

CASE STUDY



FIRE THROUGH DRY GRASS

a film by Alexis Neophytides and Andres "Jay" Molina
featuring the Reality Poets

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



How did a group of nearly 30 people come together across experiences to create an award-winning documentary film about nursing home residents during the coronavirus pandemic?

This case study provides an oral history of the filmmaking process behind the documentary ***Fire Through Dry Grass***, as well as learnings about collaboration, impact, accessibility, and centering care in all aspects of the process.

It also asks the questions: Who has agency and authority over a story, and how are creative decisions made during traumatic times? How can film teams, protagonists, and their communities work together with intention and care, prioritizing everyone's health and well-being, and navigating conflict as it inevitably arises? What resources might be needed to support accountable, inclusive filmmaking?

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BACKGROUND

Wearing snapback caps and Air Jordans, the Reality Poets don't look like typical nursing home residents. In ***Fire Through Dry Grass***, these Black and brown disabled artists document their lives on lockdown in Coler Rehabilitation and Nursing Care Center in New York City, during COVID. In the face of institutional neglect, they use their poetry and art to underscore the danger and imprisonment they feel, refusing to be abused, confined, and erased.

Fire Through Dry Grass was co-directed by Andres "Jay" Molina and Alexis Neophytides and made collaboratively with the Reality Poets and a small group of outside filmmakers, with contributions from community members including the OPEN DOORS team.

OPEN DOORS is a collective of disabled artists, nursing home residents, advocates, and allies led by the experiences and voices of the Reality Poets. The nonprofit initiative produces artistic collaborations, programs, and mobilizing campaigns focused on community building, disability justice, and gun violence prevention. When the Reality Poets were dehumanized and confined inside their nursing home during the pandemic, OPEN DOORS and the Poets organized the Nursing Home Lives Matter movement, advocating for all those living and working in long-term care, with a mission to end racism and ableism in long-term care.

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KEY LEARNINGS

1. CENTER CARE AND ACCESSIBILITY.

The team prioritized everyone's health and well-being, by adding more time to the post-production schedule, bringing on mental health support, and creating accessible practices that accommodated the entire group. They also created a Disability Justice Advocate position to support the Reality Poets with bureaucratic medical, legal, and benefit systems, to free up their time to allow them to participate more fully in the filmmaking and impact process.

2. HAVE HARD CONVERSATIONS.

When Co-Directors Alexis Neophytides and Andres "Jay" Molina and Producer Jennilie Brewster formed an LLC quickly to accommodate a funding deadline, the Reality Poets voiced concerns about the films' ownership and how money would be spent. The team leaned into the tension, shared information about the fundraising process, and made sure the Poets would get paid, and are now looking into how to change the ownership structure to better reflect their collaborative model. Rather than avoiding conflict, the team embraced the change to actively listen, learn from mistakes, and repair relationships.

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3. IN COMMUNICATION, REPETITION IS KEY.

The team revisited conversations and decisions with the film's participants more than once, which led to concrete changes, like the inclusion of Reality Poet Roy Watson in the film. People's interests, availability, and perspective may change, so it's important to check in regularly about the big picture as well as the day-to-day.

4. VALUE LIVED EXPERIENCE.

The Reality Poets played a central role in creating the film. The team tried to push back against the speed of the documentary industry to allow for collaboration while the Poets had medical treatments and were in unsafe living conditions. In some ways, this isn't a new filmmaking model. The documentary field already accommodates powerful people in the industry, and this team just recentered who has power—those with lived experience.

5. VALUE FILMMAKING EXPERIENCE.

The team could have benefitted from having more people with documentary production experience to distribute the technical pieces of work more evenly. Hiring Sarah Feuquay as co-producer helped enormously.

6. ALIGN UPFRONT ON VALUES AND WORKING STYLES WHEN POSSIBLE.

The team's work with Concept Artist and Animator Guillermo Mena was grounded in clarity around roles, expectations, decision-making, timelines, and a trusted facilitator. That structure, plus shared values of mutual respect, trust, humility, open communication, and confidence in each other's creative potential, allowed the collaboration to thrive. Other collaborations faced challenges and could have benefitted from taking more time to ensure each person's goals and working styles were aligned before committing to work together.

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7. IT'S OKAY TO CHANGE COURSE.

When Composer Gene Back and Reality Poet and Musician Vincent Pierce hit roadblocks while working on a song over Zoom, they brought another musician in to work with Vince in person. It helped to reevaluate mid-process and come up with new ideas to move the project forward.

8. DON'T BE AFRAID TO WORK ACROSS EXPERIENCES.

There's no magic formula to collaborating across experiences with a large group. As much as they planned in advance, things went awry. People made mistakes. Even when it was hard, the team worked through it, driven by a shared belief in the film, mission, and each other. Being their authentic, imperfect selves ultimately resulted in a better film and stronger relationships.

9. FIND NEW MEASURES OF SUPPORT.

It was helpful to have Consulting Producer Stephanie Palumbo from Peace is Loud serve as a bridge between the social justice and documentary film spaces, and to be available as a sounding board for individuals or to facilitate group conversations. This role should be further explored and defined for other projects.

10. LEARN FROM OTHERS' EXPERIENCES.

Bringing other film protagonists to talk to the Reality Poets helped them feel more prepared for how the film would change their lives and inspired more equitable practices, like Reality Poet Peter Yearwood's co-producer credit. The team also showed the film to select community partners to get feedback on representation before picture lock.

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CREATOR'S NOTE

In August 2021, in my work as Director of Film Impact and Innovation at Peace is Loud, I had a conversation with Fork Films' former Chief Creative Officer Kat Vecchio about their upcoming grantees. All of the films sounded compelling, but she highlighted one in particular: ***Fire Through Dry Grass***, which embraced a participatory model between seasoned documentarian Alexis Neophytides and one of its protagonists, self-taught filmmaker Andres "Jay" Molina. Alexis and Jay co-directed and collaborated with the film's participants across all phases of production. At the time, I suggested to Kat that the team should share their learnings about this process with the documentary community.

Two years later, we're doing just that—detailing the extraordinary collaboration that occurred on the film in a case study that delves into the team's embrace of care, community, and impact. The case study also includes key takeaways that might be applicable to other filmmakers, protagonists, and funders.

I joined the ***Fire*** team in January 2021 to help strengthen their foundation of equity, safety, and representation and lay the groundwork for an impact campaign. The role quickly expanded and gave me the incredible gift of witnessing the team's deep love and commitment to each other, as well as the shared mission of justice and liberation that fuels their work.

(cont.)

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My own process in writing this case study changed over time. At first, I planned to write this from my perspective, but quickly realized it didn't make sense for a singular author to share the story of a collective process. It needed to include everyone's voices to align with the film's ethos, but I hadn't budgeted enough time to interview everyone on the team. I learned that I needed to expand my own timeline to accommodate team participation, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, mirrors a learning on the film.

Of course, this case study can't possibly capture the complexity of making a collaborative film with nearly 30 people. And while I talked to the majority of the team, I didn't talk to everyone, so this only scratches the surface of each person's incredible and unique contribution to the film. Instead, I think of it as a window into some of the benefits, challenges, and learnings from the team's decision to forge an alternate filmmaking path and prioritize the community over the individual.

I'll close with a request from **Fire's** Co-Producer and protagonist Peter Yearwood: "I hope people read this and take it to heart, because the idea of making a film with everybody's participation isn't just a theory—this is how our team worked, and it worked well."

- STEPHANIE PALUMBO

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FILM SYNOPSIS

Fire Through Dry Grass uncovers in real-time the devastation experienced by residents of a New York City nursing home during the coronavirus pandemic. Co-Directors Alexis Neophytides and Andres “Jay” Molina take viewers inside Coler, on Roosevelt Island, where Jay lives with his fellow Reality Poets, a group of mostly gun violence survivors.

Wearing snapback caps and Air Jordans, Jay and the other Reality Poets don’t look like typical nursing home residents. They used to travel around the city sharing their art and hard-earned wisdom with youth. Now, using GoPros clamped to their wheelchairs, they document their harrowing experiences on “lock down.” COVID-positive patients are moved into their bedrooms; nurses fashion PPE out of garbage bags; refrigerated-trailer morgues hum outside residents’ windows. All the while public officials deny the suffering and dying behind Coler’s brick walls.

The Reality Poets’ rhymes flow throughout the film, underscoring their feelings that their home is now as dangerous as the streets they once ran and—as summer turns to fall turns to winter—that they’re prisoners without a release date. But instead of history repeating itself on this tiny island with a dark history of institutional neglect and abandonment, ***Fire Through Dry Grass*** shows these disabled Black and Brown artists refusing to be abused, confined, erased.

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TEAM



ANDRES "JAY" MOLINA
Co-Director,
Cinematographer,
Reality Poet



ALEXIS NEOPHYTIDES
Co-Director, Producer,
Cinematographer



JENNILIE BREWSTER
Producer,
OPEN DOORS founder



M'DAYA MELIANI
Editor



DIANA DIROY
Editor



PETER YEARWOOD
Co-Producer, Associate
Impact Producer,
Reality Poet



SARAH FEUQUAY
Co-Producer



VINCENT PIERCE
OPEN DOORS Director,
Musician, Impact
Strategist, Reality Poet



LEVAR "VAR" LAWRENCE
Reality Poet, OPEN DOORS
Design Team



**ALHASSAN "EL"
ABDULFATTAAH**
Reality Poet, OPEN DOORS
Design Team



FRANCENE BENJAMIN
Reality Poet



SHANNON NELSON
Reality Poet



**RAMON "KING TITO LOVE"
CRUZ**
Reality Poet

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THERESA WILLIAMS
Reality Poet



**ALEXANDRA LENORE
ASHWORTH (DZANA)**
Associate Producer,
Impact Coordinator



**ROSEMARY
MCDONNELL-HORITA**
Impact Producer



GUILLERMO MENA
Concept Artist and
Animator



GENE BACK
Composer



SARA BOLDER
Executive Producer



JIM LEBRECHT
Executive Producer



STEPHANIE PALUMBO
Consulting Producer,
Director of Impact and
Innovation at Peace is Loud



ALEX ESHELMAN
OPEN DOORS Associate
Director



ANNA BORES
Disability Justice
Advocate



MIKKO COOK
Movement Gardener



DAVID ONABANJO
Impact Assistant



GERARDO DEXTER CIPRIAN
OPEN DOORS Designer and
Editor, former OPEN DOORS
Co-Director

TIMELINE

2016:

OPEN DOORS + REALITY POETS FOUNDING

Jennilie Brewster began visiting Coler Rehabilitation and Nursing Care Center on Roosevelt Island and spending time with a group of its residents, including Andres “Jay” Molina, LeVar “Var” Lawrence, and Vincent Pierce. She set up a nonprofit initiative called OPEN DOORS, grounded in mutual care, respect, and friendship, and raised money to support the group’s creative education. Inspired by a visiting artist, they started writing poetry and named themselves the Reality Poets. Over time, the group expanded, and another Coler resident, Peter Yearwood, became a member and the Poets’ manager.

AUGUST 2019:

ALEXIS + JAY BEGIN COLLABORATING

Jay wanted to learn how to make motion graphics, so Jennilie found him a filmmaking mentor, Alexis Neophytides, a former Roosevelt Island resident who, in addition to co-creating and co-directing the documentary series *Neighborhood Slice*, had also designed a filmmaking program for The TEAK Fellowship, where she taught for nine years. OPEN DOORS hired her to work with Jay on bringing his projects from conception to reality.

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JAY: I used to watch a lot of live TV, so I would see commercials with graphics, and it was always in my mind—how do you do that? I started researching and learned After Effects is one of the tools you need. I found YouTube tutorials that guide you through teaching yourself, and when Jennilie saw my interest in that she bought a subscription through OPEN DOORS. I taught myself Premiere Pro, After Effects, and Photoshop.

ALEXIS: In August 2019, Jay had gotten a grant through OPEN DOORS to work with a filmmaker, so I went over to meet him and we hit it off.

JAY: She helped me a lot with a lot of stuff. I did a project in which I animated some of my poems. After each line of the poem, she wrote down possible images that I could use, and I found images from the internet and manipulated them into something that reflected a poem. She also filmed interviews with the Reality Poets about our work with OPEN DOORS.

ALEXIS: We did storyboards together for his visual poetry, and I helped him film stuff. He wanted to make a film about the Reality Poets. Then the pandemic happened.

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MARCH 2020: COVID HITS COLER

When the pandemic hit New York City in March 2020, the city began housing COVID-19 patients in a shadow hospital, the Roosevelt Medical Center, within Coler's walls, while simultaneously placing Coler's residents under lockdown.

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FRANCENE BENJAMIN: We couldn't meet in person, so we had Zoom meetings twice a week to talk about what we were going through. The hardest was when someone died. We were missing people from the group, and no one would tell us the truth about what was going on.

PETE: We were just thinking about—how the hell are we gonna survive this? We were in survival mode, not thinking about everything it takes to make a movie. We just wanted the world to know.

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APRIL 2020: FIRE THROUGH DRY GRASS ORIGINATES

When a COVID patient was put in Jay's room with him, he and Jennilie had the idea to document and share what was happening to try to save the Poets' lives.

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JENNILIE: A couple weeks into lockdown, as OPEN DOORS had moved our programming to virtual, the Poets were talking about their experience—COVID patients coming in, no separation, no PPE—and a lightbulb went off in my head: We're in an unprecedented historical moment where they've shut everyone out of nursing homes, and I'm getting video footage from people inside living through it. The world needs to see this. Jay and I had a conversation about making a film and bringing Alexis in as his co-director. I said, "Alexis won't be your teacher, she'll be your partner—do you want to invite her to help tell this story?"

JAY: They put a COVID patient in my room. I was feeling stressed out, like, these people don't really give a fuck. They don't care about my life. I called Jennilie and talked to her about the situation, and she noticed my anxiety. She said, "Jay, let's make a movie." I was like, "I can't make a movie." She said, "Why don't we invite Alexis?" That's when I said, "Yes, definitely, we're gonna get this done."

ALEXIS: When they called me, I didn't hesitate, because I was worried about Jay. We wanted it to be a quick turnaround and get something out to show what was happening in there—to save their lives.

VINCE: Jay brought the idea of documenting everything to the Reality Poets at an OPEN DOORS meeting. We wanted people to know about the neglect and abuse, but not only that—what the staff was going through too.

JAY: We started having ideas of things to film besides Zoom meetings. Anything I could film on the inside, I filmed. Anything we needed to film on the outside, Alexis filmed.

ALEXIS: I pulled three hours from all the Zooms OPEN DOORS had filmed, and then our first editor, Diana Diroy, came in, and we put together a 15 minute selects reel. Then Jay did some early animations, since he'd been doing that in his visual poetry. We submitted it to Field of Vision, and they gave us our first grant. It was amazing to have validation that other people cared about the story. We thought we were making a short, but from the beginning, Jay was like, "I think we have a feature here."

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“Vince fought for us. Coler’s CEO told us we couldn’t leave, and Vince kept going back, pushing, writing emails, saying, “You have to let us out. We need to breathe.”

FRANCENE

JULY 2020: NURSING HOME LIVES MATTER LAUNCHES

Nursing Home Lives Matter launched and demanded the removal of Coler’s CEO, open lines of communication between residents, staff, and administration, and the implementation of safety protocols. In response, the president and CEO of New York City Health and Hospitals emailed Vince and set a meeting.

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VINCE: When Coler first had one positive patient, I remember thinking that they would set up a plan for us, but I didn’t know they were setting up a plan to bring COVID patients in. People started dying around us, and I was like, “Damn, somebody gotta speak up.” It made me go hard. I wrote a petition and we had an article in Mother Jones, but no one was listening until two travel nurses, who were white women, wrote to the New York Post. Then everyone started contacting us in support of Nursing Home Lives Matter. Once the community got behind it, I realized it could be a movement.

FRANCENE: Some days I wanted to just break my window and jump outside. Vince fought for us. Coler’s CEO told us we couldn’t leave, and Vince kept going back, pushing, writing emails, saying, “You have to let us out. We need to breathe.”

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WINTER 2020: THE FILM BECOMES A FEATURE

The team applied to the ITVS open call for funding and was accepted, and the film evolved from a short into a feature. Executive Producer Sara Bolder also secured a large donation from an individual donor. Jay, Alexis, and Jennilie formed an LLC for the project to accept the money they raised for the film.

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JAY: The vision changed as we went. When we started reviewing the footage, I planted the idea that we should show the path each of the Reality Poets went through before we got to Coler.

JENNILIE: Initially we had a small budget, but that changed when we contracted with ITVS and it shifted into a feature, which is what Jay wanted, and it was great once we had the funds to do it. But it was a crash course in how to make a film under duress.

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DECEMBER 2020: THE COMMUNITY RALLIES TO PROTECT THE POETS

After hearing that COVID patients might be housed inside Coler again, Nursing Home Lives Matter held its first rally, with the Roosevelt Island community, elected officials, and press in attendance. On the same day, NYC Health + Hospitals announced they would not bring COVID patients to Coler's facility.

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APRIL 2021: LOCKDOWN IS LIFTED

After 388 days, thanks to the Nursing Home Lives Matter movement, Coler lifted their restrictions and residents were finally able to leave the nursing home.

JANUARY 2022: PEACE IS LOUD JOINS THE TEAM

Peace is Loud joined the project to support the team's health and well-being, and to lay groundwork for the film's impact campaign.

FALL 2023: THEATRICAL & BROADCAST PREMIERES

The film premiered at theaters in New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and on POV on PBS stations across the United States.

OCTOBER 2021: M'DAYA MELIANI JOINS THE TEAM

The film's original editor, Diana Diroy, left the project due to a prior commitment, and M'Daya Meliani came on as editor.

JULY 2023: WORLD PREMIERE

Fire Through Dry Grass had its world premiere at BlackStar Film Festival and won the Best Feature Documentary award. The festival, which uplifts the work of Black, Brown, and Indigenous artists, was a shared space to recognize not only the trauma the Poets endured but also the power they hold.

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FRANCENE: When I saw myself in the film, I felt bubbly inside. I said, "Oh my God, really, that's me?" Never in my wildest dreams could I have known it would become this.

PETE: This was the right place to premiere. The audience's standing ovation, their reaction to certain parts of the film, and the fact that they were people of color who might come from communities like ours told me that they understand the struggle. The whole theater just erupted at the end of the film. We saw how important this issue is for people, how it's still relevant for them. It was healing for the Poets—the support we received at BlackStar was just the thing we needed for our confidence.

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KEY THEMES:

CARE

FOUNDATION OF CARE

The film production's care-centered practices originated with the Reality Poets's friendships and the core values of OPEN DOORS.

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VINCE: We were always hanging out, but when OPEN DOORS started and we became the Reality Poets, we started hearing each other's stories and I learned things about them I didn't know before. Having a better sense of who we all are made our bonds grow closer.

PETE: Jennilie and OPEN DOORS came into my life at a time when I needed something to make my life worth living. I felt needed and appreciated in that space, because I was doing things for other people.

ALEXIS: The ethos of OPEN DOORS influenced the ethos of the film—we got on board with the spirit of collaboration and making community art.

PETE: We've always had agency at OPEN DOORS. All it takes is one OPEN DOORS member to say, “I don't feel good about this,” and it doesn't get done. And the people that were making the movie were constantly reminding us that if we didn't feel right about something, we could do it a different way. They wanted to make sure we were good mentally and physically. So we went into it willingly with our hearts because we knew that people cared about us.

ALEXANDRA LENORE ASHWORTH (DZANA): Everything was done with the utmost intention of care.

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- 19 CARE
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ON THE FOUNDATION OF CARE:

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ALEXIS: The Poets love each other, and they take care of each other. The seeds were there, and then it was kind of miraculous—most of the people the film attracted shared similar values.

VINCE: When we started bringing in people from outside, like Diana and M'Daya and Stephanie, it became this organic thing where everybody connected because of the power of the film and our communication.

SARA BOLDER: The care for one another despite the many bumps in the road comes from the Poets' care for each other even though they've had bumps in the road, too. Mutual aid is a core value of disability justice. Jay articulates it in the film when he says, "If someone doesn't come down one day, the Poets are like, 'Where are you?'" And we watch him adjust Var's cigarette. It's not that I'm helping you—we are in this together, and together we experience joy, community, sorrow, pain, anger, and we're stronger together.

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"They wanted to make sure we were good mentally and physically. So we went into it willingly with our hearts because we knew that people cared about us."

PETE

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CORE VALUES

The team didn't explicitly define core values at the project's inception, but two values—care for the Poets and a drive to get their story out—were at the heart of the collaboration. The team also prioritized process over product; accommodated each other's medical needs and worked at a healthy pace; and integrated equity, safety, and representation into their practices. At times, this meant pushing back against the speed of the documentary industry, explicitly asking outsiders for more time and reasonable accommodations.

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SARA B.: Everyone shared a belief in the value of the Poets' experience. You would think that would be the norm on every film, but it's not. This was a mission. A shared mission. That was the power of this experience—that despite our challenges, there was this really deep-seated belief in each other, the importance of this story, the process of making this film, and the potential for this to make a difference.

M'DAYA MELIANI: We all had a deep love and respect for the Poets and a passion to get the story out with the understanding that this is life and death. And because of that, this process had a much more humane approach. In the disability world, you do check-ins to see how everyone's feeling mentally and physically every time you meet. There are a lot of non-disabled spaces where you don't do that and just go straight to work like machines. The personal is ignored and hence individual needs and the deeper bonds between the team don't get formed, especially when working remotely. I've worked on other jobs for years without building relationships like these. I genuinely love Jay and Alexis and treasure our friendship after this experience.

SARAH FEUQUAY: OPEN DOORS and the film team both really cared about the Poets' health. Alexis made sure we accommodated Jay's dialysis schedule, which took extra labor and logistics, and had an understanding of his needs.

ANNA BORES: The Poets' medical needs and disability was always factored into the time things would take.

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ON CORE VALUES:

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GUILLERMO “GUILLE” MENA: At some points in the process, due to health issues and dialysis treatment, Jay wasn’t as available, so we adapted all of our processes to having more frequent meetings with Alexis and then knowing when we could consult with Jay. The slower pace was totally helpful. But even before his dialysis, Jay and Alexis worked in a relaxed way that helped me get comfortable, like I was working between friends. I felt there was something unusual with the way we were making things, but I said I won’t question this too much because it’s feeling good. Maybe it’s a moment to pay attention to that when everything is going in this way of productivity and technology. This collaboration is only possible if we are human.

SARA B.: We needed to budget more time to accommodate a slower process, and time equals money. How do we balance this in a capitalist society that values production, productivity, and speed? When documentary funding is harder than usual and distribution is almost nonexistent?

M’DAYA: Alexis would say that the process was more important than the product, and for me too, that was the most important thing—that the edit was serving this ethos of collaboration. A lot of times you lose sight of that in post-production.

ALEXIS: We also worked at a slower pace because we had to show the film to so many people and get feedback from each of them. We wanted the Reality Poets to be really involved. I got feedback from someone who was like, “The film first, the film first!” That’s not this project. We are going to make our best possible film, but a lot of the things we did might not make for someone else’s best film. We did the best for all of us as a group.

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19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**KEY THEMES:****COLLABORATION****CO-DIRECTORS ALEXIS AND JAY**

Alexis and Jay's partnership as co-directors spanned identities, experiences, and perspectives. Alexis is a white, able-bodied woman from New York City with over fifteen years of filmmaking experience; Jay is a man of color who uses a wheelchair and grew up in the Dominican Republic, and is a self-taught filmmaker. They shared a commitment to care for one another and their larger team, a desire to put process before product, and a willingness to have hard conversations. Together, they made a film that neither could have made on their own.

In the early days of production, Jay was living under lockdown in Coler and trying to protect his own life while COVID patients were placed in the facility. But even when lockdown ended, he was on a dialysis schedule that left him feeling unwell and very fatigued. He and Alexis figured out a way to collaborate that accommodated his health and availability, while still moving the project forward.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON ALEXIS AND JAY'S COLLABORATION:**

JAY: Alexis is more experienced than me, so I thought, "Alright, I'm going to learn a lot here." But she was never like, "I'm gonna do this because I'm better than you." We come from two different sides of life, but we absolutely had equal voices in decision making. Alexis asked me a lot, "Jay, what is your vision?"

ALEXIS: Jay brought his lived experience and artistic input. Merging our aesthetics and forging our collective voice became another parameter of our filmmaking. It was a challenge not to be like, "Here's my total voice," but I became more open, taking the seeds of things we both liked and dreaming of things in different ways. I think in the end it allowed us to create a shared style and aesthetic that is unique to this film.

JAY: For a while, I was dealing with dialysis bad. I was not feeling good and didn't want to be bothered. There were a lot of meetings where I said, "Yes, let's do that, bye," because I needed rest. But Alexis would always call me back the next day and talk it through and said if I didn't like it, we could go another way. I'd take that into consideration, do some research, and let her know what I thought. We still had our times where I was like, "What the fuck?" and she was like, "What the fuck?" but we always stuck together. Before we made a decision, we both had to agree with it. There was no, "This is what I wanna do." It was, "This is what we wanna do."

ALEXIS: We went from a mentorship to a partnership and along the way developed a really close friendship, which I think is a lovely thing to come out of this. It's just as important as making a film, if not more.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

THE REALITY POETS

The Reality Poets played a central role in creating the film. Some, like Jay and Pete, had “formal” titles on the film team, but all watched cuts, gave feedback, and made decisions about what parts of their own stories would appear on screen.

PETE: We had agency throughout the process of making this movie. We were at the meetings and got to make decisions. We got to watch cuts and say what we were good with and what we wanted to change. The film team would listen to us—they didn’t just have us there to look good. I was asked at every turn, “Do you feel comfortable talking about this? Are you sure?” The fact that the co-director was also a Reality Poet and a patient at Coler made it even more real. He understood what we were going through.

JAY: The Poets met to hang out and talk every day. I would tell them what’s going on with the movie, and they’d tell me right there if they had a suggestion. When we started working with M’Daya, whenever she had a new cut of the film, we’d send it to all the Poets. We always tried to respect their wishes because it’s them in the film. Like, “Alright, we like it, but if you don’t want it, we’ll take it out.”

VINCE: Every time there was a new cut of the film, the Poets watched it and got together to talk it through with Alexis and Jay. Every cut came back stronger.

M’DAYA: Being able to get feedback from the Reality Poets was essential. I’m taking that model with me and advocating to show cuts to the participants on new projects.

ALEXIS: Many of our conversations in the edit room were about Jennilie and the Poets’ feedback. What they said mattered. A lot.

ALHASSAN “EL” ABDULFATTAH: I believe it’s an innovative way of filmmaking that doesn’t exclude any people that are actually in the community. We didn’t need a Hollywood budget—we did a lot with what we had, were supportive of one another, and stayed on message.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

ON COLLABORATION WITH THE REALITY POETS:

PETE: The reason Jennilie asked me to be co-producer and associate impact producer is that she needed my input, my lived experience. She knew I had a big mouth and what I had to contribute was important to the film.

ALEXIS: Var is so wonderful—we had some great conversations which you see in the film, like the one where he’s singing the Mr. Rogers song. We were talking on Zoom one day and he said there was a town hall happening in the courtyard, and I was like, “Do you wanna go out and see what it is?” And he went out and [former Coler CEO Robert] Hughes was there, and this really intense interaction happened between them.

JAY: Var, Pete, Vince, and me—we take turns telling the story. Each one of us had a background story and an arc.

PETE: Who’s telling the story? The Reality Poets are telling our story. Who’s putting the movie together? Alexis and Jay. But there can’t be any question that it’s our story. We lived through this.



“When we started working with M’Daya, whenever she had a new cut of the film, we’d send it to all the Poets. We always tried to respect their wishes because it’s them in the film.”

JAY

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

REALITY POET COLLABORATIONS

In addition to Alexis and Jay's partnership, some of the Poets had their own collaborations with artists and musicians. Guillermo ("Guille") Mena, an Argentinian artist, worked on the film's teaser poster with EL and Var, and the film's composer, Gene Back, collaborated with Vince on a few songs for the film.

While Guille, EL, and Var, thrived despite geographic distance, Gene and Vince had challenges connecting over Zoom. Rather than abandon the collaboration, they changed direction and invited another musician, Mark Marshall, to join Vince in the studio in person.

ALEXIS: Guille is such a delight. He was there to create art together with no ego—he wanted to uplift everyone. He really cares about the process.

GUILLE: I was afraid of not fulfilling Jay or EL and Var's expectations, and I never underestimated their input. Being in that humble position helped me to connect more easily with them, and they had a respectful way of listening to me. I researched poster activism and the Black Lives Matter movement, but I knew I was very far away, so I treated it carefully—how can I share this with the Poets and also acknowledge that maybe they know a lot of this already? They had a lot of information but different information, so it was a complement, not a vertical teaching moment. I found their experience of what they're consuming visually in everyday life in New York really interesting, and it informed a wide range of possibilities.

EL: We wanted the poster to have an authentic look, and Guille's artwork is very raw and authentic. We had these little flames sketched out to highlight the title itself.

SARAH F.: We laid out a clear approval process and structure in advance. We agreed that Guille and Alexis would work closely on the first poster drafts, with Jay giving feedback. Once they all approved it, they'd send it to the OPEN DOORS design team, Var and EL, to have feedback sessions with Guille. Having that clarity helped it go really well. We also brought in Dexter [Ciprian] to facilitate the conversations, because we valued his existing relationship with the Poets and his comfort level in asking for feedback.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON REALITY POET COLLABORATIONS:**

EL: Our communication and Zoom meetings worked well. We had a variety of pictures and color schemes to choose from and narrowed down our selection together. We'd give input, like, "I like this one, but let's try it with another type of style." It made it easier than having one option and a lot of disagreement.

VINCE: I never wrote a song for a documentary, so I wanted guidance from people that did it before. At first I teamed up with Gene, and he was great, but he was across the country and I work better in person than over Zoom.

GENE: Initially, the idea was to trade files, but I underestimated how challenging communication would be. I tried sending Vince some ideas so he could add beats, and I'd assemble it together, but that didn't work either. It would've been ideal for me to be there in person, but we didn't have the budget for that, on top of our collaboration starting during peak pandemic. So I eventually asked my friend Mark Marshall, who lives in Brooklyn, to work with Vince in the studio once it was safe enough to do so. Bringing him in was huge.

VINCE: Once I met with Mark in person, it fell into place. He showed me how to do a song that's part of a score—there's a big difference when you're making a beat versus making a beat to a scene. We took beats that I had written and added new sounds to them. It became an equal partnership.

GENE: I learned that in a creative collaboration, it's so important to have a personal, physical closeness and develop a true understanding of each other's creative perspective.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

FORMING AN LLC AND FUNDRAISING

When the film team started fundraising to turn the short film into a feature-length documentary, Alexis, Jay, and Jennilie formed an LLC to be able to receive money. Shortly after, the team received substantial funding from ITVS, and the Reality Poets had questions about where the money was going, especially since the ITVS contract prohibited the team from paying the Poets out of this production budget solely for participating in the film.

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JENNILIE: I stand by the decision because the benefits to the community far outweigh the cost to my own sense of justice, but in that moment when we made the LLC, I felt like I was making a deal with the devil. In a sense, I was going to own Var and Vince and Pete's stories, and the reason it was going to be in my name instead of theirs was that I was in the position to make it happen. We talked about all of this with them, and they were like, "Yeah, make the film," but it wasn't talked about enough. At the same time, I could've kept doing this work for another ten years and would not have brought as much money to OPEN DOORS. I believe in reparations as more than a thought experiment—what does actual redistribution of wealth look like? I've had benefits in my life from white privilege, and it's important for me not to benefit from the sale of the film. If we'd had more time to talk about these things from the outset, it would've helped in the long run.

SARA B.: At some point, people started having questions—we're bringing in all of this money, and more kept coming. Where is it going?

ALEXIS: I didn't realize how confused everyone was gonna be. This was a real learning point for me. We explained what ITVS was, and I thought we were talking to everyone and filling them in along the way, but it wasn't enough. I didn't realize that we needed to start the conversation all the way at the beginning. To the Poets' credit, they said something. I think not moving to the speed of the film world is really important, but that was something we didn't have any experience with at that point. We didn't assume that everyone in the group knew everything, but as Jennilie says, repetition is key. Sometimes one conversation is not enough.

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19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON FUNDRAISING:**

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VINCE: It wasn't communicated the right way in the beginning, but once the concern was brought up, they really explained what they were aiming to do. That conversation helped us at a time because we said, "Before shit happens, we gotta sit down as a team and explain what's happening from the beginning." We nipped things in the bud before they started brewing.

JENNILIE: Later Vince said, "This is what happens in families. You have conflict. Then you make up and get over it." It also lit a fire under us to figure out how else we could pay everyone and create more opportunities for people to have a role in making the film. We went into action around those uncomfortable feelings.

PETE: After that, I liked the transparency in our process. The film team would say, "We got this amount of money, and this is what it's going to be used for."

ALEXIS: One big takeaway is that it's okay to fuck up. It actually helped build trust on the team, that the Poets could say something and we could all talk about it and apologize and discuss how we could do things better. That's important in all relationships.

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"We explained what ITVS was, and I thought we were talking to everyone and filling them in along the way, but it wasn't enough. I didn't realize that we needed to start the conversation all the way at the beginning."

ALEXIS

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

MAKING A FILM ACROSS COMMUNITIES

This filmmaking process became, in many ways, a community project with a large group of collaborators. At times, the lines between all of the entities—OPEN DOORS, Nursing Home Lives Matter, the Reality Poets, and the film team—blurred, presenting both challenges and opportunities. The film received an influx of funds while OPEN DOORS was fundraising for their own programs. Jennilie struggled to define her role as producer when she was also a film participant. Listening to and honoring the voices of a large community at times made it hard for Alexis and Jay to hone in on their artistic voice. What ultimately kept the team together was continual communication—a willingness to direct these tensions head on and find shared solutions.

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ALEXIS: There's a venn diagram of OPEN DOORS and *Fire Through Dry Grass*, and at times, the overlapping space grew or shrank. Right now it's very tight, but it's been difficult to figure out who's doing what or who's paying for what.

ALEX ESHELMAN: I knew the film had more money than OPEN DOORS. That was a challenge. But I also knew the film could help raise money for OPEN DOORS.

DZANA: OPEN DOORS had a lot of excitement around the film and also wanted to remind people that it's not the only thing they were doing. There was always an understanding that we would utilize the film to create movement around things that are important to OPEN DOORS. What's hard—and that's why we have impact producers—is, how do you do that, especially before the film is released?

M'DAYA: One of the hardest things was defining how many people were involved and who was instrumental in making the actions in the film happen. We anchored the film in the world of four Reality Poets, but Jennilie and Dexter were also doing a lot of the heavy lifting in real life.

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19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

ON MAKING A FILM ACROSS COMMUNITIES:

JENNILIE: I helped produce *Nursing Home Lives Matter*, which in some ways felt bigger than the film. The Poets were stuck in there, in danger. In addition to advocating for their rights, I lived on the island and brought fresh bread to Francene and cheese and raisins to Pete. These were my friends. I loved them, and I was afraid for their lives, so I was in it for the movement, and the film was a way to get the word out. But when we got out of the initial crisis, our original cause—NHLM—for a while seemed almost eclipsed by chasing film world success.

ALEXIS: I think at times Jennilie identified more as a film participant than a producer and was struggling with her representation in the story.

JENNILIE: The title of Producer created a lot of tension in me. In general, I don't think a white person has a place making art about Black trauma. Claudia Rankine's book *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* begins with an Aimé Césaire quote: "A man who wails is not a dancing bear." The idea of making spectacle or entertainment—that's not the film we made, but I'm so sensitive to that possibility. It helped me to read the Documentary Accountability Working Group's framework and have documentary participants like Margie Ratliff meet with us and share their experiences, because I was able to identify with them. And we built a container that had places for me to go for support—calls with Stephanie, Sara, the therapists.

DZANA: We're a community of many people and what's incredible is we actually try to support each other.

SARAH F.: I integrated resources on working equitably from The Management Center into my job, like having one-on-one check-ins. Sometimes people feel more comfortable talking openly in individual conversations than group meetings.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON MAKING A FILM ACROSS COMMUNITIES:**

M'DAYA: Working with a nonprofit and non-filmmakers was a huge asset, yet we didn't always speak the same language. It would've benefitted us to be able to be in person a few more times to iron out the kinks, but we had to be remote because of COVID. I think that was kind of the beast of it—this aspect of collaboration is so important, but balancing all of the voices and everyone's needs can be quite complicated. That labor in and of itself can be a lot, in addition to the heavy lifting of editing a film. This was all new territory for us, but in the end, I think that all of our communication brought us to a solid understanding of each other and the film.

ALEXIS: There were a lot of voices on this project giving feedback. At times I felt my own voice get diluted, or confused, in trying to listen to everyone else's voice. Maybe holistically for the film, that was good, but at times it was challenging to give myself the creative space to think about how to make things work, because I was buzzing with everyone else's ideas and knew it was important to take them all into consideration. It was extremely challenging.

PETE: I told Alexis and Jay, "You're getting a lot of feedback. You'll get fifty different pieces of feedback from fifty different people. Just make the best film you can. Go with your gut, go with your vision. You won't be able to please everyone. Make the one you think is good."



"I knew the film had more money than OPEN DOORS. That was a challenge. But I also knew the film could help raise money for OPEN DOORS."

ALEX ESHELMAN



19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

WORKING ACROSS EXPERIENCES

Everyone on the team brought something valuable to the project—a background in filmmaking, experience with social justice organizing, intimate knowledge of how nursing homes are run, artistic vision, a desire to create change. But it requires extra time, care, and communication to ensure everyone can thrive in a collaborative environment.

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JAY: There was a time in the middle of the whole process in which I was feeling discouraged and wanted to give up. I'd see a cut and say, "This is it!" And Alexis would say, "I don't like this," and I'd be like, "What the fuck?"

ALEXIS: It was an adjustment to shift from being Jay's mentor to working together as partners. I learned in school that you do something first and it's not finished. You get feedback and you refine it. But it was kind of mind-blowing to Jay that we'd work on a film for this many years, with so many rounds of feedback and revisions. I relate to it because it's hard getting feedback, but I will redo something 100 times until I feel like it's working. It was really tricky for me to figure that out and not be overbearing, but also try to distill what Jay was saying since he wasn't used to giving feedback.

JAY: We would talk about it, and then I'd see the big picture and why things happened, and actually, we made a better film because we took our time.

SARA B.: Creating with a team is very hard and can feel counterproductive at times, but what does it mean when people are giving you their life stories and hearts and souls and it's them—it's them, it's not you—and yet you're the creator, with others? Since Alexis was one of the only people on the team with prior documentary experience, she did the majority of the traditional filmmaking work. But it's not just that she put in longer hours. She also brought exceptional skills and talent, and poured her own heart and soul into the process. Without Alexis, this film isn't the film it is.

M'DAYA: I think it would've been beneficial for Alexis to have an assistant. It helped enormously when Sarah Feuquay was hired as co-producer.

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19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

ON WORKING ACROSS EXPERIENCES:

ALEXIS: We were all figuring it out together. It was a difficult process to make a film in this way, to take in feedback from so many people, and to have so many artistic collaborations going on at once. Personally, I felt a lot of pressure to manage all these elements, and a lot of weight from the responsibility of it all. At times, in the thick of it, I felt lonely. Hiring Sarah was a pivotal moment for me. She did amazing work, but also I felt like I was being seen, and that was meaningful. It comes back to care. I was putting in all of this care for everyone else, but I didn't look at the care I needed, too.

SARAH F.: The full team wasn't always engaged in the day to day, and they shouldn't have to be—communication is key. I tried to give people information and they could decide how much to engage with it. Like, I would invite people to meetings but indicate that it was optional.

DZANA: Not everybody needs or wants to be film savvy, and at the same time that doesn't mean that people shouldn't be up to date. But there's so much information. How much do we need to download to everyone, and how much do we say, "You don't need to take on this responsibility, but if it percolates any ideas, you're welcome to share them?"

SARAH F.: We've talked about how this film created a new model of production, but I would actually say that this is not a new model of production. In the documentary industry, we're used to making accommodations for people, working around scheduling, identifying what top line items and approvals we need from people with limited availability. This is just about recentering who those folks are. Instead of valuing people who bring finances or prestige to a project, we're valuing their lived experiences. You don't have to change much except for who you're accommodating.

DZANA: We had people with different levels of knowledge about film trying to get on the same page, and I admired and learned from the effort to teach people who wanted to learn more. But you do not have to be a director of a film to hold power or knowledge. If a community or participant doesn't want to, they shouldn't have to take on traditional film roles in order to be valuable in the eyes of the industry, as long as conversations are happening about what story's being told, how it's being told, how decisions are being made. That should never have been only a director's decision anyway.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON WORKING ACROSS EXPERIENCES:**

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ALEXIS: We all come with different kinds of experience that have value, but the neoliberalist society that we're living in values productivity and education over other types of experiences that are often deemed "not professional." That's bullshit.

DZANA: There are multiple cultures and communities within our community. We're trying to communicate across experiences. Each of us needs to recognize our differences but try not to be scared of them. We should be aware of them and bring them up, and also we should not let them stop us, particularly those of us with privilege, from utilizing the privilege in a way that's supportive.

SARA B.: I can bring the privilege of the incredible experience I've had with Crip Camp. I know funders want to know what I'm working on. That's what I should be doing if it's acceptable to whoever is benefitting from the project—that's the point of having access to power. It's a pleasure to share the power. When I look at who's on this team, across race, class, ability, chronic illness, everything—and that this film emerged and it's fucking awesome and it already has helped change things—I'm still smiling about it.

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"Not everybody needs or wants to be film savvy, and at the same time that doesn't mean that people shouldn't be up to date."

DZANA

19 CARE 23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

COMMUNICATION

In order to work collaboratively, the team needed to prioritize communication, which encompassed group meetings, one-on-one conversations, repetition, and, maybe most importantly, having hard conversations. Stephanie's also supported the team as a sounding board in one-on-one conversations, where they made plans to resolve tensions, and by facilitating dialogues as needed.

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ANNA: We had a “big picture check-in” every Wednesday at OPEN DOORS. Great things came from those conversations. We would talk things out and arrive at a solution. I’d never worked at a job where there was a dedicated time to talk about how you were feeling.

SARAH F.: When I joined the team, I led a conversation about what people’s hopes and dreams and expectations were around this film. The purpose wasn’t to make a decision about something—it was to know what was important to everybody so we could keep those ideas at the center of our work.

JENNILIE: These conversations need to be ongoing dialogues. Repetition is key. It needs to be talked about and revisited again and again. We needed to have somebody from the beginning whose job it was to keep that communication flowing.

ANNA: It sounds obvious, but it was important to make sure everyone was in the loop. Sometimes you’re so in the loop that you don’t even realize that other people aren’t. It was really easy for everyone at Coler because they’d see each other in the hallway, but we needed to make sure to communicate with the Poets who don’t live there. It’s okay to repeat things and build in extra reminders just in case.

DZANA: Sometimes the film itself is actually not the most important thing—the collaboration is. And for that to succeed, people need to hash things out and not be afraid, or acknowledge when you are afraid and try to be gentle with each other, but not pretend there’s no conflict. It helps to make space, like, “Hey, there was tension there. Do you want to talk about it? How can we support you right now?”

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19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON COMMUNICATION:**

M'DAYA: To get through those rough moments, we had to communicate openly and patiently, and not just throw in the towel. Jay and Alexis are honest and not conflict-averse, and that really helped because we came out of editorial challenges with a deeper level of trust, which is so key to a successful partnership between editors and directors. It also helped that Stephanie had one-on-one communications with the team and worked through things with people on the side—there was a lot going on to resolve tension that not everybody was part of.

JENNILIE: Having Stephanie's voice in the mix was essential to the success of the project, and, frankly, my own mental health, because she was a bridge between social justice and documentary filmmaking, translating between those two worlds.

SARA B.: This whole thing has been a growing, changing organism with a lot of group dynamics. We're a huge group, maybe larger than other films with similar approaches, and it grew organically—it was gonna be 15 minutes, then bigger money came in and it's gonna be a feature, oh, it's gonna be on TV. All of that growth and success creates tensions. Having a "Stephanie type" is crucial. She wasn't part of the creative team. She wasn't a participant. She was an outside voice who earned trust relatively quickly, and could look at things going on and point out, "Hmm, should we have a conversation?" And people were like, "Thank god Stephanie is bringing this up." It's easier to avoid this stuff—you're moving forward, on a deadline, gotta get something to a distributor. It's easy to stay on that train. It's clear that this was critical to the success of this whole experience, but I have trouble articulating what this role is—what would it look like on a similar project? Who would be the "Stephanie"?

DZANA: The conversations Stephanie had with Pete about impact and Alexis and Jay had about filmmaking—it's not just mentorship. Support, care, and communication are so important. The film is the vehicle for the message, but you're enacting it in every interaction you have in the community.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON COMMUNICATION:**

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M'DAYA: There was such a human aspect here—every person who participated was important to the process. We would cry on Zooms, or laugh, or just have these profound moments. You couldn't ignore the realness talking to Jay in Coler while the Poets are still facing shit and people are in the ICU. It's not about the business of making a film. We're humans and life hangs in the balance. Process over product. People over product.

PETE: What we went through at Coler, people went through worse. This is why we did this. You were only hearing on the news that they wanted you to hear. Cuomo tried to cover up the amount of deaths. We tried to bring that story to light, from the people who lived it, you see it in real time. You see us go through this shit. We're not telling a story. We're living a story.

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"Jay and Alexis are honest and not conflict-averse, and that really helped because we came out of editorial challenges with a deeper level of trust, which is so key to a successful partnership between editors and directors."

M'DAYA

19	<u>CARE</u>
23	<u>COLLABORATION</u>
40	<u>IMPACT</u>

KEY THEMES:

IMPACT

EQUITY, SAFETY, AND REPRESENTATION

Film impact nonprofit Peace is Loud joined the team to help strengthen the foundation of equity, safety, and representation already set by the film team and OPEN DOORS, and to lay the groundwork for an impact campaign. They initially signed on for a short-term, paid consultancy but quickly evolved into a long-term, pro bono commitment.

To begin, Stephanie Palumbo set one-on-one conversations with all of the Reality Poets and some members of the film team, to learn about what was working well and what additional support might be needed. She then created a document echoing back what she heard and recommending next steps. OPEN DOORS and the film team implemented these suggestions, and Stephanie continued working with the team to actualize some of them, as well as build line items like mental health care, fees for the Poets, and a Disability Justice Advocate into the impact budget. **(A summary of this document can be found in the Appendix of this case study.)**

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JENNILIE: It was very helpful to have an intellectual framework about how we care for each other and get specific in a supporting document to share with the team. That document informed the work because it was useful and clear and operational—like, these are specific, concrete things you can do to ensure we have equity, safety, and representation in our processes.

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- 19 CARE
- 23 COLLABORATION
- 40 IMPACT

TRAUMA, HEALING, AND GROWTH

In the early days of filming, the team worked urgently to try to save the Reality Poets' lives, which left little time to talk about shared values or set up collaborative work processes. Stephanie's initial conversations with the team surfaced the need to bring on mental health support. Her colleague at Peace is Loud, Florencia Varela, found **The Liberated Us**, a therapeutic practice founded by Tanisha Christie that focuses on BIPOC and immigrant communities and centers people's liberation through their stories. They agreed to a sliding scale rate for the Reality Poets and members of the film team and OPEN DOORS, and their sessions were funded by Perspective Fund. Not everyone decided to move forward, but those who did found the process transformative. But even those who didn't work with therapists were still changed by participating in the filmmaking process or the Nursing Home Lives Matter movement, sharing their stories, or working through relationship ruptures and repair.

JENNILIE: We started recording Zoom meetings in April 2020. It was an extremely intense time. We were worried about people dying and focused on trying to get a short film out quickly to get attention. How do you do research and development in an emergency? We never had early conversations about our hopes for the film.

DZANA: There were spaces for folks to name their feelings, but then people to whom it was named needed support, too. We are not therapists, and that's really hard because we knew that everyone was hurting and moving through a lot of pain from the pandemic, and we didn't know what to do about it.

PETE: When I first spoke with Stephanie, one of the first things she wanted to know was how we were feeling, mentally and physically, and then brought therapists on board. That was big. A lot of people benefitted from sessions with the therapist. Sometimes directors think they can serve in that role in interviews, but, like, if your plumbing is messed up, you're not going to call an electrician. Every filmmaker should have help in place for people who have been traumatized by an experience and are making a film about it.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON TRAUMA, HEALING, AND GROWTH:**

FRANCENE: Things came out of me in therapy. It hurt, but it also healed. I was able to talk and ease my mind and body, and the tension came away from me.

VINCE: Therapy helped me a lot. When I was incarcerated and released, they used to make me do mandatory therapy, but it felt like a judgment thing and didn't work at all, so I was very leery. But once I met my therapist and realized they had incarcerated family and family in the streets, we really connected. She understood me and was like, "How can we get through this?"

JENNILIE: Everyone became more self actualized.

SARA B.: I was seeing growth and power and self acceptance among the team, and it turns out working with the therapists helped that.

PETE: Vince is a changed person. He reminds me of—Moses went to the mountaintop and came down a changed man. He's a leader now. He cares about how people feel and what's good for us.



"Therapy helped me a lot. When I was incarcerated and released, they used to make me do mandatory therapy, but it felt like a judgment thing and didn't work at all, so I was very leery. But once I met my therapist and realized they had incarcerated family and family in the streets, we really connected."

VINCE

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION 40 IMPACT

IMPACT COACHING

Initially, Stephanie planned to mentor Pete in impact producing, but they quickly realized the work seemed abstract since the campaign hadn't launched yet. So instead they met regularly and talked about all of the things Pete was already doing that constituted impact, reinforcing how much he already knew. They also partnered on a series of impact-related projects to help him and the other Poets feel comfortable embarking on a campaign, and to connect with others who had similar experiences.

PARTNER CONVERSATIONS

Together, Pete and Stephanie led conversations with potential impact partners including Sins Invalid, Caring Across Generations, and National Domestic Workers Alliance. (Pete also had an additional conversation with Roosevelt Island community members.) The partners all watched the film before picture lock, so their feedback could be integrated into the edit to ensure equitable representation on-screen. Stephanie and Pete brainstormed ideas and questions together before the calls, then she facilitated the first session and he facilitated the second. They discussed red flags, especially around anything potentially problematic; "green flags" or scenes that resonated with partners; and ideas for future strategy or tentative commitments to work together. They also asked what type of support audiences might need when watching the film, given its potentially triggering subject matter. Finally, they shared feedback and conversation transcripts with the film team for consideration in the edit.

//

JENNILIE: If only filmmakers with no connection to the story gave us feedback about the film, I'd worry it would exist in a vacuum as opposed to something that is connected to real lives in a social landscape. I'm grateful we had conversations with our neighbors and allies on Roosevelt Island and with folks doing similar justice work already, and how it resonated with their perspective as a disabled person of color or a healthcare worker—that's important.

//

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

DEMYSTIFYING “IMPACT”

To help the Reality Poets learn more about impact campaigns, Stephanie and Pete invited other impact producers and filmmakers to share their experiences with the team. The Poets watched documentaries in advance of the conversations, and asked questions to help prepare them for the challenges and opportunities on the forthcoming campaign. Stephanie also held several informal strategy brainstorms with the Poets, as well as a “day in the life of an impact campaign” where they worked through potential impact scenarios in real time. The model of learning through reciprocal dialogue, as opposed to listening to a presentation, worked well for the team, and helped bring folks together through accessible language and avoiding industry jargon.

Guests included:

- **Sonya Childress and Sahar Driver**, Co-Directors of Color Congress
- **Cecilia Mejia**, former Impact Director of A-DOC
- **Gerry Leonard**, Director of Filmmaker Services and Impact at Working Films
- **Julia Bacha**, filmmaker and Creative Director at Just Vision

ALEX: When the film is released, it will be kind of out of our control. The world will interpret it, and unforeseen things will come up. So we’re focusing on and planning for that lack of control, and getting ourselves ready.

PETE: We’re going to run an impact campaign. What the hell is an impact campaign? None of us were familiar with that kind of stuff. Forget about the word “impact” because that’s the scary part of it. An impact campaign is no different than any other campaign, like an ad or political campaign—people are trying to reach a certain audience. I think of impact campaign the same way. Who are the people we want to reach? What is it we want them to do with this film? How much of ourselves are we willing to put into this thing? We need to do this with intention. I also learned we don’t need 100 allies—we just need the right ones, who share our vision and will make the work more powerful. We should always look at quality over quantity.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT**ON DEMYSTIFYING “IMPACT”:**

“

EL: We already made an impact. If we didn’t do what we did, I believe Coler would have been a lot more dangerous. We’re not doing this for clout. We’re doing it because my friends and loved ones went through this experience, and I don’t want it to happen to anyone in the future. The nursing home institutional space is lacking attention, and we’re bringing awareness and care.

VINCE: I want people to take the film and run with it, for Nursing Home Lives Matter to give residents all over the country a voice.

FRANCENE: I want the film to change people’s lives. Those that live in nursing homes—we did this for them, to be able to speak up and not be afraid. That’s the only way we’re going to get change.

PETE: The way I see it, politicians don’t have the power. It’s people who have the power.

”

”

“We already made an impact. If we didn’t do what we did, I believe Coler would have been a lot more dangerous. We’re not doing this for clout. We’re doing it because my friends and loved ones went through this experience, and I don’t want it to happen to anyone in the future.”

EL

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

FILM PROTAGONISTS

Stephanie also invited previous documentary film participants to speak with the Reality Poets, to help them prepare for how the film's release would impact their lives. They talked about what they experienced emotionally and practically, in a day-to-day sense; how being in a film affected their advocacy work; what it was like sharing their story with the world; and what advice they had for the Poets. These conversations led to a change in the film's edit, inspired Pete's co-producer credit, and strengthened Jennilie's connection to her experience as a film participant.

Guests included:

- **Kamilah Willingham**, *The Hunting Ground*
- **Ale Pablos**, *Ale Libre*
- **Julie and Tracy Pierce**, *Sicko*
- **Margie Ratliff and Susanne Reisenbichler**, *Subject*

PETE: Talking to other people who were in films was helpful because it gave us a sense of what we were in for. A lot of new things are coming our way that we have no idea about. We could expect anything from retaliation to acceptance. Now we have an idea of how to recognize what could happen and how to stop or change it. I'll always remember Kamilah's advice: "Any time you're having a conversation, protect your energy. Choose three points you want to get across, and no matter what happens, focus on that message. Everything else is secondary."

JENNILIE: After our conversation with Margie and Susanne, Pete and I talked and shared concerns about the fact that Roy Watson, a Reality Poet who died of COVID in the early days of the pandemic, wasn't in the film. We'd gotten feedback from outside audiences that since we didn't have footage of Roy, his story wouldn't work emotionally in the film. I regretted greenlighting that decision. Roy was our knowledge holder, an elder in the group. How do we explain that we let his passing be lost? Stephanie facilitated a conversation about it, and Alexis also really wanted to make it work, so we added Roy back to the film.

19 CARE23 COLLABORATION40 IMPACT

“Talking to other people who were in films was helpful because it gave us a sense of what we were in for. A lot of new things are coming our way that we have no idea about. We could expect anything from retaliation to acceptance. Now we have an idea of how to recognize what could happen and how to stop or change it.”

PETE



LOOKING AHEAD

As *Fire Through Dry Grass* premieres in theaters and on PBS, the team is launching an impact campaign to use the film to achieve Nursing Home Lives Matter’s goals, with Impact Producer Rosemary McDonnell-Horita, Associate Impact Producer Peter Yearwood, Impact Coordinator Alexandra Lenore Ashworth, Impact Strategist and OPEN DOORS Director Vincent Pierce, and Movement Gardener Mikko Cook at the helm.

To join the Nursing Home Lives Matter movement or bring the film to your community, visit firethroughdrygrass.com.

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LEARNINGS OVERVIEW



After reflecting on the process of making *Fire Through Dry Grass*, the team identified practices that were crucial to the success of the project, as well as lessons learned that they wished they could have implemented sooner. The “Key Learnings” section highlights best practices grounded in this particular filmmaking process, while the “For Filmmakers” section offers concrete ways other film teams might apply these learnings, as well as tools to help implement them. There is no one-size-fits-all for this work, so this is not meant to be prescriptive—every team and situation is unique and should be approached as such. This is intended as a starting point for conversation and exploration, in the spirit of collaboration that the team holds dear.

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KEY LEARNINGS

1. CENTER CARE AND ACCESSIBILITY.

The team prioritized everyone's health and well-being, by adding more time to the post-production schedule, bringing on mental health support, and creating accessible practices that accommodated the entire group. They also created a Disability Justice Advocate position to support the Reality Poets with bureaucratic medical, legal, and benefit systems, to free up their time to allow them to participate more fully in the filmmaking and impact process.

2. HAVE HARD CONVERSATIONS.

When Co-Directors Alexis Neophytides and Andres "Jay" Molina and Producer Jennilie Brewster formed an LLC quickly to accommodate a funding deadline, the Reality Poets voiced concerns about the films' ownership and how money would be spent. The team leaned into the tension, shared information about the fundraising process, and made sure the Poets would get paid, and are now looking into how to change the ownership structure to better reflect their collaborative model. Rather than avoiding conflict, the team embraced the change to actively listen, learn from mistakes, and repair relationships.

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3. IN COMMUNICATION, REPETITION IS KEY.

The team revisited conversations and decisions with the film's participants more than once, which led to concrete changes, like the inclusion of Reality Poet Roy Watson in the film. People's interests, availability, and perspective may change, so it's important to check in regularly about the big picture as well as the day-to-day.

4. VALUE LIVED EXPERIENCE.

The Reality Poets played a central role in creating the film. The team tried to push back against the speed of the documentary industry to allow for collaboration while the Poets had medical treatments and were in unsafe living conditions. In some ways, this isn't a new filmmaking model. The documentary field already accommodates powerful people in the industry, and this team just recentered who has power—those with lived experience.

5. VALUE FILMMAKING EXPERIENCE.

The team could have benefitted from having more people with documentary production experience to distribute the technical pieces of work more evenly. Hiring Sarah Feuquay as co-producer helped enormously.

6. ALIGN UPFRONT ON VALUES AND WORKING STYLES WHEN POSSIBLE.

The team's work with Concept Artist and Animator Guillermo Mena was grounded in clarity around roles, expectations, decision-making, timelines, and a trusted facilitator. That structure, plus shared values of mutual respect, trust, humility, open communication, and confidence in each other's creative potential, allowed the collaboration to thrive. Other collaborations faced challenges and could have benefitted from taking more time to ensure each person's goals and working styles were aligned before committing to work together.

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7. IT'S OKAY TO CHANGE COURSE.

When Composer Gene Back and Reality Poet and Musician Vincent Pierce hit roadblocks while working on a song over Zoom, they brought another musician in to work with Vince in person. It helped to reevaluate mid-process and come up with new ideas to move the project forward.

8. DON'T BE AFRAID TO WORK ACROSS EXPERIENCES.

There's no magic formula to collaborating across experiences with a large group. As much as they planned in advance, things went awry. People made mistakes. Even when it was hard, the team worked through it, driven by a shared belief in the film, mission, and each other. Being their authentic, imperfect selves ultimately resulted in a better film and stronger relationships.

9. FIND NEW MEASURES OF SUPPORT.

It was helpful to have Consulting Producer Stephanie Palumbo from Peace is Loud serve as a bridge between the social justice and documentary film spaces, and to be available as a sounding board for individuals or to facilitate group conversations. This role should be further explored and defined for other projects.

10. LEARN FROM OTHERS' EXPERIENCES.

Bringing other film protagonists to talk to the Reality Poets helped them feel more prepared for how the film would change their lives and inspired more equitable practices, like Reality Poet Peter Yearwood's co-producer credit. The team also showed the film to select community partners to get feedback on representation before picture lock.

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FOR FILMMAKERS

CARE

- Explore models of care that fit your team's needs.
- Proactively accommodate disabled team members. Use existing resources to find and adopt care-centered practices for all team members.
- Ask people about their preferred working style and what conditions might allow them to thrive on the team.
- If it feels useful, bring on mental health support with clear goals and boundaries. Add this to your budget, and make a plan for how anyone who utilizes this might transition to another form of support after the funding runs out.
- Create a rapid response plan and map out how your team would mitigate potentially harmful scenarios.
- Ensure there are pathways for your film protagonists and others in communities represented in the field to give feedback before picture lock. Discuss the type of support people might need before, during, and after watching the film.

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TOOLS FOR CARE:

- FWD-Doc's created a comprehensive **inclusion toolkit** to help the industry embrace best practices to embed disabled-led expertise in filmmaking.
- The **Film Event Accessibility Working Group** has a multitude of resources to support accessible screenings and events.
- **Peace is Loud** is working to further define the role they played on this film and if or how it can be replicated on other projects.
- **Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Oseguera** has served as a consultant to documentary filmmakers on matters related to race, religion, participant care, ethics, consent and healing centered filmmaking.
- **Film in Mind** provides therapeutic support for the film industry.
- The initiative **DocuMentality** is focused on changing challenges to mental health and well-being facing the documentary industry.
- The documentary **Subject** details the experience of participating in a documentary film.
- Subject's producer Margie Ratliff created the **Documentary Producers Empowerment Alliance** to bring vital resources to film protagonists

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COLLABORATION

- Have group conversations as early as possible to share everyone's vision and values and align on goals.
- A true collaborative filmmaking process requires slowing down to include all voices in the process. Budget extra time for all stages of production, and explain this decision to funders.
- Bring clarity to shared work by identifying each person's role, responsibilities, and expectations on the project.
- Determine how the team makes decisions. Consider creating a calendar of decisions you anticipate and schedule time for team discussions in advance of each date.
- Rather than avoiding conflict and letting it fester, lean into tension and explore its root cause. If helpful, bring in trusted facilitators to support hard conversations.
- Embrace ruptures as opportunities to repair and rebuild trust.

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TOOLS FOR COLLABORATION:

- Active Voice's **[Prenups for Partners](#)** offers question prompts that can frame early dialogues.
- Reimagine's **[Levelset](#)** program helps teams build a legal container from values-based conversations.
- The Documentary Accountability Working Group's **[framework](#)** can help guide all aspects of this process.
- The Management Center offers free resources to aid collaborative projects, including their **[MOCHA template](#)**.
- A **[decision tree](#)** can help you clarify where individuals have autonomy and where the group comes together to make decisions.
- For more in-depth reading, Sandra Kim's **[Liberation Organizations handbook](#)** offers decision-making frameworks for decentralized but hierarchical teams, and Seeds for Change provides **[a deep dive](#)** into consensus models.

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MONEY

- Talk about money regularly. Have transparent, knowledge-sharing conversations about the film budget and fundraising with the full team.
- Explore ways to compensate all members of your team, including protagonists.
- Talk through potential risks, including whether it would interfere with benefits, have tax implications, jeopardize anyone's physical or emotional security, invalidate distribution deals, and/or create legal implications.
- If it poses a high risk, explore alternate methods of compensation based on need and circumstances.
- If it poses a low risk and the team wants to move forward, consider budgeting for industry standard rates, establishing profit sharing, and finding creative ways to abide by distribution deal terms, like paying participants for archival licensing or location fees.

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CREDITS

CASE STUDY CREDITS

Writer and Editor: Stephanie Palumbo

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Consultant: Camaro West

Graphic Designer: Lani Rodriguez

Interviews: Alhassan “EL” Abdulfattaah, Alexandra Lenore Ashworth (Dzana), Gene Back, Francene Benjamin, Sara Bolder, Anna Bores, Jennilie Brewster, Alexander Eshelman, Sarah Feuquay, LeVar “Var” Lawrence, M’Daya Meliani, Guillermo Mena, Andres “Jay” Molina, Alexis Neophytides, Vincent Pierce, Peter Yearwood

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PHOTO CREDITS

Cover: **Fire Through Dry Grass** poster. Design by Guillermo Mena. Photo by Elias Williams

Pg. 3: Peter Yearwood looking out the window at Coler. Film still

Pg. 11: Jay, Pete, Vince, and Var headshots. Photo by Elias Williams. Alexis headshot. Photo by Alex Murawski. Jennilie headshot. Photo by Alexis Neophytides. Tito headshot. Photo by Alexis Eshelman. Sarah headshot. Photo by Alexis Pancrazi

Pg. 14: Animated bars in the halls of Coler Hospital. Film still

Pg. 20: Jennilie, Gerry Leonard, Alexis, Dzana, and Jay smiling at a barbecue.

Pg. 23: Co-Directors Alexis and Jay on Roosevelt Island. Photo by Alex Murawski

Pg. 26: Pete, Jay and Alexis in post-production at Hell’s Color Kitchen. Photo by Sarah Feuquay

Pg. 30: Vince, Alexis, Pete, and Jay in the library at Coler.

Pg. 33: Vince, Var, and Jay in a recording studio.

Pg. 36: Screenshot of Jennilie, Alexis, Jay, Dzana, and Sara B. smiling on a Zoom call.

Pg. 39: Alexis with her arm around Jay.

Pg. 42: The Reality Poets outside under cherry blossoms on Roosevelt Island. Film still

Pg. 45: EL holding a microphone at a Nursing Home Lives Matter rally. Film still

Pg. 47: Francene, Pete, Vince, Diana, Mikko, and Alexis pose in front of a Reality Poets mural in Coler.

Pg. 48: Vince, Tito, and Jay outside Coler.



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OPEN DOORS CREDITS

Vincent Pierce

Director

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Peter Yearwood

Reality Poets Manager

Alex Eshelman

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Development and Partnerships

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Mikko Cook

Movement Gardener

Gerardo Dexter Ciprian

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Featuring the Reality Poets:

Andres “Jay” Molina

Vincent Pierce

Peter Yearwood

LeVar “Var” Lawrence

Ramon “King Tito Love” Cruz

Alhassan “EL” Abdulfattaah

Shannon Nelson

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Alexis Neophytides

Andres “Jay” Molina

Produced by:

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Jennilie Brewster

Executive Producers:

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Erika Dilday

Chris White

Sara Bolder

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Alexis Neophytides

Edited by:

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Diana Diroy

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FILM CREDITS CONT.

Co-Producers:

Peter Yearwood
Sarah Feuquay

Concept Artist and Animator:

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Motion Designer

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Gene Back

Additional Music by:

Vincent Pierce

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Ellen Goosenberg Kent
Alysa Nahmias
Stephanie Palumbo

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Alex Murawski
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Hell's Color Kitchen

For Hell's Color Kitchen:

DI Colorist

Jon Fordham

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FILM CREDITS CONT.

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Senior Conform Editor

Bahron Thomas

Director of Finishing

Keith Shapiro

Post-Production Coordinator

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Assistant Editor

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Archival Footage and Stills Courtesy of:

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blvdneprime via Pond5

CNN

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FPAC/GEO, Map data ©2022 Google

Historic Films

Erik Van Ingen via Getty Images

Kinolibrary

Library of Congress

Municipal Archives, City of New York

Museum of the City of New York

StockAgentIO via Pond5

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FILM CREDITS CONT.

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Dan Mayeda

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James Johnston

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Alexander Eshelman

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Cheryl Green

Audio Description:

Dicapta

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of Education

Disability Justice Advocate:

Anna Bores

Accessibility Consultant:

Rosemary McDonnell-Horita

Impact Strategist:

Vincent Pierce

Associate Impact Producer

Peter Yearwood

Impact Assistant:

David Onabanjo

Movement Gardener

Mikko Cook

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FILM CREDITS CONT.

Poetry Coaches:

Joel François
Jive Poetic
Steven Willis

Music Coach

Mark Marshall

Fiscal Sponsor:

Women Make Movies

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Sins Invalid
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Julia Bacha
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Hailey Bedford
Ilana Berghash
Patty Berne
Rebel Sidney Black

Iyabo Boyd
Gale Brewer
Dana Brewster
Danielle Brewster
Yael Bridge
Kenny Brown
Caring Across Generations
Andrew Catauro
Victoria Chalk
Carlos Chavez

Sonya Childress
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 David Evans
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 Madeline Farr
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Cheryl Green
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 Jeane Ridges
 Brandon Senese
 Dena Shenk
 David Silva
 Christine Sprague
 Morgan Steinfeld
 Jane Swanson
 Alain Sylvain
 Lukasz Thieme
 Mary Umans
 Emily Walsh

MUSIC

"A Show of Hands" - Composed, produced and performed by Mark Marshall

"Streets Don't Love Nobody" - Composed, produced and performed by Vincent Pierce

"Castaway" - Composed, produced and performed by Mark Marshall

"Maryland" - Composed, produced and performed by Alex Eshelman

"What Would You Do" - Composed, produced and performed by Vincent Pierce

"Nothing Left Infinity" - Composed, produced and performed by Alex Eshelman

"Anthem" - Composed and produced by Vincent Pierce; Performed by Vincent Pierce, LeVar Lawrence, Ramon "Tito" Cruz and El Abdulfattah

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IDA Sarowitz Project Completion Fund
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PEACE IS LOUD RECOMMENDATIONS

The list below summarizes a document Peace is Loud delivered to the *Fire Through Dry Grass* and OPEN DOORS teams, with recommendations on how to continue prioritizing equity, safety, and representation in all aspects of their filmmaking and impact process. (Some items have been withheld to protect privacy.)

1. BRING CLARITY TO PEOPLE'S ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

- The Reality Poets each have a specific interest in how they want to participate in the impact campaign, outlined in the document. Revisit their roles during the campaign since things may change.
- Provide media training for the Reality Poets.
- Find mentors for Vince and Pete who can support their impact work.

2. STRUCTURE COMMUNICATION AND POWER-SHARING.

- Continuing to ensure the Reality Poets' health and well-being is the campaign's first priority.
- Hire an advocate dedicated to supporting the Reality Poets' participation in the film and campaign. This person would assist with their communication, transportation, and calendars, and help them navigate medical, financial, and legal issues, including benefits.
- Make sure the Poets' advocate communicates with them in the method that works best for each person, recognizing and embracing different working styles across the team.
- Continue using a calendar, and add all of the film and campaign's key decision points.
- Share more about the filmmaking process with non-film team Reality Poets.
- Communicate film updates regularly at meetings and via email and text.
- Identify in advance decisions that need to be made for the film and who is going to make them—and why.
- Use a framework to make full group decisions that allows time to process.
- Use a "zero to five" voting system for group decisions, so everyone gives more precise input than "yes" or "no."
- Build in extra time and flexibility for decisions made by the full group—specifically, at least 25% more time than anticipated.
- Continue recognizing that not every decision is urgent.
- Make a plan in advance for when decisions are both urgent and important.

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APPENDIX

The Poets' availability to work on the film or the impact campaign could change because of varying health symptoms, doctor appointments, changing living situations, reliance on nursing staff to get them out of bed or unreliable transportation, and time spent advocating for personal health care needs. The OPEN DOORS team already assisted them with some of the items above, but having a dedicated advocate would ensure they had the accommodations necessary to be able to fully participate in the campaign. This ultimately became the Disability Justice Advocate position.

3. NAVIGATE FINANCIAL DECISION-MAKING AS A TEAM.

- Share more about the film budget with the Reality Poets.
- Make a plan for how to split any future film proceeds.
- Pay all Reality Poets the same fee for the impact campaign, not tied to any "traditional" film work, but to recognize that the film's release will create emotional labor and change their lives.
- Create additional paid opportunities for the Reality Poets to participate in the impact campaign, like speaking engagements, strategy sessions, art or design work, and/or licensing poetry.
- Set industry standard rates for Reality Poets with "formal" film or campaign positions.

Setting a rate not based on hours, output, or productivity demonstrated the value of different kinds of labor, and ensured no one will be overlooked financially if their health or living situation prevented them from being able to "work" on the campaign in a traditional sense. Paying everyone in this way recognized how the Reality Poets would be affected by the public release of their story on such a large scale. The Disability Justice Advocate worked to coordinate any payments the Poets received with their benefits.

4. SUPPORT THE TEAM'S SAFETY.

- Offer individual therapy to anyone interested.
- Make rapid response plans for potential scenarios after the film's release.