIVE

FEBRUARY 2021





ABOUT THE CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary, entertainment, and public media, CMSI bridges boundaries between scholars, producers, and communication practitioners who work across media production, media impact, social justice, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and research, convenes conferences and events, and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter.

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report was written by CMSI's Aras Coskuntuncel (lead researcher), Caty Borum Chattoo, and David Conrad-Pérez. Varsha Ramani, CMSI communications and program manager, facilitated operations and communication support. This research was funded by a grant from Working Films.

INTRODUCTION

Movements for social justice comprise thousands of individual voices – community groups, neighborhood coalitions, direct service organizations, and members of the public who are inspired to participate. On the local level, nonprofit civil society organizations work closest to the communities and issues they serve. These non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are civic network builders. Encouraging people to engage in civic practice is the everyday work of movement building, equity, justice, and democracy in action, and is embodied in local organizations and their leaders. In this context, documentary films have a long history of engaging with social movements by telling their stories and empowering community action, and by introducing the reality of human struggle and triumph in nuanced, intimate ways that can invite connection and solidarity.

Today, collaborations between documentaries and community organizations often happen within a particular model—by building organizational partnerships around individual films, whereby filmmakers and their impact teams work closely with issue advocacy groups to reach the people most affected by the stories they are telling. A different model seeks to empower nonprofit community organizations with the tools and training to leverage documentary storytelling regularly and consistently in their efforts to engage publics and constituents around social issues. In this way, the hope is for nonprofit organizations to add the power of intimate documentary storytelling to their strategic toolboxes. This report examines this idea through a focused year-long experiment with this model, an initiative called *Putting Films to Work*.



“DOCUMENTARIES ARE CAPABLE OF PROVIDING

A ‘WAY TO TOUCH PEOPLE’S HEARTS’.”

CAROLINE DURHAM, GEORGIA APPLESEED

ABOUT PUTTING FILMS TO WORK

Facilitated by the film-based action organization Working Films, the *Putting Films to Work* project was a year-long initiative that offered training and support to a select group of Georgia-based nonprofits; the objective was to provide the organizations' leaders and staff with the hands-on skills and tools to use documentaries to advance their organizing, public engagement, and advocacy goals. *Putting Films to Work* launched in April 2019 with a two-day convening and training session for eight organizations, hosted by Working Films. Based on the training, participating nonprofits organized film screenings through March 2020. The nonprofits were selected by Working Films and a team of Georgia Based social justice advocates and organizers after a competitive application process: The Counter Narrative Project, LaGender, Inc., Housing Justice League, Quest Communities, Georgia Justice Project (GJP), Georgia Asylum and Immigration Network (GAIN), Living Room, and Georgia Appleseed. The eight organizations, each working on different social justice issues in Georgia, organized 17 screenings in total. Some of the organizations also partnered with other local and national organizations during the process.

As part of Working Films' ongoing commitment to equity and supporting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) led grassroots organizations, the selection process prioritized applicants whose leadership reflected the communities they serve. Of the eight organizations selected for *Putting Films to Work*, three organizations are led by Women of Color (Housing Justice League, GAIN and LaGender), and three organizations are Black-led (Counter Narrative Project, Living Room, and Quest).



ABOUT THIS STUDY

Through an examination of the *Putting Films to Work* protocol and interviews with its participants, this study considers the utility of a particular model for local movement building, in which nonprofit organizations are trained to incorporate documentary storytelling into their ongoing strategic efforts for social justice.

This study includes in-depth interviews with participating organizations and an analysis of case study prompts curated from the organizations via email.¹ The prompts asked the organizations to share the precise details of their documentary screening engagements.

This study explores the following questions:

- **How does working with nonfiction storytelling influence partnering organizations' practices and creative thinking around public engagement with their communities?**
- **How does working with documentaries impact nonprofits' organizing, educational, and advocacy practices and goals?**
- **What were the specific outcomes for the participating organizations when they worked strategically with documentaries?**

This report provides a summary of the key findings from this research, including an analysis of the interviews and the organization's responses to a set of case study prompts.

The study aims to provide a portrait of how the documentaries were used as tools for engagement and organizing for social justice issues, including a nuts-and-bolts view of what is involved in doing this type of community engagement, along with participant reflections on the opportunities and challenges that documentaries present to their work.

This research endeavors to help film-based impact organizations, strategists and documentary filmmakers gain more insight from the experiences of organizations that collaborate with documentaries in community settings. On a broader level, the study also aims to provide strategic understanding to organizations and researchers who are interested in how documentaries can be leveraged as tools for social change, dialogue, and community building.

¹ One of the participant organizations, Living Room, Inc., is no longer in operation, and we couldn't reach out to two organizations. This research engaged representatives from each of the five remaining organizations.

PARTICIPATING NON-PROFITS



THE COUNTER NARRATIVE PROJECT is an Atlanta-based advocacy organization supporting black gay men, which “works in solidarity and coalition with all movements committed to racial and social justice.”¹ The group hosted three screenings with three different films: *I Am Not Your Negro*, *Rigged*, and *Black is... Black Ain't*.



THE GEORGIA JUSTICE PROJECT (GJP) is a nonprofit that supports “low income people who have been affected by the criminal justice system”³ and works to “reduce barriers to reentry.”⁴ The group hosted two screenings of two different films: *Life after Life* and *Returning Citizens*.



GEORGIA APPLESEED: CENTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE is a nonprofit law center focused on “children experiencing poverty, children with disabilities, and children who experience the effects of institutional bias and racism.” The group organized two screenings of two films: *Segregated City: The Fight to Desegregate New York City Schools* and *Priced Out*.



THE HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE, a nonprofit focused on affordable housing and gentrification in Atlanta,⁷ organized screenings of four films: *Sweet Auburn Blues*, *Priced Out*, *Flag Wars*, and *The First Rainbow Coalition*.



THE GEORGIA ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION NETWORK (GAIN) is a nonprofit that provides “free immigration legal services to victims of crime and persecution.”² The organization hosted three screenings of a CBS News documentary, *The Darien Gap: A Desperate Journey to America* and *Seeking Asylum: An Immigrant's Journey*.



QUEST COMMUNITIES, is a nonprofit focused on developing affordable housing,⁵ organized screenings of *Owned* and *Priced Out*.



LAGENDER, INC. is a nonprofit organization that addresses the needs of the black transgender community on issues such as HIV/AIDS, homelessness, and discrimination.⁶ The group organized a screening of *Happy Birthday*,



LIVING ROOM, INC. was a nonprofit focused on providing housing and health care for people living with AIDS. By 2020, the organization closed operations and wasn't able to host any screenings prior to closing down.

LIST OF SCREENINGS AND DOCUMENTARIES

CITY RISING illuminates the journey of California's neighborhoods advocating for responsible development. The documentary examines gentrification in the state—its historical roots, economic role and social consequences.

DATE: MARCH 13, 2019

HOST: HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE

THE HOME TEAM explores how Atlanta's historic Westside neighborhood and its communities have been affected by the construction of the Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

DATE: MAY 15, 2019

HOST: HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE

SWEET AUBURN BLUES tells the story of one of the most historic neighborhoods in the South. The documentary traces the history of Auburn Avenue "as a nexus of black culture and commerce, a springboard of the civil rights movement, and a community irreparably cleaved in two by the construction of the Downtown Connector in the 1950s."⁸ Directed by Alahna Lark.

DATE: JULY 25, 2019

HOST: HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE

I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO "envision[s] the book James Baldwin never finished, 'Remember This House.' The result is a radical, up-to-the-minute examination of race in America, using Baldwin's original words and flood of rich archival material. *I Am Not Your Negro* is a journey into black history that connects the past of the Civil Rights movement to the present of #BlackLivesMatter."⁹ Directed by Raoul Peck.

DATE: JULY 31, 2019

HOST: COUNTER NARRATIVE PROJECT

PRICED OUT explores the effects of 15 years of gentrification in Portland, Oregon. The documentary "is a heartbreaking vision of the history of housing

discrimination in the nation's whitest city, and the personal impact it has had on residents."¹⁰ Directed and produced by Cornelius Swart.

DATE: APRIL 17, AUG. 9, 2019, AND MARCH 11, 2020

HOSTS OF INDIVIDUAL SCREENINGS: HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE, GEORGIA APPLESEED, GEORGIA JUSTICE PROJECT, QUEST COMMUNITIES

HAPPY BIRTHDAY MARSHA! "is a film about iconic transgender artist and activist, Marsha 'Pay it No Mind' Johnson and her life in the hours before she ignited the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City."¹¹ Written and directed by Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel.

DATE: AUG. 31, 2019

HOST: LAGENDER

THE DARIEN GAP: A DESPERATE JOURNEY AND SEEKING ASYLUM: AN IMMIGRANT'S JOURNEY documents immigrants' journey through the Darien Gap "with coyotes and paid people-smugglers who help those that can afford it to navigate the path."¹² Produced by CBSN's Adam Yamaguchi and CBSN Originals.

DATE: SEPT. 12 AND OCT. 21, 2019

HOST: GAIN

STORYSHIFT: AN EVENING OF EXPLORING ACCOUNTABLE STORYTELLING (Film Series Event)

DATE: SEPT. 26, 2019

HOST: WORKING FILMS, BEAUTIFUL VENTURES

LIFE AFTER LIFE "follows the stories of Harrison, Noel, and Chris as they return home from San Quentin State Prison. After spending most of their lives incarcerated, they are forced to reconcile their perception of themselves with a reality they are unprepared for."¹³ Directed and Produced by Tamara Perkins

DATE: OCT. 8, 2019

HOST: GEORGIA JUSTICE PROJECT

LIST OF SCREENINGS AND DOCUMENTARIES

FLAG WARS “is a poignant and very personal look at a community in Columbus, Ohio, undergoing gentrification. What happens when gay white homebuyers move into a working-class black neighborhood?”¹⁴ Directed by Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras.

DATE: OCT. 24, 2019

HOST: HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE

RIGGED “chronicles how our right to vote is being undercut by a decade of dirty tricks - including the partisan use of gerrymandering and voter purges, and the gutting of the Voting Rights Act by the Supreme Court.”¹⁵ Directed by Michael Kasino.

DATE: NOV. 5, 2019

HOST: COUNTER NARRATIVE PROJECT

OWNED explores the promise of US housing policies, the systematic oppression in many of America’s “chocolate cities,” and the communities that these systems have created.¹⁶ Directed by Giorgio Angelini.

DATE: NOV. 14, 2019

HOST: QUEST

THE FIRST RAINBOW COALITION tells the story of the Chicago Black Panther Party’s efforts “to form alliances across lines of race and ethnicity with other community-based movements in the city, including the Latino group the Young Lords Organization and the southern whites of the Young Patriots. Banding together in one of the most segregated cities in postwar America to collectively confront issues such as police brutality and substandard housing, they called themselves the Rainbow Coalition.”¹⁷ Directed by Ray Santisteban.

DATE: JAN. 8, 2020

HOSTS: WORKING FILMS, GEORGIA PUBLIC BROADCASTING, AND HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE

SEGREGATED CITY: THE FIGHT TO DESEGREGATE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS follows “a group of students fighting for a better, more just education” in the New York City public school system, which is “one of the most segregated school systems in the nation.”¹⁸ Directed by Sweta Vohra and produced by The New York Times.

DATE: JAN. 16, 2020

HOST: GEORGIA APPLESEED

BLACK IS...BLACK AIN'T explores Black identity in America. “Is there an essential Black identity? Is there a litmus test defining the real Black man and true Black woman? Riggs’ own urgent quest for self-definition and community, as a black gay man dying from AIDS, ties the multiple perspectives together.”¹⁹ Directed by Marlon Riggs.

DATE: FEB. 3, 2020

HOST: COUNTER NARRATIVE PROJECT

RETURNING CITIZENS “focuses on a passionate group of individuals who are looking for a second chance – or perhaps a chance they never had to begin with. Taking place in Southeast Washington, DC, the film offers a humanizing perspective on a community that has been negatively impacted by mass incarceration.”²⁰

DATE: MARCH 12, 2020

HOST: GEORGIA JUSTICE PROJECT

THE PUTTING FILMS TO WORK MODEL

In order to demonstrate the potential that nonfiction media and documentary storytelling can hold for nonprofits and public institutions interested in accelerating the impact of their work, *Putting Films to Work* (PFTW) uses a participatory, practice-based way of working that is rooted in responding to the specific interests and priorities of each organization.

As detailed in the following section, a sequence of steps moved from **(1) capacity building and training on the use of documentary as a tool for engagement**, to **(2) a phase of institutional reflection and planning around the selection (and then promotion) of the best films, spaces, and timing for each event**, to **(3) facilitating the actual on-the-ground screening engagements**, and then **(4) finally to a period of further institutional reflection around what was learned through the events and what institutional and engagement strategies could be changed (or expanded) as a result**.

Rather than forcing a top-down, one-size-fits all form for engagement, the sequence of thoughtful, iterative preparation is key to the *Putting Films to Work* model's overall goal of using nonfiction media to facilitate change – both within organizations and in the areas where they work – from the ground up.

**“THE AUDIENCE WAS REALLY ENGAGED,
MORE SO THAN I ACTUALLY EXPECTED.”**

ERIKA CURTIS, GEORGIA JUSTICE PROJECT

PHASE ONE: TWO-DAY TRAINING INSTITUTE

LEARNING THE TOOLS, BUILDING CAPACITY, AND SHARING EXPERIENCES

As a kick-off event for the PFTW model, Working Films convened participant organizations for a two-day training meeting, from April 25 and 26, 2019, in Atlanta. The capacity-building event was led by senior staff at Working Films and other experts from the field, and it focused around today's best practices and key lessons in the use of documentary film as a tool for engagement, organizing, education, and advocacy. The training introduced participants to Working Films' curriculum, including the eight elements required to put films to work, and reviewed case studies of other film and organizing campaigns for participants to discuss and use as templates for them to imagine their own events. The space also created an atmosphere of collaboration, where representatives from each participant organization were able to share experiences, tackle shared problems together, imagine new ways of integrating documentaries into their missions, and ultimately build a supportive community of groups all working on urgent social issues within the same state.

Working Films also spearheaded a StoryShift conversation in Atlanta on September 26; several of the organizations in the PFTW cohort attended, and Charles Stephens from the Counter Narrative Project was also on the panel, which consisted of filmmakers, producers, actors, and community organizers. As the conversation focused on accountable storytelling, participants discussed questions such as: Who gets to tell whose story? What is our responsibility as makers to the people featured in the content we create? How are media makers practicing accountable storytelling? Working Films presented their StoryShift videos featuring documentary filmmakers discussing their accountability practices.

PHASE TWO: PLANNING THE EVENT

PICKING THE FILM, CHOOSING TIME AND LOCATION, AND PROMOTING THE SCREENINGS

The next stage for the participating nonprofits, after the training institute, was to apply the visions they first created at the institute and to begin designing and planning their event. The first step in this process was for each organization to pick up to 3 films that they wanted to show. To help facilitate the process, Working Films provided a set of documentaries to each of the organizations related to their work; some of the nonprofits picked a documentary from that list while others found different films outside of the pool provided by Working Films. Organizations then secured licenses of their choices of documentaries for public screenings.

After securing the licenses, each organization picked the dates, locations, and promotion of the screenings based on their resources and the content of the films. Some of the organizations picked the dates and/or locations strategically reflecting the themes covered in

the documentary to drive more audiences. And some of the organizations opted to use their own facilities to take the costs down. At this stage, the participants decided which other community leaders or organizations should also be a partner for the event, and how the design of the event could be strategically positioned to best support its overall goals.

With the help of Working Films, the host organizations promoted their screenings through various channels. In addition to using their own networks, social media, and press releases, those who partnered with different local organizations also benefited from their partners' networks. Working Films helped the hosts develop their press releases and promotion campaigns and place the events on community calendars.

PHASE THREE: IMPLEMENTING THE SCREENINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

About three months after the two-day training institute, the participant organizations started hosting screenings. The flow of every event was generally the same for each organization – the film was screened and then some form of a panel or community discussion followed. All of the hosts we interviewed described lively and engaging discussions/conversations during their events and said that many audience members were eager to share their own experiences and stories after the films. Every participating organization said the screenings were successful in engaging with the communities they wanted to reach, including with audiences they hadn't interacted with before, and that they now consider documentary storytelling as another tool in their efforts to advance their organization's goals and motivate their members.

PHASE FOUR: REFLECTING ON WHAT WAS LEARNED, HOW THEY CAN IMPROVE, AND WHAT IT ALL MEANS

After the events, participants were encouraged by Working Films – including through the facilitation of this study – to reflect on the experiences of the events. This involved reflections on the nuts and bolts of doing community engagements with documentaries and a deep consideration of the feedback that they received from their screening communities. This process included prompting the participants to identify which aspects of the events were most useful and helped them to enhance their engagement strategies, extend their institutional reach beyond their usual communities, and ultimately move their missions forward. It also included encouraging participants to use the screening events as an opportunity to challenge how they could do better, where their implicit bias and blind spots show up, and how the events may have made more clear where the experiences and perspectives of their intended communities may not be adequately valued or prioritized in their mission or engagement strategies and how they could better respond to these needs. The remainder of this report reflects the findings of these final reflections.

KEY FINDINGS



> DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING ENHANCES LOCAL CIVIC AND SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK.

Most of the organizations utilized documentary screenings in their public engagement efforts for the first time with the *Putting Films to Work* initiative, and the organizers emphasized that they will continue using storytelling in their work. The nonprofits that collaborated with other local and national organizations to organize screenings provided very positive feedback and illustrated an existing thirst for future, additional collaborations.

> FORMING COALITIONS HELPS TO MITIGATE RESOURCE CHALLENGES.

Most of the participating organizations have very limited resources; one of their goals was to establish and/or strengthen ties with other local and national organizations working on similar social justice issues. To widen and strengthen their partnership networks, the host organizations collaborated with different NGOs in various stages of the project, from organizing the screenings to inviting them as participants and/or panelists.

> DOCUMENTARY EVENTS PROVIDED AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO RAISE AWARENESS AROUND THEIR WORK WITH NEW COMMUNITIES.

Several participant organizations said that they were able to use the events to reach new audiences that they wouldn't traditionally engage with and to reach audiences (and other local organizations) that they have long wanted to work with but didn't have the opportunity.

> **DOCUMENTARIES PROVOKED A QUALITY OF DIALOGUE, PERSONAL EXPERIENCE SHARING, AND DIRECT ENGAGEMENT BY COMMUNITY AUDIENCE MEMBERS THAT EXCEEDED WHAT PARTICIPANT ORGANIZATIONS SAY IS POSSIBLE THROUGH THEIR MORE TRADITIONAL MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA-ORIENTED STRATEGIES.**

The participant organizations pointed out that the documentary screenings allowed them to bring together new audiences and partnerships and provided the opportunity and environment to build communities.

> **RESOURCES ARE NEEDED TO LEVERAGE THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF SCREENING DOCUMENTARIES.**

Most of the participating nonprofits exhausted their limited existing resources to organize the screenings, and some weren't able to invest in extensive ways to measure the impact of the screenings, follow up with audiences, or provide the attendees with concrete, immediate ways to take action. Additional support on building coalitions and bringing key communities and leaders into the design and facilitation of the events earlier in the process could help ensure the sustainability of these important engagements.

> **PROVIDING CONCRETE AND IMMEDIATE WAYS FOR AUDIENCES TO ACT IS CRUCIAL.**

Participants expressed feeling convinced, following the screening engagements, that providing multiple immediate, concrete opportunities for audiences to act is very important to channel the energy of the events, and opportunity of the moment, into meaningful actions and steps toward longer-term community building. There is widespread desire for these outcomes, but organizations could use additional support in identifying how best to make this happen.

> **DIRECTING ATTENTION AND RESOURCES TO MOVEMENT BUILDING IS A WORTHWHILE PURSUIT**

When working with similar nonprofits with limited staff and resources, there is an opportunity for Working Films to consider providing additional resources to evaluate the impact of the screenings and follow-up with audiences. Participants expressed that the opportunity to provide more attention to monitoring the efficacy of the engagements would be of tremendous value to their efforts around strategy development and demonstrating impact. Movement building requires the ability to activate a group of people in the future, and while documentaries can capture their attention, nonprofit organizations need collaborative help to put these newly engaged publics to work for the longer term.

WORKING WITH DOCUMENTARIES

**“WE FOUND THAT WHEN WE’RE ABLE TO TIE
A CALL TO ACTION WITH A FILM AFTER PEOPLE
SEE IT, THEY’RE MUCH MORE MOTIVATED
TO TAKE ACTION.”**

CHARLES STEPHENS, COUNTER NARRATIVE

How does and can this model work for collaborating NGOs? What aspects of working with documentary storytelling to enhance nonprofits’ public engagement efforts are useful, and what opportunities exist for refinement and iteration? Interviews with each participant reveal three interconnected experiences:

- 1. Documentaries can allow organizations to reach new audiences and new levels of engagement and partnership,**
- 2. Documentaries reveal the importance and challenge of documenting impact and sustaining community-level conversations, and**
- 3. Organizations are looking for support around film selection, long-term resources and coalition-building to support future organizing.**

USING DOCUMENTARIES TO REACH NEW AUDIENCES AND NEW LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP

While expanding coalitions and reach is a common goal for almost any nonprofit or community-based organization, the documentary events provided tools for groups to achieve this aim more strategically and creatively than other efforts. While social media or mass media campaigns can reach large audiences, for instance, organizations often have little control over who they are ultimately able to connect with and over the quality of that engagement. With the documentary events, on the other hand, organizations were able to both **(1) reflect on specific audiences they wanted to reach and direct their attention toward those communities**, and **(2) create a space for productive engagement that allow them to go beyond the typical one-way flow of communication** that is often characterized by more mass audience-oriented engagement campaigns.

For participating nonprofits, **engaging with their communities, widening their existing network of partnerships, and raising awareness** were among the main goals of the screening events. Within these goals, participants emphasized that reaching new audiences—moving beyond the people they already engage in their daily work—is key. As Kimya Trotter, from Quest Communities, expressed: “We decided to target an audience that didn’t know much about us in the community and also target decision makers in the community.” Similarly, the Georgia Justice Project’s Erika Curtis said the organization saw the project “as a really good opportunity to bring in people that we don’t normally interact with because a lot of our events are very targeted.” Kate McNeely, director of development at the Georgia Asylum and Immigration Network (GAIN), said GAIN advertised publicly and was able to draw in people who hadn’t heard about the group, “and that was probably the most exciting part to us.”

The desire to engage new audiences also extended to other organizations, and efforts of expanding public partnerships. In designing their documentary events, several organizations built other community groups -- that they’ve long wanted to collaborate with -- into the event’s agenda. This included partnering with organizations that were at the initial Working Films training forum, and other organizations who are just working on similar issues in the state. The documentary event provided an ideal strategic space for these groups to formally come together in an informal public setting – a way for them to **collectively engage with each other on an issue of shared interest with a community that is also directly interested or affected by that issue**.

The hosts partnered with a variety of organizations at different stages of the year-long initiative. Caroline Durham, legal and policy director at Georgia Appleseed, said that her organization was hoping from the very beginning that they would be able to connect with other people in the *Putting Films to Work* cohort. And the documentary event provided that opportunity. She spoke about Georgia Appleseed's partnership with Annie E. Casey, which gave a short presentation before the first screening. She also mentioned their partnership with Quest, another participant organization; for the second screening, the president of Quest was one of the panelists. Charles Stephens, founder and the executive director of the Counter Narrative Project, said that organizing the screenings also gave their organization a valuable opportunity to partner and collaborate with other groups. He said his organization partnered with the New Georgia Project, Women Engaged, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for the screening of *Rigged*: "We just did more of a community conversation afterward, but it was a really powerful discussion because we had folks from ACLU Georgia and New Georgia Project." And although they weren't able to partner with multiple organizations for their screening, Kate from GAIN said that working with other partners will be a priority of theirs for similar events in the future.

In addition to bringing together new audiences and partnerships, the host organizations pointed to the **opportunities for community-building** provided by the documentary screenings. Most of the organizations had never used documentaries as a tool for community engagement or organizing before the project, yet representatives of the nonprofits told us that the screenings exceeded their expectations and everyone plans to incorporate them into their work going forward. Participating organizations recognized that documentary storytelling is a different way to engage and organize compared to the traditional ways to communicate and engage with communities; they emphasized the power of storytelling in terms of bringing people into a space to discuss social justice issues and providing unique opportunities to call for action. As Caroline from Georgia Appleseed puts it: documentaries are capable of providing a "way to touch people's hearts." And this emotional connection matters, participants expressed, because it can provide an opportunity to both influence an audience's perception about a given topic, and provide a space for people to share in a collective emotional experience and create community together around it. Emphasizing storytelling's importance for struggles to bring social change, Caroline likened what she saw documentary storytelling doing as being similar to an effective rally cry: Talking about how to bring people to a rally is important, she said, "but at the rally, the rally cry has to be one that touches heartstrings. That's what storytelling does." Kimya from Quest noted the motivational and energizing role of storytelling: "I just love how you cannot know anything about the topic, watch a film and you're like ready to go march on Washington." She said documentaries are "a great way to bring people together and in discussion, and it's like a platform or gateway to talk about the difficult topic; you can always reference the film and get to some hardcore issues."

For some participants, like Erika from the Georgia Justice Project, the documentary provided a way to put “a human face” on the issues that were central to their organization, making it easier for people to see the importance of the work they do and how it connects with the experiences of people’s lives. In doing so, it provides a way-in for people to **become motivated to get involved** in their work. “Through these screenings, we have found a way to reach a new and younger audience,” she said. Similarly, Kate from GAIN said documentary storytelling “opens up some pathways to empathy” and engagement with audiences that their organization did not previously have access to.”

Finally, participant organizations also spoke about how the documentary events provided a space where people were **provoked—and felt safe enough—to share their own experiences**. Rather than just serving as a passive recipient of information, the events compelled people **to join a dialogue** with the participant organizations, and the other audience members, around the issues of the documentary. According to Charles from Counter Narrative, the documentary screenings provided a way for them to mobilize people, raise awareness, inspire critical discussion, and motivate audiences to share their own experiences. One of the ways it did this, he said, was by creating a space of community building—where participants empowered each other to speak-up and talk to one another. Recalling the screening events that Counter Narrative organized, Charles observed that “perhaps they would not have been motivated to share their stories had they not seen representations of people they can identify with sharing their stories.”

These moments of community experience-sharing and dialogue reveal the distinct, transformative value behind the use of documentaries as a tool for community engagement, and the potential that they can serve in fostering change and new understandings for both communities and organizations.

As Caroline from Georgia Appleseed noted: “standing in the back of the theater and watching the audience responses” was the highlight of the project.

**DOCUMENTARIES ARE “A GREAT WAY TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER
AND IN DISCUSSION, AND IT’S LIKE A PLATFORM OR GATEWAY TO TALK ABOUT
THE DIFFICULT TOPIC; YOU CAN ALWAYS REFERENCE THE FILM
AND GET TO SOME HARDCORE ISSUES.”**

KIMYA TROTTER, QUEST COMMUNITIES

DOCUMENTARIES REVEAL THE IMPORTANCE AND CHALLENGE OF DOCUMENTING IMPACT AND SUSTAINING COMMUNITY-LEVEL CONVERSATIONS

One of the greatest potentials behind the documentary screenings also served as one of the greatest areas for future improvement for the participant organizations: documenting impact and sustaining engagement. The inevitable question that gets raised at the end of almost every documentary screening was: “what’s next?” After a community has been provoked in an emotional experience and has shared their experiences and insights, it’s only natural to ask the organizers “so where do we go from here?”

The Counter Narrative Project was the only organization among our interviewees that had experience organizing documentary screenings before participating in the *Putting Films to Work* project, and they were prepared to effectively evaluate the impact of the screenings and keep in touch with audiences. They used a short survey at the end of their screenings, took field notes while observing the event, and organized follow-up calls. Charles noted:

“The tools that we used were very, very brief surveys. We also used field notes. Our staff would observe, and then they’ll take notes after, and debrief them about how the experience went. We would even sometimes follow up with folks and have sort of key informing interviews about the experience and just debrief it with certain individuals that were in the screenings.”

Counter Narrative also provided audiences with immediate, concrete opportunities to take action. For example, after the screening of “I Am Not Your Negro,” they “invited people to write letters to people recently incarcerated as a support . . . We literally gave them pen and paper, had them write the letters, and then we emailed them the next day.” Providing immediate and concrete opportunities to take action is crucial, Charles said. “We found that when we’re able to tie

opportunities to take action is crucial, Charles said. “We found that when we’re able to tie a call to action with a film after people see it, they’re much more motivated to take action,” he explained. As a result, “we expanded our advocacy network” and “developed new partnerships.”

Other participant organizations also made efforts for follow-up engagements, but, in their post-screening reflections, they all pointed to this area of the documentary events as something they would like to strengthen going forward. Kate from GAIN said that they “always ask people to consider being a volunteer attorney and we always mention that they can donate.” They also asked for people to sign up for their Citizen Advocacy Day, which they organize with partner organizations. But, she added, “I think we could’ve gone further with activating our audience.” If they had focused the event as more of an organizing tool instead of trying to make it a supporter appreciation day, for instance, “then I think we might have made a few more strides in actually getting some actionable things done in the room,” she said. “It was a challenge to figure out, as an organization without a political/advocacy arm, how to convert this energy into actions for the attendees.”

Quest Communities was in a similar situation, but because they organized their “first Volunteer Giving campaign” right after their screening, they reached out to their attendees for donations, and Kimya attributed the success of the campaign partly on the screenings. “I can’t say for sure how many of the audience members gave, but I do believe it was quite a few . . . I think it contributed to some of the postings and donations that we received,” she said. All of the organizations talked about the lack of staff and resources, and they said this was the main reason that they were not able to invest in more extensive follow-ups or ways to measure the effectiveness of the screenings. Caroline from Georgia Appleseed, said that they sent a short survey to participants after the screening, but that they want to do much more. She says that they have been motivated by the events to make some organization changes and improvements around their community engagement goals and ideas of impact:

“We definitely have more people through [the screenings] involved with the organization. Our board is even more engaged. We had our board meeting after the event. So it kind of lit a fire.”

Caroline added that the screening was a motivational experience for her personally, too: “It was fascinating to watch the audible and visible responses as [the audience members] talked about equity issues during the screening. . . Even just thinking about it and being back in that moment is invigorating to me.”

“The audience was really engaged, more so than I actually expected,” said Erika from the Georgia Justice Project. Caroline from Georgia Appleseed talked about a few occasions of “clapping, and hooting, and hollering” during the discussion. And Charles from the Counter Narrative Project said that during the discussion after the screening of “Rigged,” “audience members wanted to immediately get involved in combating voter suppression and shared stories about how they had been impacted.”

**“IT WAS FASCINATING TO WATCH THE AUDIBLE AND VISIBLE RESPONSES
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CAROLINE DURHAM, GEORGIA APPLESEED

ORGANIZATIONS ARE LOOKING FOR SUPPORT AROUND FILM SELECTION, LONG-TERM RESOURCES AND COALITION-BUILDING TO SUPPORT FUTURE ORGANIZING.

Every organization expressed the desire to host future documentary events and to add documentaries as a key tool in their community engagement work going forward. As reflected in this report, they all talked about the power of storytelling and the importance of post-screening discussions in building community coalitions, and raising awareness among their intended communities, and, ultimately, effectively motivating and steering meaningful follow-up engagement and critical action. However, when asked to reflect on the key challenges of hosting the documentary events, and what barriers they see in prohibiting them from being able to effectively use documentaries in their work, a few shared challenges emerged.

First, and probably least surprising, was an acknowledgement that documentary events require funding and staff support – both of which can be hard to come by for relatively small social justice organizations. They all said that the training and financial stipend provided by *Working Films* made a big difference, but that they still felt like they needed more staff, time, and money. “The challenge was just, I think a lot of nonprofits deal with this, just being understaffed,” said Erika from the *Georgia Justice Project*, adding that “money is always a problem.”

Similarly, Charles talked about capacity and money as the Counter Narrative Project's big challenges: “I think an organization has to really assess their capacity to do these kinds of events . . . For example, at our organization, we don't have a dedicated staff person to do these programs. . . . I wish we had a greater administrative structure so that we could have taken better advantage of [*Working Films*] partnership,” said Charles; he added,

“These events can be very expensive.” In the end, the participant organizations expressed that additional guidance on how these events could be sustainably resourced, or where organizations might be able to look for future financial support in this area, would be helpful.

Second, the task of selecting the best film for their event, and obtaining the license for that film, was also a challenge noted by multiple participant organizations. While they noted that *Working Films* was very helpful during the process, most of the organizations we spoke to said that identifying the right film was harder than they expected and required a lot of time and searches outside of the suggested list provided to them. Caroline from Georgia Appleseed added that obtaining the screening license was not as easy as expected. When they wanted to show a few episodes and segments from different episodes of a PBS series, she said, “The producers didn’t want us to take segments. It was like ‘either you use a whole episode or nothing.’ So we had to go back to the drawing board again and find something different.” Kate McNeely from the Georgia Asylum and Immigration Network (GAIN) detailed the process of finding the right film as follows: “Working Films brought us a list to start to take a look at and we worked through that . . . But we were looking something really specific, which is immigrants who are documented or undocumented but who are victims of crime and persecution.” She said that “after looking through a lot, looking around . . . We ended up finding some beautiful films that were made by the CBSN Originals.”

Finding the right time for the screenings was another challenge, according to Kimya, while Charles and Erika said that finding the right space was another challenge. “It’s hard to find great screening spaces in Atlanta,” said Charles from the Counter Narrative. Charles described picking the dates and locations strategically: “We wanted the screenings to align with events or moments that would also drive audience participation. So our first screening was of a documentary called “I Am Not Your Negro.” It’s a documentary about the writer James Baldwin. We hosted the screening on James Baldwin’s birthday on August 2nd.” Because the group’s second film, *Rigged*, was about voter suppression, Charles said the Counter Narrative Project partnered with an organization that works on the issue. For the final screening, he said: “We did a screening of “Black is... Black Ain’t” by Marlin Riggs. It’s a documentary about racial identity. . . We had the screening at the Auburn Avenue Research Library . . . a library that holds a lot of collections as it related to African-American culture and experience.” Caroline Durham from Georgia Appleseed, explained that the group chose a theater “in the heart of Atlanta” as the screening location because it was a well-known venue. Kimya Trotter from Quest Community Development Organization, Inc., said they decided to use their own screening room: “We decided to do it here at our location just to kind of get people here to see some of our work.” Similarly, Erika Curtis, communications and development associate at the Georgia Justice Project, explained that the group also chose to use their own office building: “So for location, for us it really was a matter of cost. Our building is equipped to hold small film screenings, up to 50 people. So we did both of our film screenings so far on our location.”

CONCLUSIONS AND STRATEGIC INSIGHTS



AFTER THE SCREENING OF *RIGGED*, "AUDIENCE MEMBERS WANTED TO IMMEDIATELY GET INVOLVED IN COMBATING VOTER SUPPRESSION AND SHARED STORIES ABOUT HOW THEY HAD BEEN IMPACTED."

CHARLES STEPHENS, COUNTER NARRATIVE PROJECT

All of the participant organizations talked about their plans to continue using documentaries and storytelling in the future. They also expressed their hope to continue their partnership with Working Films. In other words, *Putting Films to Work* has led to an increased demand among all of the organizations to use documentaries as a critical tool in their community engagement strategies and even in how they approach their overall goals and missions. The host organizations talked about organizing more interactive discussions, providing the audiences more opportunities to take action, and creating more partnerships with other organizations. At the same time, there are several opportunities for growth and expansion, both within the groups engaged through this project and in future trainings.

MORE TRAINING ON ACTIVATING THE AUDIENCES THEY ARE CAPTURING THROUGH THE DOCUMENTARIES.

Several participants shared ideas for how they could better stimulate conversations and create more effective call-to-action opportunities following the documentaries—including involving the filmmakers and other experts through post-screening panel discussions—but the idea-making around activating audiences often stalled at that point. Several participants spoke about their challenge of converting “the energy” of screening events into “actions” that the attendees could take. For instance, one participant said that she would like to add “a more planned direct action item” after future events and some sort of call to action that would prompt the community audiences “to support the reform of criminal records issues in Georgia” through concrete activities that her organization has coordinated ahead of time. Most of the other organizations were still in the brainstorming stage for what future calls to action might look like. And all of the participant organizations would benefit from additional guidance or case studies on what such actionable engagement might look like and could be possible.

A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH FOR HOW TO CAPTURE THE IMPACT OF THE DOCS FOR SCREENINGS.

Measuring the impact of the screenings is likely an area of shared importance for both *Working Films* and the participating nonprofits, but there is some ambiguity in what measures people should be using to gauge a successful event (and how that success marker should be built into their event’s design strategy). In other words, there would be tremendous value in additional resources around measuring and evaluating the effects of the screenings and follow up with the audiences. Finally, in addition to conducting interviews and organizing case study prompts with the organizers, a more anthropological approach is needed to study these projects. Future researchers should participate in the screenings so they can observe, take notes, and interview volunteering attendees. Combined with a post-screening survey, observations and audience interviews can help to paint a more complete picture of the event’s impact.

HOW-TO TRAININGS ON COALITION BUILDING AND MAINTENANCE.

For most of the participant organizations, the documentary events brought into fuller focus their need for coalition-building as a vehicle to both accelerate their missions and to ensure their own sustainability. Some participants expressed their desire to collaborate with other local and/or national organizations while others talked about strengthening their existing coalitions. The host organizations would benefit from additional training on effective coalition building.

A PARTICIPATORY DESIGN THAT INCORPORATES COMMUNITY AUDIENCES INTO THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DOCUMENTARY SCREENING EVENTS.

The desire for support around coalition building also connects to the opportunity for greater local participation within the *Putting Films to Work* model. In order for the screenings to not feel transactional, and to address some of the participants' struggles around resourcing and building sustainable engagement models, organizations could use more encouragement and guidance in better integrating community members and local leaders into the design and implementation of the screening events. For most events, the "target community" was largely brought in at the very end (on the day of the screening). Bringing other community groups and coalitions into the process earlier could get to the core of addressing many of their audience impact and activation challenges.

THINKING IN TERMS OF "SEASONS" AND "SERIES," RATHER THAN EVENTS.

To avoid one-off events, organizations could benefit from additional guidance around how documentary screening events can be strategically organized as pieces of a larger community-building objective. One idea that was raised by the participant organizations included creating (and marketing) *series* and *seasons* of screening events as something they would like to do in the future. An emphasis on creating series of screenings could provide a strategically useful function to help organizations build momentum and/or bring expanded audiences back more and more each time, and it could provide opportunities for organizations to partner with other groups and rotate the organizing work-load of these events throughout the year.



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