

## Chapter 7

### The Catalytic Role of Documentary Outreach

by Patricia Thomson

Next to gravity, inertia is perhaps the most ubiquitous force. It's an obstacle activists know all too well, and many would say it's their most crippling opponent. Documentary filmmakers also bump up against this wall. "You can watch the most powerful film in a room with a thousand people, but you don't necessarily turn to the stranger next to you and say, 'Oh my gosh, we've got to do something about that,'" observes Michael Hill, associate director of the Dorot Foundation. And no matter how forceful a television show, "people are not used to translating that into action," Hill continues. "At least I'm not. I watch Bill Moyers or whatever, and when they say, '*If you want to do more, go to our Web site,*' I've never done that once in my life!" he admits with a laugh. "You need an activity set up to channel that energy. And that's what Judith is trying to do."

Judith Helfand is cofounder of Working Films, an organization that partners with filmmakers to create outreach campaigns in communities and classrooms. She's also a filmmaker herself—one of the few that Dorot has funded. A family foundation best known for its fellowship for study in Israel, Dorot supported Helfand's personal documentary about diethylstilbestrol (DES) and cancer, *A Healthy Baby Girl*, as well as her latest "toxic comedy," *Blue Vinyl*, codirected with Daniel Gold.

"*Blue Vinyl* is irreverent, funny, accessible to the average person, and it's not something I would call your stereotypical documentary on a scientific issue," says Marni Rosen of the Jenifer Altman and Mitchell Kapor Foundations, sister organizations that co-grant in the environmental health area and that also supported both films. Naturally, Rosen was

delighted when *A Healthy Baby Girl* appeared on PBS. She was even more thrilled when *Blue Vinyl* was picked up by HBO, which reaches 10 million “unconverted average consumers,” as Helfand describes them. “For us, that was great,” says Rosen, “since we’re involved in educating the general public. Something like *Blue Vinyl* can really go far in doing that.” But Rosen also knows that a television broadcast doesn’t necessarily translate into action. That’s where Helfand’s outreach comes into play.

Earlier this year, Helfand could be found channeling audience energy at the Sundance Film Festival, where *Blue Vinyl* debuted. This filmic odyssey begins at her parents’ Long Island house, which had been recently re-sided with blue vinyl, then moves around the world to follow the toxic trail that the production and incineration of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) leave behind. When audiences exited the theater, each received a blue chip with the warning “This is vinyl. Don’t burn it and don’t throw it away” and a Web address ([www.myhouseisyourhouse.org](http://www.myhouseisyourhouse.org)) where they could learn more. For audience members riled up enough to “do something,” Helfand and Working Films provided stamped postcards protesting the continued use of PVC packaging by Victoria’s Secret and Bath & Body Works.

They also brought the issue home. Utah’s largest municipal incinerator, where vinyl products are burned, was located nearby. Working Films flew up members of the Louisiana “bucket brigade” featured in *Blue Vinyl* to train locals how to capture air samples for professional monitoring. They also organized a special screening of *Blue Vinyl* for Utah health workers and local press.

These Sundance activities kicked off *Blue Vinyl*’s outreach campaign. But that’s not where the trail began. In fact, a well-conceived outreach campaign starts with the film’s preproduction and can

potentially last for years after its broadcast, as Helfand's *A Healthy Baby Girl* demonstrates.

Helfand is among a growing number of filmmakers who have discovered that the more they interface with the community of potential users while they're making a film, the more effective it will be once it's out in the world. (See also Arthur Dong in chapter 6).

When creating *A Healthy Baby Girl*, Helfand called up Jeanie Ungerleider, a clinical social worker who specializes in fertility issues. *A Healthy Baby Girl* sprang from Helfand's own experience with a hysterectomy at age 25. When pregnant, Helfand's mother took DES, a synthetic hormone then prescribed to ensure a healthy pregnancy. This hormone has been linked to Helfand's rare type of cervical cancer, which in turn led to *A Healthy Baby Girl*, a film about Helfand's hysterectomy and the complicated web of grief and guilt surrounding it. Asking 'what did they know, and when did they know it?' of the drug companies that pushed DES on expectant mothers, Helfand reveals a shameful history of corporate irresponsibility.

Ungerleider was one of medical professionals Helfand contacted to discuss the film's content and use, but it so happened she was also on the Dorot Foundation's board of directors. Ungerleider subsequently brought the film to their attention, and Dorot wound up providing *A Healthy Baby Girl* with \$20,000 through the foundation's "board-initiated grants" category. Although it was the outreach that interested them, they provided the funds while Helfand was still in production. "Outreach can be a lot better when people are brought in from the beginning," explains Hill. "She's using them for ideas on how to make the film effective, and that's informing her filmmaking."

Ungerleider was one of those excited prospective users, and she recommended the film to peers in the medical profession and to other funders. “*A Healthy Baby Girl* is such a good teaching tool in so many different areas—in the clinic, in the classroom, with nurses, with medical students. That’s what really got me aboard,” she enthuses. Ungerleider found Helfand’s Community Action Guide (paid for by \$5,000 from the Jenifer Altman Foundation) to be right on target. “It was very much geared towards people working in health care, but also relevant to patients who were dealing with reproductive issues like infertility.” Approximately 3,000 copies were distributed, reaching target audiences through the film’s outreach and organizing partners, who handed them out at events and screenings. In addition, the film’s distributor, Women Make Movies, sent out a Community Action Guide with each sale, and other copies were requested through the film’s Web site.

But this study guide was just one component in Helfand’s outreach. As with *Blue Vinyl*, she used her time on the festival circuit to network with local activists and organize special screenings. Then after the festivals and PBS broadcast, her outreach work continued. Her core effort involved long-term partnerships with environmental health activists. Although DES is no longer prescribed to pregnant women, there are other harmful synthetic chemicals circulating in the environment, such as dioxin, which is known to cause cancer and harm fetal development. Helfand allied with an environmental health coalition that is targeting the health industry itself—Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), which seeks to eliminate dioxin and mercury from the medical waste stream. Through this partnership, she was able to use her film to move the campaign ahead in ways that would not have been possible for either party separately.

Helfand carved out a task for herself: get medical students involved in the campaign, targeting university hospitals with medical waste

incinerators. “The idea was get students to say, ‘Not in my school,’ ” Helfand explains. Dubbed ‘Divest from Dioxin,’ this outreach effort (funded by the Mitchell Kapor Foundation, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, and the Starfire Fund) involved a screening and discussion of *A Healthy Baby Girl*, plus a follow-up meeting with students—a critical organizing step. “I’d make sure there was an organizer from Health Care Without Harm there do the follow-up,” says Helfand. Like a Johnny Appleseed, Helfand made more than 100 such appearances. Some had direct and immediate results. At the University of Michigan, they formed Students Against the Medical Waste Incinerator. “They were one of the first student chapters to start, and that was definitely because of *A Healthy Baby Girl*,” says Helfand. At least six or seven other campuses were also spurred to action, but as Helfand notes, “the impact is long-term.” The broader movement of which *A Healthy Baby Girl* is part is gaining momentum. According to a recent HCWH report, the California Medical Association passed a resolution strongly urging all hospitals to phase out their use of PVC products; and medical waste incinerators have closed in California, Michigan, and Ontario.

For the Jenifer Altman and Mitchell Kapor foundations, *A Healthy Baby Girl* was an attractive proposition because it neatly dovetailed with organizing efforts they were already supporting — namely, HCWH. Similarly, when Helfand was raising money for *Blue Vinyl*, she went to foundations that were funding activists groups in Louisiana near the country’s largest vinyl plant. Even though the Ford Foundation’s Community and Resource Development unit had never supported film before, Helfand nevertheless sent them an application. “That department is absolutely committed to economic or technical development in communities that have been harmed by toxic industries,” says Helfand. “I went to them not only because they were funding some of the grassroots

organizations I was already working with, but in order for that re-development to happen, there has to be demand from consumers and the middle-class for products that don't harm anyone. And that's what *Blue Vinyl* will do." Her logic worked. "[Program officer] Vernice Miller-Travis saw an 18-minute trailer and committed \$150,000."

This kind of funding synergy makes sense to Helfand. "If a foundation is spending \$1million, it's almost like they're spending \$2 million," she says. "You fund two organizations that work together, sharing resources and materials, and one builds on the work of the other."

Helfand has no doubt about the catalytic effect of film as an organizing tool. That's why she cofounded Working Films with curator Robert West. "I never again wanted a foundation to say to me, 'I'm sorry, we don't fund film; we fund organizing. But what you do with films is not organizing.' I felt that unless I created an organization that is solely dedicated to organizing but from a filmmaking perspective, I'm always going to lose out."

Working Films is now collaborating with a handful of filmmakers on developing and implementing outreach campaigns. The deeper Helfand gets into this work, the more she sees that the most effective campaigns stretch over a period of years. "For me, it's only one or two years out when you really understand how your film functions," says Helfand. "By then you know the best thing you can do with that movie, and you do it over and over again."

That's why in an ideal world Helfand envisions multi-year grants for outreach. "My sense is that's part of what might be an evolution in film funding," says Dorot's Hill. "First people funded production; then they

wanted to do outreach. Now Helfand is at the vanguard of saying ‘That’s fine, but outreach really needs to be a three-year process.’ I don’t know how many foundations are there yet, but hopefully it’s an evolving process.”

In the meantime, it’s clear that funding for film outreach—whether around a broadcast, a piece of legislation, or an ongoing activist campaign—have proven to be a worthwhile investment for foundations interested in social change.

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## Chapter 7 Sidebar *Legacy*

Many times a film's impact is difficult to measure. It can create a shift in attitude that's real but intangible, reflected back through anecdotal evidence more than numbers, as was often the case with *A Healthy Baby Girl*. But if this shift occurs within a legislative body, the impact is as clear as the vote.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is shooting for this. The foundation, which works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families, has funded film sporadically over the past decade. Most recently, Casey supported the outreach of *Legacy*, an Oscar®-nominated verité film by Tod Lending that follows a multigenerational family in a Chicago housing project as it struggles to climb out of the welfare cycle. Filmed over the course of five years, *Legacy* shows family members ultimately succeeding in education and job training, recovering from substance abuse, securing employment, moving to a safe neighborhood, and gaining self-respect. According to Joy Moore, Casey's manager of grantee relations/media projects, "the film didn't just expose a social problem, but showed, 'this is what you can do about it.' "

*Legacy*'s outreach, managed by Outreach Extensions, involved an ambitious web of partnerships with organizations that help families living in poverty and distressed neighborhoods, including the Interdenominational Theological Center, Generations United, Center for Community Change, Los Angeles Women's Foundation, and Boys & Girls Clubs of America. "Since *Legacy* was completed in 1999, the documentary has been screened in well over 1,000 community settings to more than a half million people," says Moore. Materials were tailored for each specific audience. These included faith-based institutions, schools, halfway houses, detention centers, drug rehab centers, and business groups, particularly those dealing with banks interested in home ownership programs. (For an overview of this multi-pronged effort, see "Legacy Outreach Campaign" on the Web site, [www.legacymovie.com](http://www.legacymovie.com).)

One very specific audience is on Capitol Hill. Outreach Extensions sent educational toolkits and videocassettes of *Legacy* to members of Congress prior to a briefing on housing, and that, says Moore with satisfaction, was a key catalyst to a pending bill entitled "Legacy: Living Equitably—Grandparents Aiding Children and Youth." The fact that the bill is directly named after *Legacy* speaks to the film's influence.

For Moore, there's no question that a film can bring something special to a campaign. When she attended a *Legacy* screening at a Baltimore school for pregnant and parenting girls along with the film's subjects, she was tingling with the energy in the room. "It was just magical," she recalls. "You can see the power of film to get people's attention. Afterwards, we got letters from kids saying, 'Thank you for letting me see that I can make it,' and 'You gave me hope.' Those kinds of things."

*Legacy* is now just one film in Casey's more ambitious outreach effort called the Making Connections Media Outreach Initiative (MCMOI). Operating in 22 cities, this project is intended to extend the impact of documentaries beyond broadcasts by linking public television and radio stations to community organizations and policymakers to create sustainable community change.



When the fit between film and foundation is right, says Moore, there's nothing better. "Film is one of the most powerful tools a foundation can add to its existing arsenal," she states. "There are always going to be reports and traditional ways to get the story out. Media gets it to a broader audience and can employ techniques that a report can't. It can provide a face to the statistics. It can show the environment; it's really hard to describe a chemically destroyed dream. In a report, the words are there, but to *see* the effects is a powerful tool."

## Chapter 7 Sidebar2

### A Healthy Baby Girl: Funding Sources

#### PRODUCTION/POSTPRODUCTION

Corporation for Public Broadcasting	Postproduction	\$198,836
Margate Foundation	Postproduction	20,000
New York State Council of the Arts	Postproduction	15,000
National Foundation for Jewish Culture	Completion	10,000
Fund For Jewish Documentary Film Making		
Yale University – Ernest Schenkin Fellowship	Production	7,500
Lucius & Eva Eastman Fund	Postproduction	3,000
Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers International Union	Completion	<u>5,000</u>
TOTAL		259,336

#### DISTRIBUTION SUPPORT RECEIVED

Shefa Fund	Jewish outreach	\$10,670
Paul Robeson Fund/Funding Exchange		6,000
Independent Television Service		3,000
Jenifer Altman Foundation	Community Action Guide	5,000
Starfire Fund	Jewish/Student Org. HCWH	5,000
Puffin Foundation		2,000
United Mineworkers		2,000
IUE		2,500

Lucius & Eva Eastman Fund		2,750
Nathan Cummings Foundation	Jewish outreach	7,582
Variety Fund		1,157
Mitchell Kapor Foundation	Divest from Dioxin	to come
W. Alton Jones Foundation	Divest from Dioxin	to come
Starfire Fund	Divest from Dioxin	to come
Individual & Business Contributions		<u>3,740</u>
TOTAL		51,399

## Sidebar MediaRights.org

Outreach used to be a lonely path, followed by film pioneers one at a time. But that's been changing over the past decade as organizations dedicated specifically to this endeavor keep popping up. In addition to Working Films and Outreach Extensions (see chapter 7) founded in 2000 and 1992 respectively, there is the Community Connections Project, begun in 1996 by Independent Television Service to assist the independently produced public television programs they fund. And there's Active Voice, which also organizes outreach campaigns for public television programs by independents. This division was begun in 1998 by American Documentary Inc., the producers behind *P.O.V.*, PBS's showcase for independent documentaries.

These four groups save dozens of filmmakers each year from reinventing the wheel when planning outreach. But they can partner with only so many people. Ultimately, that's a small percentage of the thousands of mediamakers who are industriously churning out films and videos.

Filmmakers and nonprofits now have a useful outreach resource at their fingertips in MediaRights.org, an on-line information clearinghouse. With research and development money from the Ford Foundation, filmmaker Julia Pimsleur launched MediaRights.org in 2000 to facilitate partnerships between filmmakers and nonprofit organizations interested in social issues. At its core are several huge databases with which activists can find each other—one listing 850,000 nonprofit organizations working on social and environmental issues, and another listing social-issue films and videos and their distributors.

On the subject of outreach, MediaRights.org has a valuable new resource: *The Outreach Toolkit*. Copublished with the nonprofit Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, the toolkit is a compendium of nuts-and-bolts information on do-it-yourself grassroots distribution. In addition to a thorough run-down of what constitutes "outreach," filmmakers can find tips for writing a study guide, as well as in-depth case studies of outreach campaigns, including grants proposals, budgets, and promotional materials. Having an on-line version of the toolkit enables MediaRights.org to offer interactive guidance. Their Interactive Budget, for instance, lets filmmakers plug in a dollar amount for outreach and shows

what this would allow them to do. There's also access to an on-line bulletin board, where filmmakers planning their outreach can ask questions, share tips, and network with their peers.

Such resources have gone a long way in creating a body of shared knowledge that wasn't there ten years ago. From the look of things, this field is just now taking off.