

# DOCUMENTARY FILMS AND GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT FOR IMMIGRATION JUSTICE

## A Study of the *Stories Beyond Borders* Initiative

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By Aras Coskuntuncel, Caty Borum Chattoo and David Conrad-Pérez



 SCHOOL of COMMUNICATION  
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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.

Artwork by: Rommy Sobrado-Torrico



# INTRODUCTION

Documentary storytelling is a vital, dynamic force within the contemporary media marketplace and public sphere, serving crucial functions that strengthen democracy – from informing and entertaining, to mobilizing and building community solidarity around shared concerns. As a longstanding tradition, intimate documentary storytelling can serve as a unique cultural mechanism to gather community members to engage in challenging social problems together, to fuel civic dialogue and to help inspire common ground.

To foster the kinds of meaningful community opportunities for audiences to watch stories and talk about them together, partnerships with local and national social justice organizations (“non-governmental organizations,” or NGOs) are beneficial for both sectors – that is, documentary storytellers who produce artful stories about real life, and social justice advocates who work on a daily basis to create change. For documentary filmmakers, civil society organizations provide ways to connect with broad audiences and subject-matter experts, thus helping films resonate in communities that might benefit the most. And for civil society organizations, documentary filmmakers can provide emotionally potent stories that help to attract the attention and interest of publics who might not otherwise convene to talk about social realities and problems.

Behind the headlines of most contemporary public challenges, the realities of lived experience are often vastly different from the cultural portraits or statistics framed in daily news coverage. Documentary storytelling, with its dual command of factual information and keen insight into the nuances of human experience, provides a new lens.

Working Films’ *Stories Beyond Borders* initiative operates from this premise.

## WORKING FILMS MISSION

Working Films uses documentaries to advance social justice and environmental protection. Recognizing the power of film to inspire, Working Films use documentaries to increase civic engagement and shift culture at the local, state, and national level. The organization offers funding and in-kind support to underrepresented filmmakers.



# OVERVIEW: STORIES BEYOND BORDERS

With the rights of immigrant communities under attack and anti-immigrant rhetoric, policies, and practices on the rise, sharing immigrants' stories and reaching out to different publics are crucial to shifting the discourse and calling audiences to meaningful action. In recent years, hate crime violence against immigrants rose significantly,<sup>1</sup> and the number of immigrant apprehensions<sup>2</sup> and family separations<sup>3</sup> at the southern border hit new highs. Anti-immigrant rhetoric alone is reported to not only cause distress among immigrants but also put their health at risk,<sup>4</sup> and help spread xenophobia.<sup>5</sup>

Amid this social and political context, the *Stories Beyond Borders* project used documentary films as a tool to organize and engage communities around issues of immigrant justice in 2019 and 2020. The campaign curated and screened five short films in community settings, followed by critical public discussions of the films' key immigration themes. The screenings brought together members of the community, along with invited experts, community leaders, organizers, and, in some cases, the filmmakers themselves. The project is a collaborative effort led by Working Films and is designed to propel audiences "to think critically and to take meaningful action for immigrant justice."<sup>6</sup>

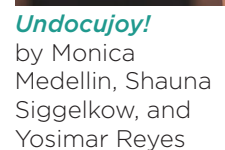
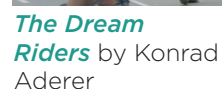
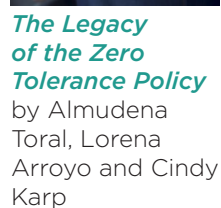
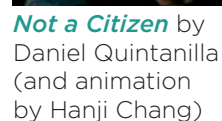
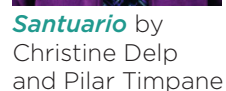
In the *Stories Beyond Borders* program, five short films together "lift up real stories of resilience and strength, while illustrating some of the ways people can give their time, energy, and resources to support organizing led by immigrant communities."<sup>7</sup>

6,000  
APPX. AUDIENCE  
MEMBERS  
THROUGH  
SCREENINGS IN 45  
COMMUNITIES.

“The ability “to watch pieces that reflected who we are, but also getting to discuss them with one another” is crucial and a great way “to build a community.”

SHERIDAN AGUIRRE, UNITED WE DREAM

## THE FIVE FILMS IN THE COMPILATION WERE:





# RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This study examines the *Stories Beyond Borders* project as a contemporary case study designed to explore the use and value of short films in grassroots engagement around an ideologically polarizing issue.

Our research involves an audience survey of 141 respondents, which comprise combined audiences from 27 cities, and 16 in-depth phone interviews. The interviews consisted of six filmmakers and ten organizers, representing local and national partner organizations, who organized the screenings, guided by Working Films.

## **This study examines the following questions:**

- ◆ How does the use of documentary films influence and enhance the community engagement capacity of partnering civil society organization?
- ◆ How does this type of local and national level grassroots engagement and organizing initiative that centers on storytelling strengthen the work of the NGOs?
- ◆ How does this grassroots engagement initiative help filmmakers reaching their goals?
- ◆ How do the community screenings influence audiences' knowledge, attitudes, and willingness to engage in action around social justice

# OVERALL KEY FINDINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES

## KEY FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS:

- ◇ Local and national NGOs see the screenings as an opportunity to bring more people into their community organizing and engagement efforts, create coalitions, and **strengthen civil society**.
- ◇ Many organizations had not previously used short films/documentaries as a tool for organizing and community engagement. As a result of the *Stories Beyond Borders* project, they will start **using documentary storytelling in their future advocacy work**.
- ◇ The screenings led to an **increased interest** in partner NGOs' community engagement work in different forms, such as volunteering, donations, and signups.
- ◇ Multiple NGO representatives said that incorporating storytelling and documentaries into their community engagement and organizing work attracted more people than their traditional methods of engagement, and it created **more opportunities to facilitate critical, lively discussions**.
- ◇ The success of using documentary storytelling in NGO efforts is about "putting faces" to and **"humanizing" their issues and movements**.
- ◇ NGO representatives said that the post-screening discussions and call to action during these discussions were **key to transforming emotions** and empathy into specific actions.
- ◇ The *Stories Beyond Borders* initiative helped NGOs to work with more organizations and people, which in turn helped them **widen their network**.

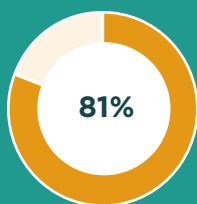
## KEY FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH FILMMAKERS:

- ◇ Filmmakers see the screenings as opportunities to **reach wider audiences**, meet impact and change-oriented goals, engage with their audiences, and collaborate with different NGOs.
- ◇ Some of the filmmakers expressed that the screenings helped them to **"put a face to" audiences' reactions**.
- ◇ They think that the combination of screenings and panel discussions worked really well in terms of informing audiences and **encouraging people to participate**.
- ◇ For the filmmakers, compilations help their work to **be in communication with others' work**.
- ◇ Some of the filmmakers we interviewed said they benefited from Working Film's consultation about distribution strategies and the **chance to work with local organizations**.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM POST-SCREENING AUDIENCE SURVEY:

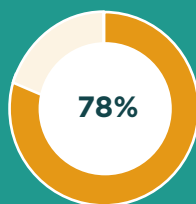
- ◇ The documentary event compelled the majority of community members to want to do something about the issues of the film (many for the first time).
- ◇ The documentaries provided trustworthy and empowering content.
- ◇ The documentaries reflected experiences and stories not provided by other sources of news and information.
- ◇ The issues of the documentaries resonated with the participants.

Survey respondents felt that the documentaries:



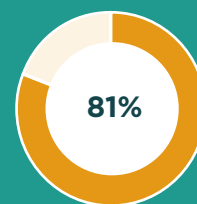
### REVEAL

perspectives missing from the media landscape.



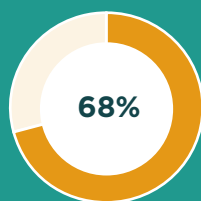
### ALERT

people to new problems.



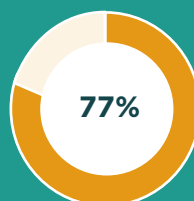
### ARTISTICALLY REVEAL

real life more deeply than other media and news..



### MOTIVATE

communities and individuals to get involved.



### STRENGTHEN

community organizations.





## KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE ENGAGEMENT

- ◇ **Provide more opportunities and times for community participants to meaningfully participate.** Some of the screenings were not able to include enough time for discussions at the end, and audiences still expressed a desire for more time even though most of the screenings included 45 minutes to an hour for post-screening discussions. Only 54% of respondents said watching the documentaries with a group had a stronger impact on them than watching the documentaries alone, and multiple community participants expressed disappointment with not being able to discuss the screenings and issues at length. Similarly, some of the filmmakers said they would have liked to participate more in the screenings; they wanted more opportunities to attend screenings and interact with audiences. Some of the organizers also said they either did not have enough time at the end or that they couldn't provide immediate, concrete opportunities for the audiences to take action in one form or another.
- ◇ **Leverage digital media or other engagement platforms to sustain communication and follow-up actions with audiences.** Some of the other organizers said that although they provided opportunities to discuss and participate, they did not have means to measure the impact of the screenings or organize follow-ups with the participants.
- ◇ **Conduct a community focus group study or a study that directly engages with community participants about their experience.** Survey responses suggested that participants could get even more out of these engagements. Some of the respondents expressed that they were not satisfied with the discussions and Q&A sessions, suggesting that partner organizations should not only provide more time to discuss but also immediate, concrete opportunities for the audiences to take action. By involving audience participants into new research, additional pathways for further engagement could be explored and imagined.

“Documentaries allow “people to see what’s happening as opposed to just hearing what’s happening. When you put faces to what’s happening in immigration, it’s more impactful.”


ENRIQUE OROZCO, COMPAÑEROS



## SECTION 1

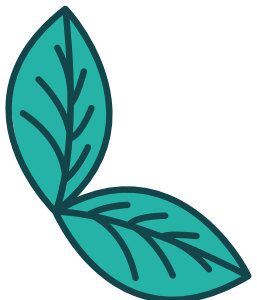
# NATIONAL AND LOCAL PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

### **How does the use of documentary films influence the community engagement capacity of partnering civil society organizations, and how does it strengthen the work of the NGOs?**



Organizers and representatives from NGOs largely expressed shared goals for the screenings, which centered on informing the public, getting people involved, bringing more people into their work, and widening their networks. Many said they saw an increase in donations, volunteers, or sign ups after the screenings. According to organizers, storytelling “humanizes” social issues and movements. They also wanted to measure the impact and results of the screenings more effectively and emphasized their need for more time and resources.

During the conversations, three overall themes emerged as being most salient to the role of documentaries in improving the community engagement and impact of civil society organizations and NGOs. The first centered on the efficacy of documentaries in transforming empathy into action. The second centered around the power of storytelling in terms of “putting faces” to and “humanizing” issues and movements. And the third focused the ways in which local expertise can be further integrated into the community screening events and used to help widen and improve the relationships that the organizations have with communities of interest. The following sections elaborate on these key themes.



## TRANSFORMING EMPATHY INTO ACTION

The NGO representatives we interviewed spoke about the transformative power of the screenings and ensuing discussions. Some audiences were moved to tears — and to action. In many cases, NGO representatives said, the screenings led to an increased interest in volunteer work.

The group Apoyo, for instance, organized screenings in Hillsborough, NC. Apoyo is an organization that focuses on assisting immigrants against ICE raids in North Carolina. Founder Rubi Quiroz said the screening boosted the involvement of existing volunteers and prompted inquiries about Apoyo's work from people who attended the screening.

"I think [the screening] brought a lot of feelings of empathy and a lot of awareness to the realities, and that's what a lot of people in the community echoed," Quiroz said. "The folks who were directly impacted [by the immigration policies] felt that they were very much seen and their stories were put up in the screen. . . . It definitely brings people this feeling of, 'Why am I not doing anything about this?' for folks who are not directly impacted."

“[The screenings] definitely bring people this feeling of, ‘Why am I not doing anything about this?’.”

RUBI QUIROZ, APOYO

Quiroz's experience was echoed by other NGO representatives, who said that incorporating storytelling and documentaries into their community engagement and organizing work attracted more people than their traditional methods of engagement, and it created more opportunities to facilitate critical, lively discussions.

The audiences' reactions struck Enrique Orozco from Compañeros, an organization that focuses on assisting immigrants in the Four Corners region: "You could see people going for tissues. It drew tears, some of those stories."

Many organizers observed similar reactions—varying from sadness to anger to pride, depending on the film in the compilation and/or the attendee's own experiences. "Everyone was moved watching these stories," said Glo Harn Choi from NAKASEC Chicago, an organization that focuses on supporting and organizing Asian Americans. Some of the films were "very heavy stuff . . . I think that's the power of this [screening], in that it shows you very first-hand accounts."

Organizers emphasized that there is a big difference between watching documentaries at home and engaging with them in a group setting, alongside experts, filmmakers, and other members of their community. "Say, for example, somebody watched this documentary at home," Glo Harn Choi said. "I'm not sure if the call to action would immediately be there . . . and I do think it's crucial that local organizations are the ones facilitating [the discussions]."

Interview participants expressed that the discussions were key to transforming emotions and empathy into action -- around the themes in each documentary and immigrations issues in general.

The discussions were often led in a panel format in which local expertise and community leaders were incorporated in addition to local organizers from the organizing NGO.

According to Hope Mustakim from the Waco Immigrants Alliance, which focuses on



providing legal and educational assistance in Waco, TX and advocating for immigrant rights, documentaries were great tools to not only inform but also prompt discussions around social justice issues. Sheridan Aguirre, field communications manager at United We Dream, described the screenings as a way “to gather more people, connect and to have a physical space where we’re all together [to] discuss.” The ability “to watch pieces that reflected who we are, but also getting to discuss them with one another” is crucial and a great way “to build a community,” Aguirre said.

The screening and panel discussion formats were more effective in transforming emotions into actions when: 1) local expertise and community leaders were incorporated, and 2) it provided immediate and concrete ways to contribute after calls to action arose during the discussions.

Mustakim said her panel reflected a diversity of community actors: “We had an immigration attorney, a local pastor whose son was in removal proceedings; we had a labor and delivery nurse whose sister had been deported, a teacher, who teaches all Hispanic children in our community.”

“People appreciated hearing personal stories coming from the panel, how this issue affected their lives here in our city,” she said. “The immigration attorney was talking about the cases she handles every day in Waco. One of our panelists shared a letter from her sister who had been deported.” The NGOs that provided different opportunities to participate—such as to sign-up, volunteer, and/or donate — received great responses from the audiences; they were able to see increased interest from the audiences beyond the immediate reactions to the screenings.

For example, Orozco in Colorado said that people have stopped him in the street since the screening to tell him that the event was “awesome.” He added that his organization saw “a surge in donations” after the event.

Adriana Quiroga from RAICES in Texas, which focuses on providing legal services to immigrants and refugees, said many people “ask specifically how they can be involved in volunteer efforts.” The post-screening discussions easily became calls to action after audiences saw the powerful stories depicted in the documentaries. Quiroz in North Carolina also said that “the discussion was mostly based on mobilization.”

“Many people “ask specifically how they can be involved in volunteer efforts.”

ADRIANA QUIROGA, RAICES

Even when organizers and attendees held informal discussions without a designated panel after the screenings, they reported seeing measurable results if concrete options to participate were provided, such as sign-ups. Joshua Nam from NAKASEC Virginia described how they not only made the screening part of their efforts to organize a rally on the day of the DACA Supreme Court hearing but also invited participants to make signs with them: “We decided to screen it the night before [the rally]. . . . You’re able to invite not only our community members but also other folks who are somewhat interested but they didn’t know how to get involved. They learned about the screening that we were doing and the sign-making . . . that drew a lot more interest from the community.”

Irma Chaves from Arkansas United, which focuses on providing legal and educational assistance to immigrant communities and advocating for immigrant rights in Arkansas, said the group screened the films at its convention between other panels and so couldn’t hold a discussion session after the screening. But even then, she said, organizers were able to see that the viewers “were really touched.”



## THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Local and national organizers observed that the success of using storytelling in their work is about “putting faces” to and “humanizing” issues and movements. Both Glo Harn Choi from Chicago and Quiroga from Texas, for instance, said that storytelling is ultimately what humanizes movements and issues. “It creates them from expository figures to narratives with a face and human behind it,” Glo Harn Choi said. Rita Ellis, founder and CFO of Paz Amigos, Inc., a nonprofit helping immigrants released from the Stewart Detention Center (under contract with ICE) in Georgia, emphasized the emotional impact the films had on the attendees, some of whom came to talk to her after the screening to share their feelings and experiences. For the attendees, there were “very heavy moments” during the screening, Ellis said, because the people on screen “are people around us ... They work with us every day.”

According to Hope Mustakim, people in especially small and “politically charged” towns are more willing to attend and help organize a film screening, and when more people are involved, “there’s safety in numbers,” including emotionally. “There’s many more people who surround you who can protect you physically and then emotionally.”

Documentaries are “a great way to start a conversation,” said Sam Yu, director of affiliate engagement at NAKASEC’s national headquarters. They also emphasized that the quality of the storytelling is also important, and “[if] it’s a great documentary that’s genuine, authentic, and told by people directly impacted by the issue . . . I definitely do see documentaries as being a very useful tool for organizing.” In addition to the quality, organizers said the format of the screenings—a compilation of short films—was particularly effective.

Aguirre from United We Dream, who was involved in the selection of the short films, said the organizers wanted to make sure that they “include stories that are racially diverse because this was an opportunity to showcase our real life stories, and frequently Latinos are portrayed as the only population that’s impacted by immigration.” They also said it was important “to have a piece that reflected joy and pride and resilience.” Orozco from Colorado emphasized that documentaries allow “people to see what’s happening as opposed to just hearing what’s happening. When you put faces to what’s happening in immigration, it’s more impactful.”

“I definitely do see documentaries as being a very useful tool for organizing.”

SAM YU, NAKASEC

## INCORPORATING LOCAL EXPERTISE AND WIDENING THE NETWORK

Organizers talked not only about their collaboration with Working Films but also the opportunities that the project provided for them to build broader coalitions. Mustakim from the Waco Immigrants Alliance emphasized this point: “With the next screening, we’re partnering with our local NAACP and then Baylor University’s Office of Community Engagement. Just building broader coalition through these film screenings and so to have more unified stance or just a presence in our town.”

In addition to their collaboration with Working Films, the partner organizations collaborated with other local organizations and communities and included them in different stages of the screenings, doing everything from helping with organization to inviting representatives as panelists and simply attending the screenings. The project empowered the groups to strengthen their existing partnerships and create new ones. Even picking a venue in some cases



became a tool to deepen and broaden local organizations' networks, especially because many of the venues included local museums, theaters, libraries, churches, and college campuses. Irma Chavez from Arkansas United said that even the group's initial conversations with Working Films prompted organizers to get in touch with "allies, members, and other organizations" in the area. Quiroz said Apoyo collaborated with the ACLU in North Carolina. And Glo Harn Choi said that for one of NAKASEC Chicago's screenings, the group specifically chose a college campus in the city, in order to collaborate with a student group called the Asian Pacific American Coalition, APAC.

Quiroga from RAICES said her group's chosen venue, the Mexic-Arte Museum in Texas, became a partner in organizing the screenings. The museum made the screening a spotlight event in its monthly event calendar; the museum curated two art installations on the immigration crisis to be part of the screening; and the artists who created the installations took part in the panel discussions. Rita Ellis from Paz Amigos said her group's collaboration with Indivisible and the Social Justice League of Columbia made the post-screening discussions more productive. For some of the organizations, such as NAKASEC, the project was their first collaboration with Working Films. Many of them incorporated local expertise from their communities: teachers, doctors, pastors, attorneys, artists, among others.

The NGO representatives talked about their need for more time and personnel for these types of projects. Aguirre from United We Dream said the whole collaborative process—from reviewing the films to organizing the screenings—would have benefited from more time and staff dedicated to the project from all partner organizations.

Even the groups that organized successful screenings noted the need for more time and said that they should have tried more to reach out to people and groups with different perspectives. "I'd really push for people from the other side to come," said Orozco from Compañeros in Colorado. from NAKASEC Virginia said that if he were to do the screening again, he would "involve more groups." Quiroga from RAICES said the group would have done more promotion if it had had more time. Some of the organizers talked about the importance of picking the right venue; Quiroz from Apoyo, for example, needed a bigger space.

All of the organizers and NGO representatives agreed that storytelling/documentaries are effective tools for organizing and community engagement, but it seems that many of these organizations don't actively seek, commission, or use storytelling/documentaries in their work. Instead of planned initiatives, they seize opportunities as they arise. Sometimes filmmakers first reach out to them and try to convince them to fund or otherwise support their projects. Some groups' efforts are limited to organizing screenings and/or using already finished material, instead of producing and distributing documentaries/storytelling as a key tool for organizing. Sam Yu from NAKASEC even said that it would be great if they had "a third-party group to join them to do docs" after they saw "how effective these are in our organizing work."





## SECTION 2

# FILMMAKERS

### How does grassroots engagement with communities help filmmakers reach their documentary goals?

This section explores filmmaker perspectives on the role of grassroots screenings and discussions in their work and how they can be used to meet engagement aims that go beyond mere distribution goals – and yet, grassroots engagement enhances the depth of the distribution possibilities.

The filmmakers whose films were picked for the *Stories Beyond Borders* project had three specific goals: to be part of the “fight for change,” to organize local bodies and people together around an issue of shared concern, and to inform people who may be unaware of the immediacy and importance of the driving themes of their film. Christine Delp, co-director of *Santuario*, said that informing audiences was not her team’s only goal: “Very early on we did want this film to be a tool for social change.” The directors see these types of projects as great opportunities for grassroots-level distribution of their work that increase their chances to have the desired impact and effect change for the issues they cover in their work. Monica Medellin, co-director of *Undocujoy*, emphasized the advantage of being able to show their film across the country.

Co-director of *Santuario*, Pilar Timpane, talked about how one of the screenings in North Carolina went very well: “We showed the film . . . we talked a lot about North Carolina politics because that affects Juana’s situation directly.” *Santuario* tells the story of Juana Luz Tobar Ortega, who entered sanctuary at a church in Greensboro, NC, in 2017 and has lived there ever since.

Daniel Quintanilla, director of *Not a Citizen*, said that he made the film in collaboration with Cosecha in Maine, and that from the beginning they had very specific change-oriented goals,

such as fundraising for Abdi Ali, who was detained by ICE in a courthouse while meeting with his lawyer.

The overall experiences shared by the filmmakers fall into one of three categories: The first centered on the opportunities the filmmakers had to reach and interact face-to-face with wider audiences. The second centered on observing and even being part of organizing. And the third centered on the format of the screenings, especially the compilation, in which their films are in communication with other documentaries that look at the issues through different lenses.

## INTERACTING WITH AND KNOWING AUDIENCES

Most of the filmmakers said they would have liked to participate more in the screenings – both in terms of wanting to attend more of them and to have had additional opportunities for audience engagement in the screenings they were able to attend. “I think it’s still important, even in this age we’re in, to have events and see people face-to-face, and just interact,” said Konrad Aderer, director of *The Dream Riders*, which recounts a group of Asian-Americans’ six-week bike ride to raise awareness for a path to citizenship. Quintanilla and Shauna Siggelkow, co-director of *Undocujoy!*, both expressed their desire to go to a screening. Quintanilla didn’t know about his audiences, but those who attended at least one screening had a good sense of who their audiences were.

“The screening process put a face to [audiences’] reactions and needs that we were seeing online.”

MONICA MEDELLIN,  
CO-DIRECTOR OF UNDOCUJOY

“The screening process put a face to [audiences’] reactions and needs that we were seeing online,” Medellin said. Many of the filmmakers had released their films online and/or submitted and showed them at different film festivals before Working Films contacted them about the *Stories Beyond Borders* project.

When it comes to their audiences, most of the filmmakers imagine a quite large audience, and they talked about reaching different groups, especially nonimmigrant, white, or anti-immigrant audiences. “I think *Undocujoy!* actually has a quite large audience, and hopefully it can shift the way people think about the issue of immigration even if it’s in a small way,” said Siggelkow.

According to Delp, when it comes to thinking about their audiences, they “try to meet audiences where they are, but also push audiences.” She also talked about how they have “a wide array of audiences.” She added that they try to talk about the film during the screenings, including the ones outside of the *Stories Beyond Borders* project, “in a way that both recognizes that it’s a useful tool for pushing white audiences but also not making it a film that’s for white audiences.”

## TOOL FOR ORGANIZING AND REFRAMING

According to the filmmakers, documentary screenings are effective for community organizing and public engagement efforts: “The screenings are good tools, among others, to bring more people in to get involved,” said Aderer. “It was more information than you would get just from social media, I think, and a chance to get involved by signing up.”

According to Siggelkow, documentaries are great for “galvanizing people.”



Timpane said screenings provide opportunities to answer, “What is the next direct step?” She said that in North Carolina, organizers spoke before and after the screening, and she witnessed audience members signing up as the organizations tried to boost community involvement. For Delp, even when there weren’t calls to action during the screenings, the films and discussions were helpful in “reframing” the issues and language.

## SHORT FILM COMPILATIONS ARE EFFECTIVE

Similar to what the NGO representatives said in their interviews, the filmmakers also found that showing a compilation of short films and holding panel discussions is an effective format. They said it allows their work to reach more audiences, tells different sides of an issue, and helps raise funds: “As a short film, it’s harder to get impact funds . . . I think the compilation is great because it’s a way to collect resources together in a more effective, targeted kind of way,” Delp said. She added that with compilations, people can potentially “see work that they otherwise wouldn’t necessarily seek out.”

Timpane said that Working Films took their goals of reaching a wider audience and “made it even more effective by adding other films to it.” She added that “the fact that not all the films are about people from Latin America, it’s very important.” Similar to local organizers, filmmakers also talked about their need for more time in both the production and distribution processes.



## SECTION 3

# POST-SCREENING SURVEY

### How do community screenings influence audiences' knowledge, attitudes, and willingness to engage in action around social justice issues?

In an attempt to better understand the influence that the screenings had on audience perceptions, knowledge and willingness to engage further around the core issues of the films, this study implemented a survey at most of the community screenings. And while surveys provide a limited view of audience perspective and experience, there is insight in participants' short-answer responses. In total, we received surveys from **141 participants**. These responses were collected from participants who attended screenings across **45 communities**, and they reflected a diversity in age range (33% below the age of 34; 24% were between 35-49 years-old; 21% were between 50-64 years-old; and 21% older than 65).

#### ON THE FILMS

**The documentaries provided trustworthy and empowering content:** Most of the respondents described the documentaries as believable (**83%**), informative (**81%**), trustworthy (**77%**), and empowering (**62%**). Among the respondents, only **8%** said the films were confusing.

**The attendees will likely share and talk about the films with their social circles:** **81%** said they would share the documentaries with other people and talk about them with other people, while **73%** said that they would watch the films by choice. **55%** said the documentaries made them care more about an important issue, and **31%** of the respondents expressed that the films made them think differently about an important issue. **25%** said the films made them hopeful about an important issue while **10%** said that they felt hopeless about an important issue.

Additional demographic data of the survey population included: 74% of the respondents described themselves as white; 13% marked "other" and wrote Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx; 7% described themselves as Asian, 4% as Black or African American, and 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native. When asked "Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latinx?" 73% said NO and 27% said YES. 90% of the respondents were female and 9% were male. 51% of the respondents have an undergraduate/college degree; 29% have a master's degree, 11% have terminal a Graduate Degree (doctoral degree, MFA, law degree, medical degree); 7% have a high school diploma, and 2% have a middle school education. 59% of the participants describe themselves as Democrat; 14 as independent; 11 as socialist; 11 undecided; and 1% as Republican.

**81%**  
FEEL  
DOCUMENTARIES  
ARTISTICALLY  
REVEAL REAL LIFE  
IN A DEEPER WAY  
THAN OTHER MEDIA  
AND NEWS

**The documentaries reflected experiences and stories not provided by other sources of news and information:** **81%** of all respondents find that documentaries in general reveal perspectives or sides to an issue not often visible in other media. **81%** also said that documentaries artistically reveal real life in a deeper way than other media and news. **78%** said that documentaries alert people to problems and issues we didn't know about, and **68%** expressed that documentaries motivate communities and individuals to get involved. Among the respondents, **73%** said that documentaries strengthen community organizations by providing ways to engage the public.

**The participants trust documentaries more than other media when it comes to information about important issues like immigration:** In total, **94%** of participants selected that they either “trust” or “trust a great deal” documentaries about real people. On the other hand, those who selected that they “trust” or “trust a great deal” national newspapers, including online, totaled **69%** while those who trusted and trusted a great deal national broadcast TV news amounted to **31%**. Elected officials on the national level have the least trust, with **5%** among the participants.

## ON THE EVENTS

**The documentary event compelled the majority of community members to want to do something about the issues of the film (many for the first time):** While only **5%** of our respondents had engaged in direct action protest, such as participating in a sit-in, and only **12%** said they had connected with a local organization in their lives, **74%** said that they are very likely to connect to a local organization in support of immigration justice after attending the Stories Beyond Borders screenings. Similarly, **47%** said they are very likely to engage in direct action, and **85%** said they would sign an online petition in support of immigration justice. Before the screenings, only **13%** said they have spoken out in-person when anti-immigrant sentiment was said or displayed, while only **11%** said they called or emailed elected officials to express support or opposition to a policy or proposed law. After attending the screenings, **81%** said that they are now very likely to speak out in-person when anti-immigration sentiment has been said or displayed, and **63%** said they would call or email elected officials to express support or opposition to a policy or proposed law. **84%** said that after watching the documentaries, they were likely to vote specifically on the issue, and **62%** said they were likely to purchase products/services or boycott products/services related to the issue.

**74%**  
**ARE VERY LIKELY  
TO CONNECT  
TO A LOCAL  
ORGANIZATION  
IN SUPPORT OF  
IMMIGRATION  
JUSTICE AFTER  
ATTENDING A  
SCREENING**

### After attending the screenings, participants said they...



**Community forums for documentaries are more powerful:** While many of the participants (43%) said that they watch social-issue documentaries regularly, more than half of the participants (54%) said that watching the documentaries with a group had a stronger impact on them than watching them alone. After watching the documentaries in a group screening format, 60% said they are now better informed about the widespread impact of family separations at the border; 54% said the screenings made a difference in their knowledge of immigration issues; 48% expressed that listening to the speakers helped changed their perspectives about immigration; and 47% said they now have a better understanding of sanctuary spaces and policies and how they work. 37% said they had an opportunity to talk with a person or community they don't usually interact with.



## ON THE CORE ISSUES COVERED IN THE FILMS

**The issues of the documentaries resonated with the participants:** 97% of the respondents said family separations and immigration raids are harming communities across the U.S. when it comes to undocumented immigrants. According to 90% of the survey takers, there should be a way for undocumented immigrants to stay in the country legally, and 71% said sanctuaries in the U.S. are necessary to protect undocumented immigrants from deportations, surveillance, and harassment.

### *Other findings from the survey responses and about the screenings/participants:*

Although each screening was organized in different ways at different locations and times with different schedules, most participants said they enjoyed the screening events. A few participants also expressed a desire for more time for discussions and questions. One respondent said, "It wasn't what I expected. I thought about it for days after and even shared a conversation with my coworkers about this event." Another one wrote: "I would have liked to know how to get locally involved on a compassionate level, not just a political platform." Many expressed that they learned a lot from the screenings: "Incredible, eye opening, inspiring," wrote a participant. And some said they wanted more time for post-screening discussions with fewer speeches by the panelists and more questions from the attendees.





## SECTION 4

# KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### What worked? And what are opportunities for further engagement and improvement?



#### FROM NGO INTERVIEWS

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1

**Incorporate storytelling/documentaries into organizing and community engagement efforts.**

All of the representatives and organizers we interviewed agreed on the advantages of using storytelling in their work: They all spoke of how the documentaries were “incredibly effective” in informing, mobilizing, and recruiting. Yet most are not actively seeking, commissioning, or using documentaries as one of their core strategies of community engagement. Different tactics and strategies work for different situations and organizational goals, but both national and local organizations can benefit from making documentaries/storytelling — from production to distribution — one of their tools. Organizers reported an observable increase in their target communities’ interest, participation, and donations after the screenings.

2

**Benefit from the power of documentaries by planning the post-discussions and call to action opportunities.**

Organizers reported even better results when they provided the audience opportunities to act on the issues covered in the films, from sign-ups to participating in rallies. The documentaries in the compilation powerfully tell stories of immigrants and communicate their messages. All of our interviewees described the emotions in the audience ranging from sadness to anger and pride, depending on the content and form of each film. From interviews and survey responses, we realized that some of the events were not able to benefit from the power of these documentaries when audiences were looking for ways to contribute to the solution or help immigrant communities. Showing these powerful films shouldn’t be the main goal of these screenings but organizing those who attend should be central. Audiences expressed a desire for more time even when most of the screenings included 45 minutes to an hour for post-screening discussions. Some of the organizers also said they either did not have enough time at the end or that they couldn’t provide immediate, concrete opportunities for the audiences to take action in one form or another.



- 3 Leverage digital media or other engagement platforms to sustain communication and follow-up actions with audiences. Find ways to follow up with audiences and measure the impact of the screenings.** Some of the other organizers said that although they provided opportunities to discuss and participate, they did not have means to measure the impact of the screenings or organize follow-ups with the participants. Collecting contact information and reaching out to members of the audience after the event should be part of each screening. Many organizers spoke of an observable increase in interest from their target audiences, but most did not try to measure the possible impacts in more precise ways. Measuring the impact of the screening (through a survey, phone call, or email) and getting in touch with participants could also help create and keep stronger ties with the audiences.



## FROM FILMMAKER INTERVIEWS

- 1 Participate in screenings and interact with audiences.** Filmmakers, organizers, and survey respondents all described the positive effects of seeing and engaging with the filmmakers and in some cases with the characters of the film. Some of the filmmakers even organized their own screenings in collaboration with different communities. Working Film's model connects filmmakers with NGOs at the grassroots level, and all parties could benefit from actively involving filmmakers more in the screenings.
- 2 Collaborate with national and local organizations.** Filmmakers said they are always looking for more funding and resources to produce and distribute their work, and these screenings provide grassroots-level distribution and engagement opportunities for them.



## FROM AUDIENCE SURVEYS

- 1 Provide more opportunities and times for community participants to meaningfully participate.** Only 54% of respondents said watching the documentaries with a group had a stronger impact on them than watching the documentaries alone, and multiple community participants expressed disappointment with not being able to discuss the screenings and issues at length. Similarly, some of the filmmakers said they would have liked to participate more in the screenings; they wanted more opportunities to attend screenings and interact with audiences.
- 2 Conduct a community focus group study or a study that directly engages with community participants about their experience.** Survey responses suggested that participants could get even more out of these engagements. Some of the respondents expressed that they were not satisfied with the discussions and Q&A sessions, suggesting that partner organizations should not only provide more time to discuss but also immediate, concrete opportunities for the audiences to take action. By involving audience participants into new research, additional pathways for further engagement could be explored and imagined.



# APPENDIX A

## List of screening locations

High Point, NC; Charlotte, NC; Hillsborough, NC; Asheville, NC; Boone, NC; Winston-Salem, NC; Raleigh, NC; Durham, NC; W. Hendersonville, NC; Chapel Hill, NC; Greenville, SC; Austin, TX; Arlington, TX; San Antonio, TX; Laredo, TX; San Marcos, TX; Waco, TX; Fort Worth, TX; North Richland Hills, TX; Corpus Christi, TX; McAllen, TX; Memphis, TN; Chattanooga, TN; Murfreesboro, TN; Nashville, TN; Durango, CO; Silverthorne, CO; Breckenridge, CO; Montrose, CO; Watsonville, CA; Santa Cruz, CA; Santa Barbara, CA; Evanston, IL; Chicago, IL; Casa Grande, AZ; Prescott, AZ; Columbus, GA; Merion Station, PA; Washington, DC; Springdale, AR; Hamtramck, MI; E. Orleans, MA; Lincoln, NE.



# APPENDIX B

## List of the 63 national and local partners and hosts

1. Carolina Human Rights Network Conference (CHRONIC),
2. Comunidad Colectiva
3. RAICES
4. Mexic-Arte Museum
5. Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) High Point
6. City of High Point
7. High Point Museum
8. Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition
9. Memphis Wesley Foundation
10. La Paz Chattanooga
11. Apoyo, the ACLU of NC
12. Department of Global Studies and Human Geography at MTSU
13. UNICEF, Southerners on New Ground (SONG)
14. The Dreamers Resource Center
15. Immigrant Justice Committee of Watauga County
16. the NC Justice Center
17. Department of Social Work at ASU
18. the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts
19. Parkway United Church of Christ
20. NC Siembra
21. Ecosocialists
22. Fearless Winston-Salem
23. NC Justice Center
24. Committee Action Popular
25. Paz Amigos
26. Indivisible Columbus
27. Laredo Immigrant Alliance
28. Laredo Film Society
29. Compañeros
30. Durango Public Library
31. Saint Joseph's University Galleries and Art Department
32. United We Dream
33. Peace United Church of Christ and Santa Cruz El Salvador
34. Mano Amigo
35. Waco Immigrants Alliance
36. Mountain Dreamers
37. Hispanic Affairs Project
38. Community Spirit Church UCC
39. Uncompahgre Valley Alliance
40. Carolina Jews for Justice
41. United Fort Worth
42. National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC)
43. Define American
44. Dream Project of VA
45. Lambda Theta Alpha-Beta Nu Chapter
46. Members United
47. Arkansas United
48. HANA Center
49. Justice for Our Neighbors Michigan and Cinema Lamont
50. St John the Apostle Parish
51. Hendersonville Resiste
52. Compañeros Inmigrantes de las Montañas en Acción (CIMA)
53. Cape Cod Coalition for Safe Communities
54. RAZE of AZ
55. La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE)
56. Prescott Area Immigration Coalition
57. Prescott Indivisible Immigration Team
58. Keep Prescott Together
59. Yavapai County Community Action Network
60. Meaningful Movies Santa Barbara
61. Trinity Lutheran Church
62. Stand In For Lincoln Youth Chapter
63. Episcopal Farmworker Ministry.

# END NOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> Hajar Habbah, "You Will Never See Your Child Again: The Persistent Psychological Effects of Family Separation," *Physicians for Human Rights*, Feb. 25, 2020, [https://phr.org/our-work/resources/you-will-never-see-your-child-again-the-persistent-psychological-effects-of-family-separation/#\\_ednref29](https://phr.org/our-work/resources/you-will-never-see-your-child-again-the-persistent-psychological-effects-of-family-separation/#_ednref29). See also, Brenda Eskenazi, et al., "Association of Perceived Immigration Policy Vulnerability With Mental and Physical Health Among US-Born Latino Adolescents in California," *JAMA Pediatrics* 173, no. 8 (June 2019).
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- <sup>7</sup> "Stories Beyond Borders," About, Working Films, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.workingfilms.org/stories-beyond-borders/about/>
- <sup>8</sup> High Point, NC; Charlotte, NC; Hillsborough, NC; Asheville, NC; Boone, NC; Winston-Salem, NC; Raleigh, NC; Durham, NC; W. Hendersonville, NC; Chapel Hill, NC; Greenville, SC; Austin, TX; Arlington, TX; San Antonio, TX; Laredo, TX; San Marcos, TX; Waco, TX; Fort Worth, TX; North Richland Hills, TX; Corpus Christi, TX; McAllen, TX; Memphis, TN; Chattanooga, TN; Murfreesboro, TN; Nashville, TN; Durango, CO; Silverthorne, CO; Breckenridge, CO; Montrose, CO; Watsonville, CA; Santa Cruz, CA; Santa Barbara, CA; Evanston, IL; Chicago, IL; Casa Grande, AZ; Prescott, AZ; Columbus, GA; Merion Station, PA; Washington, DC; Springdale, AR; Hamtramck, MI; E. Orleans, MA; Lincoln, NE.

# STORIES BEYOND BORDERS



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