

Working Films Profile

By Kathie deNobriga
Arts & Democracy Project
Center for Civic Participation

In my work as a curator, I was excited that 200 people could sit in a dark room, see a film, be moved, and ask, 'what can we do?' I began to think about how to be more deliberate in getting the right people in the room. And I realized we needed good answers to that question about "what to do", and that many of the best answers were going to be local answers. So then, Judith Helfand and I began to think about an organization that could deliberately connect the non-fiction stories of struggles with ground-level activists and organizers.

— Robert West

Anyone who has ever sat in a theater seat, heart pounding during a horror movie or teary-eyed over a tragic love story, knows the power of film to enthrall us and stir our emotions. But as Robert West and Judith Helfand have discovered, film can do much more. As co-founders of Working Films, they help filmmakers, organizers, and educators harness the visceral power of the moving image to bolster coordinated community education efforts, consumer organizing campaigns, activist movements, and classroom projects on issues of social and economic justice.

Neither a production company nor a distributor, Working Films instead serves as an innovative and active resource for the world of independent film, providing strategic advice and consultation that helps documentary filmmakers and communities connect with each other. As the Working Films website explains, the nonprofit organization “brings the persuasive, provocative and personal narratives in independent documentary films and video – vividly illustrating the struggles and triumphs of our lives – to long-term community organizing and activism.”

West, a former film and video specialist at the Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, N.C., met Peabody Award-winning filmmaker Helfand in 1994, when she came to town to screen her documentary, *The Uprising of '34*. The film, which she co-produced and directed with veteran documentarian George Stoney, deals with Depression-era attempts to unionize the southern textile industry. At a strategy meeting sponsored by activists interested in the film and the issues it raised, someone asked what the afterlife might be for a work of this kind. Five years later, West and Helfand formed a partnership that answers that question.

One seminal moment in the creation of Working Films was an audience discussion following a showing at the Mint Museum of Debra Chasnoff's *It's Elementary*, a highly regarded documentary that shows how responsible adults can

handle children's questions about sexuality and homosexuality. West's curatorial decision to show the film was part of the museum's ongoing practice of offering documentary film as part of a contemporary art series, connecting those films with social and political issues.

West had invited the chair of the local school board, as well as the founder of the youth gay and lesbian support group, to be part of a post-screening dialogue. The discussion became galvanized when one teacher in the audience spoke of his personal anguish at being prohibited to talk to youth who had questions about sexuality because he knew firsthand the human cost of such denial. This teacher's courage in speaking out, about his anguish and his own story, moved the school board chair to grant the local gay youth leader a long-requested meeting. In time, the school board's policy of "if they ask, don't tell" was reversed.

As West says, "People saw that the film wasn't just about what was happening in California, it was about what was happening *here* in North Carolina. But what occurred in our screening room was way too accidental — I just happened to know the school board chair as well as the gay leader. I began to think about how to be more deliberate in getting the right people in the room to see a film. I realized we needed good answers to that audience question 'what can we do?' and that many of the best answers were going to be local answers. So then I began to think about an organization that could deliberately connect the non-fiction stories of struggles with ground-level activists and organizers."

At the time, West was already working with Helfand. After *The Uprising of '34* was broadcast nationally in 1995 (and voted one of the year's 10 best documentaries by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences), Helfand became very interested in learning how the film could be used in labor organizing and outreach. She found that collaborating with activists, educators, and organizers in the course of creating her work influenced her films in exciting and unexpected ways. As a result of their individual experiences, West and Helfand began to explore the idea of creating an organization that would serve both filmmakers and activists, and Working Films was born.

"Judith and I felt that the power of the documentary was not being fully exploited, and that we wanted to maximize the potential," West says. "Documentaries can create collective epiphanies, shaking people's perceptions and assumptions like nothing else."

Working Films holds in delicate balance the needs of filmmakers to have their work seen by the widest possible audience and activists' needs to have their stories of struggle told well, to strategic audiences. Working Films' methodology is to embed good nonfiction stories in long-standing work for change on the ground level, "to give the street good stories," so that neither effort is isolated. (West uses the term *non-fiction*, because new technologies are pushing the boundaries of the traditional *documentary* film.) Working Films does not seek to turn filmmakers into activists *per se*, but to

support them in their goal of being the best filmmakers possible, of being compelling storytellers.

The approach of WF is to ask the questions, “what issues does this film raise?” and “how do we link to grounded efforts already in place so we can ensure we make a difference?” Among the many services that Working Films provides, one is a half-hour consultation — free to all filmmakers and activists — to explore questions about a film’s outreach, community engagement and organizing. Beyond this one-on-one assistance, Working Films maintains a website that connects a portfolio of films (about civil rights, environmental justice, criminal justice, human rights, disability rights and economic justice) with educational resources: websites, books, organizations, and classroom study guides.

A deeper level of WF methodology is the one-day or two-day “public engagement summit meeting,” which is instigated by a particular film or a particular issue. West, Helfand, and the WF staff carefully choose a dozen activist groups that could make a difference on whatever issues the film raises. WF conducts research and thinks carefully about whom to invite to the table. If the film will be broadcast nationally, then an organization with a national presence will be needed. If it’s a local issue, then a different set of organizers may be invited. “We look for smaller, scrappier organizations, as well as the big groups like Greenpeace. Organizers and activists know the power of media --- they know that a really great film is still the best way to move and motivate audiences to action. Two hundred people sitting together in a dark room, watching a powerful story, and collectively being moved --- it has huge potential,” West says.

Once the activists and organizers have agreed to participate, the organizations receive a DVD of the film, regardless of its stage of completion. They are asked to watch the film with their colleagues, and think about how to integrate it into their organizing efforts. The goal, West says, is *not* to “help us get out the word about this film,” but to determine “how can this film support the work you’re already doing?” Each organization sends a draft workplan, which is then shared with the others at the table — three to five years’ worth of organizing strategies and tactics. Then participants spend the day talking about each other’s plans, piecing together the strategic needs, and determining what’s missing and what’s available, like web sites or fact sheets. Every group creates a commitment to the film that is specific, explicit, and absolutely ingrained in the individual organization’s work.

Working Films then identifies and shares the resources to make the screenings happen. For example, if a group agrees to host 20 screenings in 20 cities, with a Q&A follow-up featuring local folk, then WF will raise money for equipment and facility rental. West acknowledges that WF’s resource-sharing commitment is in partial response to what he’s seen happen: community groups sometimes feel burned when asked to partner without receiving a share of the outreach dollars. WF’s commitment to power-sharing in this way signals mutual respect and common cause.

Helfand's and Daniel Gold's film *Blue Vinyl*, about the dangers of incinerating polyvinyl chloride (PVC), provides an example of how strategy meetings work. In addition to reducing the use of PVC on the front end and trying to shut down the incinerators which burn used PVC, producing dioxin that poisons neighborhoods and villages worldwide, strategists identified yet another path. They found one lingerie manufacturer already using non-PVC for 50 percent of its packaging; getting this company to go 100 percent PVC-free became the target of a coordinated plan with a website/e-mail launch and postcards to the company's CEO from *Blue Vinyl*'s audiences at Sundance. It worked. "We were successful because we were in a deep strategic partnership. *Blue Vinyl* premiered in 2002, but activists and organizers are still using it. A film doesn't age in the activist world like it does in the film world, where we tend to look for the newest releases, the next best thing. A filmmaker's work has more currency, for longer, when it's used by activists to support their work – their time-frame is much longer than ours," West says.

For *Blue Vinyl*, Working Films created My House is Your House, an organizing and education campaign that works in close partnership with the Coming Clean Collaboration, Healthcare Without Harm, and the Healthy Building Network. All across the country, hundreds of screenings, from house parties to large public gatherings, have been co-hosted by local environmental organizations and tied to a local "PVC life-cycle" story. In addition to affecting personal consumer choices, Working Films and their partners seek institutional transformation, and have begun to achieve it. Kaiser-Permanente eliminated vinyl in their construction and procurement standards. Seattle's Parks and Recreation Department cancelled a major order of PVC pipe. Architects, builders and developers, including the US Green Building Institute, are target audiences, as well as the faith-based community in partnership with Habitat for Humanity. Working Films awarded small grants to a score of Habitat affiliates for their ideas about how to build a PVC-free house. WF has also created a 17-minute epilog, *Let the Consumer Revolution Begin!*, documenting the impact of *Blue Vinyl* on the elimination of PVCs.

Activists help filmmakers learn how they can join the fight in a way that's strategic and that has measurable outcomes. Filmmakers also need to know that it's all right — and sometimes necessary — to release a five-minute clip to the public, and not wait a year until the film is completed. West says that part of Working Film's agenda is "to raise the expectations of the social justice documentary filmmakers — their expectations should be more than getting an audience. Their expectations can and should include concrete, specific wins tied to the issue. If part of your goal is to strive for wins on the issue – the impact of your film will be lasting and incredibly gratifying."

With the advent of new technologies, the distribution of film and video has taken quantum leaps. Use of video-blogs, podcasts and cell phones will have a profound impact on who sees these important films. "All this takes film beyond the elite ground of the PBS broadcast, the art house, the film festivals," West says. Non-traditional release strategies could have a powerful effect on civic participation, because it will widen the audience for these films. If an educated populace is fundamental for a healthy

democracy, then new electronic distribution methods could contribute to a new body of informed and motivated citizens.

What's needed to make the next step? West thinks that one of the problems is that "we've had 50 years of documentary filmmaking, but no clear ability to point back, and see how the issues have been impacted." Documentary filmmaking has moved away from its early journalistic style, which was supposedly objective and agenda-free; as West says, "Now it's time to learn what has actually happened as a result of our documentaries that *do* hold an agenda for change." Working Films evaluates their screenings, tracks how films have been used in selected campaigns, and looks for long-term impact, with the understanding that change takes time. West points to the model of *It's Elementary*; filmmaker Chasnoff is completing another film in which she looks back on the original documentary's impact over time. West would like to see more field-wide commitment to monitoring strategies, based on an understanding that a one-night epiphany is only the first step.

West and Helfand believe that being able to demonstrate the impact of a film will lead to a much stronger field, particularly since filmmaking is so dependent upon foundation funding. Foundations like clear successes, and West thinks that being able to point to those successes will increase the likelihood of funding. "But it's not just about serving the film's production needs, it's about showing the key connections to strategic allies on the ground, in the streets, all working with media in new and unimaginable ways."

"We need to know about the wins, big and small --- not isolated in some foundation annual report, and outside the narrow silo of one particular issue or another. I'd like to see foundations get their grantees together, find out whose storytelling style fits with whose issues." Working Films has already worked with some foundations, providing technical assistance to their grantees, helping them to develop strategic connections to those activists that may also be funded by the foundation.

Meanwhile, back at home, Working Films is part of the local activist scene in Wilmington North Carolina: its headquarters in an historic firehouse is open to community groups, and several meet there regularly: the Cape Fear Green Building Alliance, the Southeastern Alliance for Community Change, Wilmington Peace Meet-up and Full Belly. Creating a common ground for social change activism is Working Film's approach, in spaces both virtual and real.

West believes that media can convince people that change really is possible, that hope is alive: in a time of cynicism, skepticism and oppressive political structures, that is a fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary thought.

Kathie deNobriga has been a director, performer and producer of theater in Tennessee, North Carolina and Georgia. A founding member of Alternate ROOTS, deNobriga is now an independent arts consultant and on the City Council of Pine Lake, Georgia.

