

## Chapter 5

### Small Grants Seed Big Films

by K. M. Soehnlein

Money for filmmakers—that was the simple goal of the Film Arts Foundation Grants Program when it began in 1984. The San Francisco organization had been around for just seven years at that point, but it had quickly grown from a gathering of filmmakers looking to pool resources to a service organization offering classes, a newsletter, a resource library and a variety of equipment for rent to dues-paying members. Helping get money into the hands of its filmmaker-members and the larger community they were building was the logical next step.

In the 1980s, many independent media projects found funding through a strong national re-granting program. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was distributing money to regional media arts centers, which were then selecting filmmakers for grants at all levels of production. Filmmaker Helen De Michiel—now the executive director of the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC)—recalls living in Minneapolis at the time and receiving re-granted NEA money through her local media arts center, Film in the Cities. "They were willing to take risks on somewhat unformed ideas," she says, "or on films that needed a push to move them through the filmmaking process." Some parts of the country, however, like the San Francisco Bay Area, were so abundant in working film artists that even a steady flow of federal money wasn't meeting the community's funding needs.

It was in this climate that San Francisco media arts organization Film Arts Foundation (FAF) set up a small endowment, the fund for Independent Cinema, to support an annual grants program. Initial funding came from the Hewlett Foundation. The Fund established three grants categories: personal works (artist-made films or videos that could be fully produced within the grant amount), development, and completion/distribution. Gail Silva, FAF's director, recalls, "We had so little money that we devised categories where we could make a difference." One of those categories in

particular—development—is still one of the most difficult for which to receive money, and eighteen years later remains one of the Film Arts Grants Program's strongest commitments.

The idea behind development funding is simple: first money starts the project. Silva explains, "It gets you things essential to competing in the funding world. You can make a clip that you can show to other funders or use the money to travel for research, which helps get a proposal together." Development money is often called seed money, and the metaphor is apt. The filmmaker's idea is the seed; foundations provide the fertilizer. However, it often takes the expertise of a grassroots intermediary, like FAF, to make the case as to where that fertilizer should be spread.

Film Arts Foundation gets approximately 300 grant applicants per year to its grants program. Typically 60 or so are for development; of those, between four and six are selected. Funds have primarily gone to documentaries, although narrative projects have been funded for script development as well. Silva says the panelists Film Arts hires to make granting decisions look for "how clear the ideas come across in the proposal," and whether or not the required work sample and filmmaker's track record demonstrate "the sophistication and experience to carry it off." She adds, "We're not throwing money willy-nilly. It's a very selective process."

Unlike completion funding, which is most often granted based on a rough edit of the film, or production funding, which usually requires a preview clip or well-researched proposal, development money is basically given to an *idea*. "It's a risk because not every filmmaker finishes their project," Silva admits. "Maybe they can't raise any other money, or maybe some piece of the project falls apart. Sometimes they do research and then discover that there's no story there." In general, re-granting programs like FAF's are in a better position to absorb some of that risk than a foundation whose board may be looking for measurable results every time. "If now and then a filmmaker determines he or she can't develop the film," Silva says, "better they discover that early on than to get too far along."

More commonly, seed money allows good ideas to blossom. FAF development grantees include success stories like Susaña Munoz and Lourdes Portillo's *Las Madres: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, a 1985 Academy Award nominee; Allie Light and Irving

Saraf's *Dialogues with Madwomen*, which won the Freedom of Expression Award at the Sundance Film Festival and was broadcast on PBS's *P.O.V.*; and Ellen Bruno's *Sacrifice*, another Sundance and *P.O.V.* screener, winner of the Golden Spire Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival.

Filmmaker Nancy Kelly, recipient of a 1999 development grant, premiered her finished film, *Downside UP*, this February at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA). Her documentary examines the way her hometown of North Adams, Massachusetts, rose from economic blight after Mass MoCA was constructed in an enormous abandoned factory downtown. For Kelly, the \$2,500 FAF grant, along with another \$10,000 in seed money from the LEF Foundation, was essential to get herself and her crew across the U.S. for the museum's opening. She explains, "Ten thousand people showed up for opening day. We have that on tape thanks to those first grants. It's really such a small amount of money, but it was so crucial to the story and for gathering momentum for the project." (See sidebar.)

The Film Arts endowment receives money each year from the San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund's Grants for the Arts program. The Hotel Tax Fund collects a 14% tariff on every occupied hotel room in San Francisco; Grants for the Arts (GFTA) gets 8.5 cents from each dollar collected. According to GFTA director Kary Schulman, the agency is responsible to use this money to fund works that directly benefit the city's visitors. "We can make an argument for funding an organization like Film Arts Foundation, which is recognized for its expertise in the field, its history, and its reputation for supporting the making of art in the city," she says. Through FAF, GFTA contributes to the exhibition of works at film festivals and other public events, even though funded projects might be years away from completion. "We understand that some kinds of impact are not measurable," Schulman says. "Our desire to see work reach the end-user depends upon money coming in at the beginning."

Although GFTA is the only agency providing money to FAF specifically for regranting, others have stepped up when asked to foster the growth of FAF's Fund for Independent Cinema. The Fleishhacker Foundation is one such San Francisco-based family foundation. Executive director Christine Elbel says that a \$15,000 grant given by Fleishhacker for FAF to run a capital campaign to increase support for the fund was a

recognition of Film Arts' reputation as "a mainstay for artists, especially at the early development of their careers." The Fleishhacker Foundation's board includes an arts committee with a special commitment to funding film and video. "We gave money to Film Arts Foundation because our own grants can only fund a small fraction of the people out there," says Elbel. "Film Arts Foundation is a national model of a service organization that provides direct support to artists. Technically, we don't fund endowments, but this was a way to get money to artists."

Nancy Kelly has used her seed money well. She used the opening day footage—including interviews with museum officials, her family and other townspeople—to make a trailer that helped her eventually raise money from ten other foundations, along with tens of thousands of dollars in in-kind services such as editing time. At the time of this writing, Kelly was waiting on word about a grant from a large national foundation that had turned her down for production money but, having seen the film, was now talking to her about getting involved in its distribution. "After the program officer looked at my work-in-progress" relates Kelly, "he called back and said, 'I lost sleeping thinking about it.'" Because *Downside UP* is ultimately an argument for art and culture as an economic engine in distressed communities, this program officer sees Kelly's film as a potential educational tool on a much wider scale. Kelly also believes her film can persuade conservative politicians and others opposed to public funding for the arts that "art is not just good for your soul. Art has revitalized North Adams' downtown and has brought in 120,000 tourists a year."

Gail Silva expresses her wish that more foundations would take on direct support of mediamakers, although she recognizes that not all foundations have the expertise to do so. "It's not easy for a foundation to know all the intricacies: how to read a budget; what the marketplace is; can this person actually pull it off?" she says. "Re-granting gives us an opportunity to put together panel of people who are specifically knowledgeable in the field."

Today, Film Arts' program is one of the few providing re-granted money for media development. The NEA's regional re-granting was a casualty of the early '90s culture wars, replaced by centralized decisionmaking. Helen De Michiel of NAMAC, whose membership comprises media arts centers around the country—many of whom

once leveraged NEA money to procure matching grants from local foundations—argues that as funding processes have changed, so too has the type of work that receives funding. She says, "There are very few major funders out there for nonfiction features; basically HBO, Showtime and ITVS are the only ones who can greenlight \$250-350,000 to make these films. So what filmmakers propose in order to get that money are products that work on television, with a three-act narrative structure. Work that's community-based, often about local issues with larger political repercussions, is becoming invisible."

Development money re-granted on a regional or local level also has an effect beyond the jumpstart it gives to particular projects. By affording artists the chance to explore new ideas, it enriches the work being made in a given community and contributes to a collective body of art vital to the culture at large. De Michiel speaks of this process in terms of sustainability, urging private foundations and media arts centers to pursue one-on-one relationships and begin to pool resources for re-granting. "These organizations are on the pulse; the foundations have the money," she says. "In order for us to have a vibrant independent media culture at the national level, the incubators must start early and locally, and the strengths must be built up from there. "

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**Downside UP Budget Summary**

	<b>Production Budget</b>	<b>\$ 205,861</b>
<b>INCOME</b>	<b>Cash Funds Raised to Date</b>	<b>161,200</b>
	LInCS Grant (ITVS)	65,000
	Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities	35,000
	High Meadow Foundation	16,000
	Hoosac Bank	10,000
	LEF Foundation	10,000
	Springcreek Foundation	6,000
	Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation	5,500
	Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund	4,000
	Cultural Council of Northern Berkshire	2,700
	FAF Grants Program	2,500
	Fleishhacker Fund	2,500
	Rough House Editorial	2,000
	<b>In-Kind Contributions</b>	<b>34,125</b>
	WMHT	22,340
	Banff Center for the Arts, Alberta	11,785
	<b>Total Funds raised to date</b>	<b>195,325</b>
	<b>Funds Still Needed</b>	<b>10,536</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>	Pre-Production	2,738
	Producing Staff Total	34,200
	Production Personnel—Independent Contractors	22,800
	Production Expenses	31,394
	Post-Production Personnel	20,750
	Post-Production Expenses	44,505
	Administrative Costs	9,425
	Miscellaneous (music rights, graphics, etc.)	20,300
	Insurance & Fees	19,749
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$205,861</b>