

'Justice Matters' and the Power of Film to Persuade

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Each year, Justice Matters, a special series within Filmfest DC, the annual Washington, DC International Film Festival, shines a spotlight on some of the best new social issue films from around the globe. This year, three of the films were judged outstanding by jurors and audience members.



Filmmakers throughout the history of the medium have felt the need to address injustice, poverty, and other social concerns, prodding audiences to reflection and action, a tradition that continues today. As Filmfest DC founder and director Tony Gittens noted in launching Justice Matters in 2010: "What better city to highlight this tradition than our nation's capital, the vortex of ongoing debate on how best to further democracy and equitable treatment for all." And what better time than the present.

I was happy to catch the Justice Matters 2017 program during this year's festival in April. I had attended Justice Matters in 2012, highlighting *5 Broken Cameras* in an earlier PhilanTopic post and was eager to see this year's selection of films, especially *The Good Postman*, an intimate story about the flood of Syrian refugees into Europe set in Bulgaria, where I'd lived for two years.

This year's lineup included eight award-winning films that explore some of the most pressing challenges of our time and some of the most creative and courageous responses to those challenges: corporate corruption (*150 Milligrams*); corrosion of public trust and the need for a free press (*All Governments Lie: Truth, Deception, and the Spirit of I.F. Stone*); the privatization of public education (*Backpack Full of Cash*); refugee integration (*The Good Postman*); the crisis in Syria (*Last Men in Aleppo*); and climate change (*Tomorrow*). Two of the films mined the past for lessons and inspiration: one a personal recollection of the U.S. invasion of Grenada (*The House on Coco Road*); and a musical quest set during Freedom Summer (*Two Trains Runnin'*).

(All the films should be available in other festivals, theaters, broadcast, or on the Internet. More information about each is on the Justice Matters site and/or on the films' websites.)

Jurists for the series included Conrad Martin, executive director, the Stewart R. Mott Foundation and executive director of the Fund for Constitutional Government; Montré Aza Missouri, founder and director, Howard Film Culture; and Kathryn Washington, director of diversity and innovation at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The impetus for Justice Matters was provided by two Filmfest DC fans. Ken Grossinger, who had a career as a community and labor organizer, and Michelíne Klagsbrun, an artist, have always been deeply concerned about social and economic justice. In 2007, they started the CrossCurrents Foundation to support those interests. A family foundation, CrossCurrents' broad funding interests include civic engagement and the environment, peace and security, civil rights, and public art. Both founders had been attending Filmfest for many years and appreciated seeing films that addressed issues they cared about.

"I always believed in the power of art to inspire social movements, to work toward social change," Klagsbrun told me.

Grossinger came to appreciate that potential through his wife, Klagsbrun. "Organizers know how to move the needle a few percentage points," he said. "But I realized that for shaping public opinion, there is nothing like the arts. There's a transformative power there that penetrates hearts and minds in a way that political discourse doesn't. And film offers visibility to issues on a scale beyond the reach of many approaches to community organizing. Together, a strong film coupled with an organizing strategy can advance social change."

Soon after they created their foundation, the couple contacted Gittens with a proposal to establish the Justice Matters film series and award. Gittens was enthusiastic about the idea and hired Linda Blackaby, a longtime festival programmer whose career has centered around connecting films with communities and who was already advising the festival on its annual lineup. (She's now the festival's senior programming consultant and has curated the Justice Matters series since its inception.)

"Over the past eight years, Justice Matters has featured forty-one films," Blackaby told me. "And thanks to the [Wyncote Foundation](#), we've been able to create that community connection, too: taking films out to schools and other settings, using social media to reach new audiences, and bringing the filmmakers and resource people to post-screening discussions."

That combination of films-plus-impact appealed to Grossinger and Klagsbrun. "We were involved early on with Good Pitch, which really influenced our thinking in this area," said Klagsbrun.

[Good Pitch](#) helps filmmakers find financial support for production costs and community engagement activities, connect with nonprofit organizations working on the issues captured in their films, and build relationships with industry representatives. It's supported by a range of funders, and though it now offers a variety of events around the world, its core program remains focused on filmmakers who are trained to "pitch" their films to a select group of potential donors and partners.

"Good Pitch gets it right in their approach to advancing social change," said Grossinger. "They provide support for both production — the making of the film — and for impact. The filmmakers learn through Good Pitch that it is as important to understand organizations and the work they do as it is to produce a film about those same issues. Good Pitch links the two. We've supported the production and subsequent organizing of several films through Good Pitch."

The CrossCurrents Foundation has continued to look for new ways to carry out its mission, supporting a range of projects, including the [mural project](#) in Baltimore that helped sustain that community as it was grappling with [the death of Freddie Gray](#). And it continues to look for ways to support film. Grossinger and Klagsbrun are enthusiastic, for example, about a new project: [Double Exposure](#), a three-day film festival featuring investigative journalism-inspired documentaries and a concurrent symposium for film projects developed by teams of filmmakers and journalists. As traditional media has cut back on its coverage of complex issues, and many online media sources offer only superficial coverage of such issues, policy experts and consumers alike recognize the role that serious films can play in sustaining good journalism.

Blackaby's work on the audience-engagement component in Justice Matters relates to that concern and takes advantage of the festival's home base in Washington, as Gittens, from the beginning, hoped it would.

Feras Fayyad, co-director of *Last Man in Aleppo*, is Syrian; as a filmmaker in that war-torn country he was jailed and tortured. He now lives in exile in Denmark but continues to receive death threats. The film is about two men who work for the volunteer Syria Civil Defense group, or White Helmets, an NGO that became famous for its work rescuing victims of the intensive shelling and bombing of the Syrian city of Aleppo.

"We provide links to White Helmets and two other NGOs, and Feras promotes involvement from the audience," says Blackaby. "It's an example of some of the films we show that have a very clear activist agenda. But our aim is also to support these filmmakers in their professional development, to help them continue to bring social issues to the fore. Feras was here for four days, watching the other films, meeting those filmmakers, and making contacts that will continue to sustain his work."

For Damani Baker, the director of *The House on Coco Road*, the project was personal: his family was living in Grenada when the U.S. invaded the country in 1983. But the film also is an informed exploration of the politics of the Reagan years. Justice Matters set up interviews for Baker with WPFW's "Voices With Vision" host Netfa Freeman, a political analyst at the progressive [Institute for Policy Studies](#) in Washington, D.C, who interviewed him for one of the post-screening discussions, and Kojo Nnamdi, host of the [Kojo Nnamdi Show](#) on WAMU, who interviewed him after a second screening — a more substantive experience for the filmmaker and the audience than the usual post-screening Q&A.

Through a collaboration with DC-based [Teaching for Change](#), screenings and post-screening discussions of *The House on Coco Road*, *Backpack Full of Cash*, *Two Trains Runnin'*, and *All Governments Lie* also were taken to six local high schools. In addition to conversations with the directors and producers, students met with Judy Richardson, a former [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) member and civil rights activist who shared her own personal experiences behind the events depicted in *Two Trains Runnin'*. (For more details and great photos about those events, check out this [report](#) on the Teaching for Change website.)

Not all social issue films have a concrete impact agenda, however. "Sometimes there are short-term measurable outcomes to a film's social change goal," Blackaby says. "But the experience of viewing a film can also resonate over time, deeply affecting one's consciousness and understanding."

For their part, Grossinger and Klagsbrun see increasing interest in film within the grantmaking community.

"I participated in an arts and social justice workshop some eight years ago organized by Claudine Brown, who at the time worked at the Nathan Cummings Foundation. The meeting took place immediately in advance of the annual Grantmakers in the Arts national conference," Grossinger (a GIA board member) told me. "Only fifteen people came. But several years later, we had to close registration for the same event at one hundred. And subsequently, GIA held an all-day meeting designed to bring film funders together with other arts funders to explore possibilities for collaboration. Foundation board members still need to be persuaded, but many grantmakers agree that it's a winning strategy to fund film production and the associated impact campaigns, especially when the film's content lines up with a foundation's priorities."

At a brunch at the Grossinger-Klagsbrun home in Georgetown, on the next-to-final day of the festival, the filmmakers, the community engagement partners, the Filmfest DC staff and consultants, the award jurists, and funders gathered to celebrate. In thanking everyone and reiterating his vision for the festival, Gittens emphasized the potential of film, even in a time when we're challenged to make sense out of the nonsensical.

"I want the audience to be changed," said Gittens. "I want them to walk out of the screening thinking and feeling differently than when they walked in. And I think Justice Matters makes that happen."

The next day Grossinger announced the Justice Matters jurors' awards: best film, *150 Milligrams*, with an honorable mention for *The Good Postman* and the overall festival audience award for best documentary going to *Last Men in Aleppo*.

Kathryn Pyle is a regular contributor to PhilanTopic. Check out her other great posts for PhilanTopic [here](#).