

New York Women in Film & Television

CREATIVE WORKFORCE SUMMIT JOURNAL

Storytelling STEM

Featuring:

Dr. Ellen Ochoa
ASTRONAUT

Maria Agui Carter
PBS LATINA SCIGIRLS

Dorothy Bennett
NEW YORK HALL OF SCIENCE

Paula Eiselt
AFTERSHOCK

Tiera Fletcher
AEROSPACE ENGINEER

Maria Hinojosa
PULITZER PRIZE RECIPIENT

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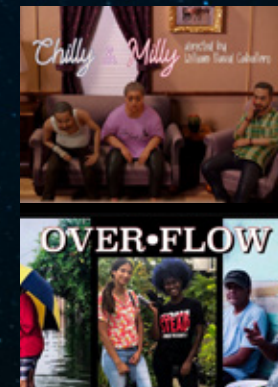
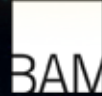


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NYWIFT CREATIVE WORKFORCE SUMMIT JOURNAL STORYTELLING STEM

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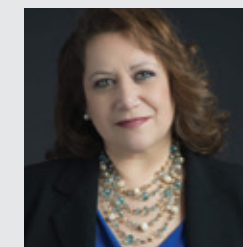
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CYNTHIA LÓPEZ

CEO, NEW YORK WOMEN IN FILM & TELEVISION



Welcome from NYWIFT

IT IS WITH OPTIMISM AND PRIDE that we present this publication to you! My love for all things scientific and films that fed my curiosity about the world came early in life. My father would say that I was interested in science because I was in my mom's belly when they took me to the 1964 World's Fair. He would explain how she talked to me about each of the exhibits and said, "Sweet-heart, see the future – you will be part of it one day. It is important to see how things are made and imagined." Maybe it was that, or maybe it was because I enjoyed watching Grandpa making elixirs on the TV show *The Munsters*, or Jacques Cousteau on PBS showing us the underworld of sea creatures, or it was my favorite cult flick, *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (about a woman being touched by an alien and how she turned on her philandering husband)... but the link between films and science was solidified. When I won second place at the New York State Science Fair in Brooklyn in 1977, it was no surprise to my family. It was clear that there were universes unknown to me and scientific curiosity was the way to understand the world around us.

For many years, science has been an obsession and a hobby. So when this publication's editor, Maud, and I began discussing unconventional partners during the pandemic, we both saw an opportunity to bring STEM and NYWIFT together and began structuring the Summit and Film Series. Fortunately, the National Science Foundation, NEA,

and Regina Scully's Artemis Rising Foundation also saw our vision and supported this endeavor. The NYWIFT creative team then embarked on a series of planning sessions that included brainstorming the panels and talent we wanted to showcase, which ultimately led to the women and men featured in this publication. Women leading the STEM brigade as innovators, scientists, doctors, inventors, engineers, and astronauts, and filmmakers and content creators who use media to educate and innovate about ways science makes things possible.



I cannot thank all of the Summit participants enough for their valuable contributions to the field and to our work at NYWIFT. We deeply appreciate the contributions of all the Summit partners and supporters. I'd like to acknowledge the extraordinary dedication of the

NYWIFT team who brought both the Summit and this publication to life: our editor, Maud Kersnowski-Sachs, Rashiek Smart, Katie Chambers, Natalie Danford, Kerstin Vogdes Diehn, Easmanie Michel, Sara Tandoi, the NYWIFT interns, and our dedicated board of directors. We are also incredibly grateful to the National Science Foundation for its support of our work.

We hope that these pages will lead you to as many new questions as they do answers.

In solidarity,

Cynthia López



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PAT SWINNEY KAUFMAN
 COMMISSIONER



Letter from the NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
 MAYOR'S OFFICE OF MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT

CONGRATULATIONS, NYWIFT on yet another successful Creative Workforce Summit. I've been given this opportunity to provide an update from the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, which we affectionately refer to as MOME, on how we are working to support and strengthen New York City's creative economy and make it accessible to all.

First, allow me to introduce myself, as I was recently appointed Commissioner of MOME in July of 2023, after serving as the First Deputy Commissioner the previous year. I am truly honored to be in this position, and I bring with me experience in economic development and job growth for the film and television industry from the nineteen years spent as Executive Director of the New York State Governor's Office of Motion Picture and Television Development and as Deputy Commissioner of Empire State Development. During this tenure, I helped craft and shepherd the legislation that created New York state's first film production tax credit. This work helped NYC remain competitive as a desired destination for filming, as the recent extension of the credit aims to do now. By further strengthening NYC's capabilities as a production-friendly filming hub, people around the world will continue to see our skylines

and landmarks on their screens, enticing them to visit, work, and live here. With the 2023 labor stoppages now resolved, production is back, as is filming on the iconic streets of NYC, working to generate \$8.2 billion in economic activity and employ the 185,000 workers who rely on this industry for their livelihoods. We couldn't be happier.

Now, there is more to our city's creative economy than our film and TV industry, and it is the combination of all the sectors—film and television, theater, music, digital games, publishing, and more—that is responsible for generating \$150 billion in economic activity and supporting half a million workers. We like to say that when our creative industries thrive, NYC thrives, which is why we at MOME are working hard to make these sectors more accessible to everyone, including women.

To do this, we are lifting women's voices in the entertainment industries that have historically excluded them. In 2023, we announced the fifth round of the NYC Women's Fund for Media, Music and Theatre, which, to date, has awarded \$7.5 million to 343 women-led projects. We also supported another round of Sound Thinking NYC, a free summer program focused on opening doors for young women in the music

industry. There is more to come in 2024 for both initiatives, so please stay tuned.

We have taken additional steps to ensure the city's creative industries continue to thrive and benefit all New Yorkers; the Made in NY Training Programs serve to create local workforces;

JanArtsNYC shines a light on the theater and live performance events happening in NYC each January; New York Music Month in June celebrates our vibrant and dynamic music ecosystem; the New York City Public School Film Festival celebrates the talent and diversity of student voices; the first-ever NYC Mayor's Cup in 2023 proclaimed the winner of the Minecraft Education Battle of the Boroughs challenge and helped propel NYC's reputation as a global hub for the digital games industry; and, finally, our office has worked diligently to create industry-specific councils for film and TV, digital

games, and theater and live performance, so that city government and industry stakeholders can work together to solve problems and generate solutions.

For more information on any of our programs, I encourage you to visit us at NYC.gov/MOME. In the coming year, whether it be through one of our programs mentioned above, or at the many film festivals we support, I look forward to meeting and working with women filmmakers and storytellers who are at the forefront of innovative storytelling and filmmaking. Thank you and see you soon.

Sincerely,



Pat Swinney Kaufman
Commissioner, NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment

KEVIN A. CLARK, PHD
PROGRAM DIRECTOR
DIRECTORATE FOR STEM EDUCATION
NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION



Welcome to Storytelling STEM from the National Science Foundation

AT THE U.S. NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (NSF), one of the goals that I'm charged with is introducing our organization to storytellers and creatives. That's why I'm ecstatic to be part of the *NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summit: STEM and Storytelling* on behalf of National Science Foundation. We know the impact that media and storytelling can have on people, which is why this conference and publication are so important. As we address the challenges of broadening participation in STEM and connecting with traditionally underserved people, at the NSF we see storytelling and media arts as a perfect vehicle. This Summit is an example of that commitment. With a fiscal year 2023 budget of \$9.5 billion, more than 40,000 competitive proposals are submitted to NSF each year and we said: this Summit on STEM and storytelling is one that we *need* to fund because it brings together so many different types of creators and innovators.

Building connections is paramount to all of our fields. My grandmother, who raised me, always said, "Be nice to everybody, because you never know when you'll see them again" and "treat people like you are going to see them again." A few years ago, I was at a conference for the National Association for Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) and I started talking with this interesting woman I happened to be

standing next to. I'm a firm believer in nothing happens by accident. Years later when I got to the National Science Foundation, a colleague of mine, Sandy Welch, said, "There's a project that I'm going hand over to you." I'm looking it over and I think "Is this the same woman from NALIP?" And it was. It was Cynthia Lopez. As I read it, I thought "Oh my God, I've got to go to this!" I called Cynthia for the dates of the conference and she said "Kevin, it's Covid right now. We can't do anything."

"Well, as soon as it's scheduled, let me know," I said.

When I told my 20-year-old daughter that I was giving the welcome speech at the New York Women in Film and Television Summit, she looked at me and said "Why'd they ask you? You aren't a woman." Then she thought about a bit and told me. "Dad, you need to know where you are." Kids, my kids in particular, have a skill of humbling you. So, I took her advice. I came to listen, to learn, and to be supportive. If there's a way that I can be helpful to the storytellers or creatives who want to get their stories out there as it relates to STEM, I hope I can do so.

Again, thank you for having me, Cynthia and the whole NYWIFT team. I thank you for your vision and your persistence to keep pushing forward. Thank you all for your storytelling.

NEW YORK WOMEN IN FILM & TELEVISION CREATIVE WORKFORCE SUMMIT JOURNAL

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH Courtesy of NASA. Astronaut Ellen Ochoa looking through the window of the International Space Station, 2002.
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To learn more about the NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summits visit www.NYWIFT.org/summit

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LESLIE FIELDS-CRUZ
NYWIFT BOARD OF DIRECTORS, PRESIDENT



Welcome to the Creative Workforce Summit Journal

AFTER I SAW STAR WARS THE FIRST TIME, my dream was to fly in outer space. After I saw the ABC Afterschool Special *My Mom's Having a Baby*, I decided I wasn't ever going to have kids. Now, I have two kids, but at a very early age I understood how they got here because of that TV movie, which was really great. And watching *An Inconvenient Truth* confirmed what I believed: that climate change is real and that there is something I can do about it.

The stories that we in the arts and entertainment field tell allow us to dream. They help us to understand who we are as people. And they encourage us to be active citizens in our society. At the fourth annual NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summit: Storytelling STEM, we united innovators in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics with thought leaders in film, television, and media to discuss the latest technological advancements, societal challenges, and creative solutions that will allow us to work together to adapt, evolve, and thrive in a rapidly changing and challenging world. This publication not only records, but expands on the lessons learned, themes discovered, and new questions developed over those three days.

Creating a convening of this breadth and complexity requires months of planning. I'd like to acknowledge the incomparable leadership of my

friend, CEO Cynthia López, and our incredibly talented NYWIFT team, Katie Chambers, Maud Kersnowski-Sachs, Easmanie Michel, and Rashiek Smart, for all their hard work and ingenuity, not just on this Summit but all year round. I'd also like to thank the Summit participants and moderators for being part of the Summit, as well as my fellow board members for their suggestions and recommendations. Everyone's bios can be found at the back of this publication.

In addition, thank you to the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. Thank you to the Artemis Rising Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Ford Foundation for their support of NYWIFT throughout the year. Also, thank you to our signature partners, NH Hotel Group, Warner Bros. Discovery, and AMC. And I want to extend a special thank you to Kevin Clark, Director Dr. Sethuraman Panchanathan, and everyone else at the National Science Foundation for their incredible support of our work, the Summit, and its accompanying publication. We are deeply grateful.

Onward!
Leslie Fields-Cruz
NYWIFT Board of Directors, President

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MAUD KERSNOWSKI-SACHS
NYWIFT PUBLICATIONS EDITOR



Letter From the Editor

AS I WAS WORKING ON THIS PUBLICATION, I was struck by the power of early intervention for girls in STEM. Our CEO, Cynthia López, astronaut Dr. Ellen Ochoa, and our keynote speaker, aerospace engineer Tiera Fletcher, among others featured here, were fortunate enough to hear those messages even in a culture that discourages women in STEM. I had a different path. On the first day of algebra class, my teacher, who was also the football coach, announced that girls were not capable of earning an A in the class. While there were plenty of women role models I could have latched onto, including my high school chemistry teacher Dr. Bausista and even my own mother, the discouraging messages were too strong for me to see beyond. We all hear criticism more loudly than praise, and that is particularly true for young women in STEM.



(Photo by Mark Stephen Kornbluth)

I discovered a love of science years later during classes with my daughter at the American Museum of Natural History and hours spent with *The Magic School Bus* books and TV show. I even played Ms. Frizzle at her sixth birthday party. Curiosity has always been a motivating force in my life. It is what had propelled me into journalism and it's what has engaged me with science. STEM and storytelling both endeavor to explore the world around us and beyond.

Since its inception, the goal of this publication and the underlying NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summits has been to examine how the current cultural moment affects women working in the

media and entertainment industry and to expand those issues out into a broader conversation. We launched the journal discussing NYWIFT's core issues—diversity and inclusion, workplace safety, and pay equity—and followed that with a Summit focused on documentary. As we began to emerge from lockdown, many of us were asking ourselves, what's next? NYWIFT embraced that question with a Summit, *The Creative Industry Radically Reimagined*, which brought together DEI network and cable executives charged with creating change in the post-George Floyd and Breonna Taylor world, as well as activists and content creators.

The collective experience of Covid reinforced to all of us that science, technology, engineering, and math are how many of the challenges facing us as

Americans, humans, and a planet will be solved and that storytelling is how most of us will understand these new solutions and challenges. Looking at the intersection between STEM and storytelling was the clear next step for NYWIFT.

In these pages you will find intimate conversations with a diverse group of thought leaders discussing everything from the Black maternal mortality crisis to the sea level rise to children's programming and much more. I hope this publication sparks your curiosity and that you find as many new questions as you do answers in these pages.

More to come,
 Maud Kersnowski-Sachs

Inspiring Others to Dream

IN 1993, Dr. Ellen Ochoa became the first Latina to go into space. It was a big event in my household. We had followed her since she was selected to be an astronaut three years earlier. My father and I would look for photos of her in news stories about NASA. “There she is,” we’d say every time we saw her, gleaming with pride that *nuestra raza* was represented at NASA.

Seeing someone who looked like me doing the same job as male national heroes like Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin meant that I, too, could be anything I wanted to be. In April 2014 at Steiner Studios, when I was sworn in as the first Latina to serve as Commissioner of the NYC Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment, I knew I was continuing in the footsteps of women like Dr. Ochoa. I thought to myself, I am now part of a legacy of Latinas contributing to U.S. history and the public sector.

Since joining NASA in 1988, Dr. Ochoa has flown to space four times and logged nearly 1,000 hours in orbit. She became the first Hispanic director of the Johnson Space Center, and its second female director. She has received numerous awards, including NASA’s Distinguished Service Medal and the Distinguished Presidential Rank Award. Seven schools have been named after her throughout the country. Most recently, she authored a bilingual STEAM book series for kids, *Dr. Ochoa’s Stellar World*.

When we were planning this Summit, we invited a list of remarkable participants: Dr. Marc



Astronaut Ellen Ochoa, STS-110 flight engineer, wears a launch and entry suit as part of her training for a mission to visit the International Space Station. (Photo courtesy of NASA)

Schiffman from the New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell division of interventional radiology; Tiera Fletcher, who is literally a rocket scientist; Jane Startz, who produced Scholastic’s *The Magic School Bus*; William Kenworthy from HOK, who is exploring how New York can be livable with sea level rise; Maria Hinojosa, who recently won a Pulitzer; and so many more. I am honored that they added their voices and vision to this Summit. However, the one person I truly wanted to attend was Dr. Ochoa. I made more calls and sent more emails than I ever have to get in touch with any Hollywood star.

Then one day around two p.m. my cellphone rang. “Hello, this is Ellen Ochoa.” I was so stunned that tears came to my eyes, and for a moment I couldn’t speak. Here I was on the phone with my Latina hero, a woman I had spoken about to my dad so many times—and she called me. I said something like, “You have no idea how you have touched my life, Dr. Ochoa. I am honored to speak to you. You have impacted so many women and girls.” By the time we hung up, she had agreed to be the keynote lunch speaker at the NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summit: Storytelling STEM. Meeting Dr. Ochoa, whom I have admired for so long, is one of the highlights of my professional life.

Thank you, Dr. Ochoa, for your wisdom, leadership, and calm as we enter a future that is filled with insecurity and hope. Your time with NYWIFT shines a light on what is possible.



Left: At ten years old, Ellen Ochoa had many dreams, but going to space was not one of them, yet. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Ellen Ochoa) Center: Ochoa at Mission Control when she was Director of the Johnson Space Center. (Photo courtesy of NASA) Right: During her first mission, Ochoa took a brief break to play the flute on space shuttle Discovery’s aft flight deck. She performed the *Marine Corps Hymn*, *Navy Hymn*, and *God Save the Queen* for fellow crew members as well as some Vivaldi for herself. (Photo courtesy of NASA)

Below I am delighted to share with you a few of the questions I asked her during our conversation:

CYNTHIA LÓPEZ: When you were growing up, did you always want a career in STEM?

DR. ELLEN OCHOA: I didn’t have a specific goal when I was little. In fifth grade, I thought about being president of the United States. Later, I considered being a lawyer. However, both of those were short-lived. When I was 10, I started playing the flute and was pretty serious about that. I even considered majoring in music in college, but since I had always done well at math and liked it, I decided to look into fields that used math. Of course, at that time even fewer women went into STEM fields. An engineering professor I talked to actually tried to discourage me from joining his department. Fortunately, the physics professor was welcoming and even said he thought I’d do well, given my math background. So, physics it was!

LÓPEZ: Tell us about your upbringing. What is your cultural background?

OCHOA: My dad’s parents were Mexican, though they had emigrated to the U.S. by the time he was born in Southern California. He was the youngest of 12. My mom grew up in Oklahoma and then moved to Southern California as a teenager. My

dad worked for Sears and my mom primarily raised my four siblings and me, though she also took college classes to satisfy her love of learning. No one in my family was an engineer or scientist, so those weren’t subjects or careers that I particularly thought about pursuing—and, of course, one rarely heard about women scientists, other than Marie Curie!

LÓPEZ: You were the first Latina to go to space. Where were you when you received the news that you were actually going?

OCHOA: I was on vacation in Australia when I got a call from the person who assigns astronauts to crews. It certainly made that vacation even more memorable! I had been in the astronaut corps a little less than two years at that point, and the mission I was assigned to was due to launch in about a year. So as soon as I got back to Houston, I got started training specifically for that mission, which was focused on the Earth’s atmosphere—specifically ozone depletion.

LÓPEZ: During space travel, what was the most challenging thing you experienced?

OCHOA: My fourth and final mission was definitely the most complex. We were helping to assemble the International Space Station by attaching

and then activating the first piece of the truss structure that grew over many flights to be 350 feet long and holds the four large solar arrays. I used the new station robotic arm to attach the truss structure and then to move crew members around during four spacewalks. The choreography between the crew members outside and the arm operators, including multiple changes of reference frames (from ones based on the station axes to ones based on the astronaut's orientation), required a lot of practice and concentration. Fortunately, we accomplished all of our objectives.

LÓPEZ: How do you balance career and personal life?

OCHOA: I expect the same way all busy women do—one day at a time, sometimes even one hour at a time! There's no secret. It requires a lot of juggling, planning, and flexibility. I was lucky to have a very supportive and engaged husband, as well as a wonderful nanny. She was with us for 17 years. While she didn't live with us, she had a flexible schedule and even traveled with us on occasion. For example, she went down to the Kennedy Space Center to help with our little kids when I was going to launch.

LÓPEZ: If there were one thing you could do differently in your career, what would it be?

OCHOA: I was fortunate to have an amazing career

that I couldn't have dreamed of, so I'd be afraid to change anything! I certainly learned a great deal along the way, and I could likely have been even more effective earlier in my career if I had given more thought to leadership skills and opportunities. Like many people, I assumed that leadership came with a title and broad job responsibility. I didn't consider how much I could do even without those. When I'm speaking with students and early career groups, I often mention a quote that is usually attributed to John Quincy Adams: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader."

LÓPEZ: What advice would you give young girls who want to do what you did?

OCHOA: Go for it—we need you! We need bright minds, enthusiasm, curiosity, creativity, and dedication to accomplish exciting goals, not only in space but in any endeavor. Look for opportunities to learn, work hard, engage in activities where you practice teamwork—and reach for the stars.

LÓPEZ: What is next for you?

OCHOA: I get the opportunity to be involved in lots of different activities: serving on boards where I use skills I learned at NASA—including leadership, risk management, change management, inclusion, and innovation—and engaging in a variety of outreach activities. I also play the flute.

Below is an abbreviated list of programs that offer STEM opportunities for the girls in your life:

Black Girls Code
wearebgc.org

BridgeUP: STEM
bridgeup.org

Carnegie STEM Girls
carnegiestemgirls.org

Cornell University: CURIE Academy
sites.coecis.cornell.edu/curieacademy/

MIT Women's Technology Program
web.mit.edu/wtp

National Girls Collaborative Project
ngcproject.org

SciGirls (featured on page 54)
scigirlsconnect.org

Smith College Summer Science and Engineering Program
smith.edu/academics/precollege-programs/summer-science-engineering

Techbridge Girls
techbridgegirls.org

STORYTELLING STEM

Connections Build Stories Across STEM



AUDREY ROSENBERG



RACHEL WATANABE-BATTON

We're thrilled to introduce our fourth annual NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summit Journal focused on creating STEM content and building collaborations across our fields. For this summit, we gathered at the Paley Center for Media in New York City with content producers, independent and industry filmmakers, doctors, scientists, innovators, and even an aerospace engineer, Tiera Fletcher, our keynote speaker, who leads engineering teams at Boeing for NASA rockets. On top of that, she's an author and mother of three. Other key topics you will find covered here include urgent medical and environmental issues and the creative solutions of activists, filmmakers, and innovators working for change and education. We ended the afternoon with a curated conversation between NYWIFT CEO Cynthia López and the remarkable Dr. Ellen Ochoa, the first Latina to go into space and the former director of the Johnson Space Center.

For this summit, we're excited to partner with the National Science Foundation (NSF) for the first time. Like us, the NSF believes in the power of storytelling to convey complex truths, open new doors to solutions, and create much needed belonging and agency for traditionally underrepresented voices in both of our fields. In the following pages, we hope you will join us in learning new information and gaining new perspectives on both STEM and storytelling.

*Audrey Rosenberg and Rachel Watanabe-Batton
NYWIFT Board of Directors, Education and Advocacy Committee*

It's Rocket Science

Inspiring the Next Generation of Women Aerospace Engineers



TIERA FLETCHER
Award-winning Aerospace Engineer,
Modernizations Program Manager,
and Site Project Engineer

I AM AN AEROSPACE ENGINEER, but I don't want to just talk about space. I want to talk about my journey and the impact of outreach—and hopefully encourage you to do outreach into the community. Women in film and television have a great platform for outreach. You can play a role in molding our future generations. And we're trying to get to Mars, right? We definitely want to mold our children to start thinking about how they can contribute to that journey so that we can actually step foot on Mars.

Let's blast off to purpose. When we talk about purpose, we're talking about goals. We're talking about what are our dreams and how do we get there? But purpose is deeper than that. Purpose is the reason that you wake up each morning. It's the thing that drives you to keep going. It's that motivational piece that you think about, whenever you feel like giving up. And you keep going. I also want to talk about equity resources and the knowledge that's required to achieve purpose.

This is my journey.

I decided to become an aerospace engineer at 11 years old. An outreach program came to my elementary school to teach us about aerospace engineering. The program put all of my interests together. I wanted to be a scientist, a mathematician, a designer, pretty much everything, but then I learned that I could design military aircraft. When I received my acceptance letter to MIT, I thought it was a mistake. A lot of the freshman at

MIT will tell you the same thing—impostor syndrome. So, I walk into the doors of MIT in 2013 as an aerospace engineering major, because I'm so set on it. I still have impostor syndrome, but I'm still there. I'm still moving forward. I decided to thrive. I joined the Black Students' Union, the Caribbean Club, and even an African dance team. I delved into my studies. I calculated different rotations for astronauts in anti-gravity. My advisor was Professor Jeff Hoffman, an actual astronaut. I literally hooked him up in the gym and watched him perform different rotations while I had a bunch of sensors attached to him. That's a once in a lifetime opportunity. I had a chance to evaluate pathways to Mars. I was talking about how to get to Mars. I realized that I had to test out this whole aerospace engineering dream, so I did some internships and some research and whatever it took to verify my passion.

One key piece to my journey was astronaut Mae Jemison, a woman I look up to so much that when I met her at Harvard University, I cried—and I gave her a really uncomfortable hug. When you think about an aerospace engineer or an astronaut, do you imagine an African American woman? No. It's very hard to find African Americans or women in the aerospace industry. Mae Jemison was the face that inspired me to keep going. When I met her, I had just finished a project for unified engineering, the weed-out course for aerospace engineering at MIT. I was ready go back

home to Georgia. I didn't think that I had what it took to graduate. Being able to see someone who looked like me gave me the extra push I needed. It changed my life because I could actually see a mirror of what I could become.

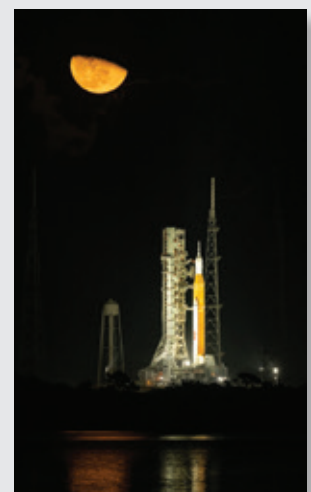
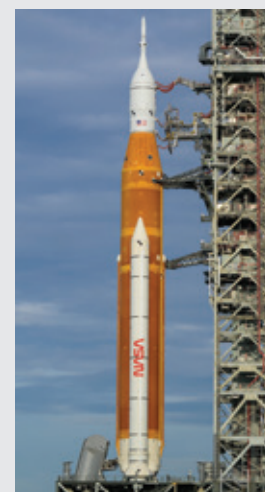
When I talk about a mirror, that's where you all come in. When I saw *Hidden Figures*, that was another moment I was thinking of completely changing the career path. When I looked around the classroom, I didn't see people who looked like me. When I went to the career fair, I didn't see people who looked like me. They were all Caucasian men. I didn't feel like I could step into those shoes. But when I saw *Hidden Figures*, I saw myself times three. I saw Mary Jackson. I saw Katherine Johnson. I saw Dorothy Vaughan. I saw possibility, literally, by looking at those women. I realized that they paid the price so that I could have an opportunity in aerospace engineering. Because when they were doing it, they couldn't even use the same restroom yet. Katherine Johnson was a "calculator," even though she had the expertise to be a physicist and more. But because she "didn't look like an aerospace engineer," she couldn't fill the shoes at that time.

I understood that they opened the doors, so that I could open the next doors wider and let more people in. We can change the narrative about the lack of diversity and inclusion in

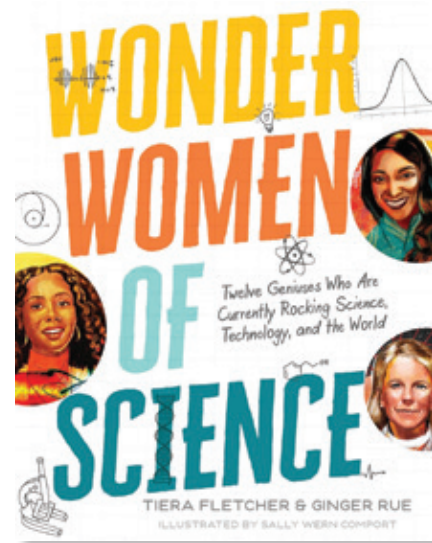
aerospace engineering. Equity and inclusion are vital to the success of our whole innovation as mankind. When we talk about diversity, when we talk about equity, we're talking about diversity of mind. I've been focusing on me as an example, but we're talking about people from different backgrounds, from different environments, from different experiences. If we all thought the same way, where would we be with AI?

This all brought me to the question: What is my purpose? I want to build rockets; that's my technological purpose. The majority of my career has been working on the space launch system. I started as a rocket structural analysis and design engineering intern during my time at MIT. Upon graduation in 2017, I went on to become a structural analysis engineer. Our company built the core stage of the Space Launch System rocket, which is 212 feet of a 300-plus-foot rocket. I became a structural engineer and engine section task lead upon transitioning to New Orleans. At the Michoud Assembly Facility, I was able to really leverage my analysis and design engineering skills. When I became pregnant with my firstborn, I had to take a desk job doing structural design engineering, because I couldn't crawl into the engine section anymore. I had a better leadership opportunity to leverage my relationship with all the different disciplines. I really grew from that

On November 16, 2022, Artemis I, NASA's new mega moon rocket, the Space Launch System (SLS), roared into the night sky and sent the Orion spacecraft on a 1.4-million-mile journey beyond the moon and back. The uncrewed flight test was the first in a series of increasingly complex missions that will set the stage for the first woman and first person of color to step foot on the lunar surface, and for a long-term presence at the moon that will enable future crewed missions to Mars. (All photos courtesy of NASA)



“When I saw *Hidden Figures*, I saw myself times three. I saw Mary Jackson. I saw Katherine Johnson. I saw Dorothy Vaughan. I saw possibility, literally, by looking at those women. I realized that they paid the price so that I could have an opportunity in aerospace engineering. Because when they were doing it, they couldn’t even use the same restroom yet.”



Top: *Wonder Women of Science*, by Tiera Fletcher and Ginger Rue, introduces readers to a computer scientist, a microbiologist, and more amazing women in unique specialties that didn’t exist until they created them. (Image courtesy of Candlewick Press)
Bottom: Fletcher set the tone of the Fourth Annual NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summit: Storytelling STEM with her inspiring opening keynote speech. (Photo: Jesse Rodriguez, Captured XC Photo & Media Services)

transition. I then became a Configuration Management and Product Integration Engineer, where I led the team through approvals to release the core stage to Florida, and we made the Artemis I launch happen. That was a literal blastoff to purpose. As you can imagine, that was a culmination of my career achievements, watching that massive rocket launch into our next phase of possibilities for humanity.

The Artemis program is going to return us to the moon and then bring us to Mars. For us to really understand what’s required for Mars, we need to go back to the moon, create a habitat, and allow us to experience what it is to bring humanity to another part of space and stay there for a long time. NASA’s Gateway is like another version of the International Space Station, but we’re building it around the moon.

But I realized that I needed to bring the narrative together: equity and inclusion and rocketry. So, I created *Wonder Women of Science: Twelve Geniuses Who Are Currently Rocking Science, Technology, and the World*, which showcases 12 fabulous women in STEM from different backgrounds, different cultures, with different disciplines. I reached a point in my career where I was finally comfortable with aerospace engineering. With my husband, Myron Fletcher, we created Rocket with the Fetters, an organization spreading the message that you can achieve your dreams.

It’s been a journey. I’m the 11-year-old little girl dreaming about becoming an aerospace engineer. I’m the college student watching *Hidden Figures* and meeting Mae Jemison, who decided to stick to it. And I’m the aerospace engineer standing here before you, today.

CONVERSATIONS

The Power of Connection

Societal Challenges & Medical Innovations in Women’s Healthcare



PAULA EISELT
Co-Director/Producer,
Aftershock



DR. MARC SCHIFFMAN
Executive Co-Director of the
Weill Cornell Medicine Fibroid
and Adenomyosis Center



**MODERATOR
MARIA HINOJOSA**
Journalist, Anchor,
Executive Producer, and
Pulitzer Prize Recipient

MARIA HINOJOSA: It was so interesting earlier that Kevin from the National Science Foundation is telling us nothing happens by chance. I think there’s something in the cosmos that brings us together, because what are the chances that on a Wednesday morning in New York City, we would all be sitting around talking about STEM and media and creatives and hearing someone from the National Science Foundation say, “We want to support storytelling.” I was born in Mexico City and raised in Chicago on the South Side. I’m a proud Harlemitte and a founder of my own media company, the nonprofit Futuro Media inspired by people like NYWIFT’s CEO Cynthia López and Board President Leslie Fields-Cruz. The reason I ended up in the United States is because my father was a dreamer. He was a medical doctor from a little town in Mexico. He was the first in his family to go to college and then decided that he wanted to help deaf people to be able to hear again. I think about that—in the 1950s, a Mexican guy saying, “I want help deaf people to hear. If they make the choice, I want them to be able to do that.” He was hired by the University of

Chicago. I think a lot about the dreamer part of my father, the essence of why we do this. What is our mission? What is our purpose? And so, I want start with that, for both of you. Dr. Marc, what is that essence of the dreamer in you? And if there’s something that you want to say about yourself that isn’t in the digital bio, because you’re a human being, you can tell us that, too.

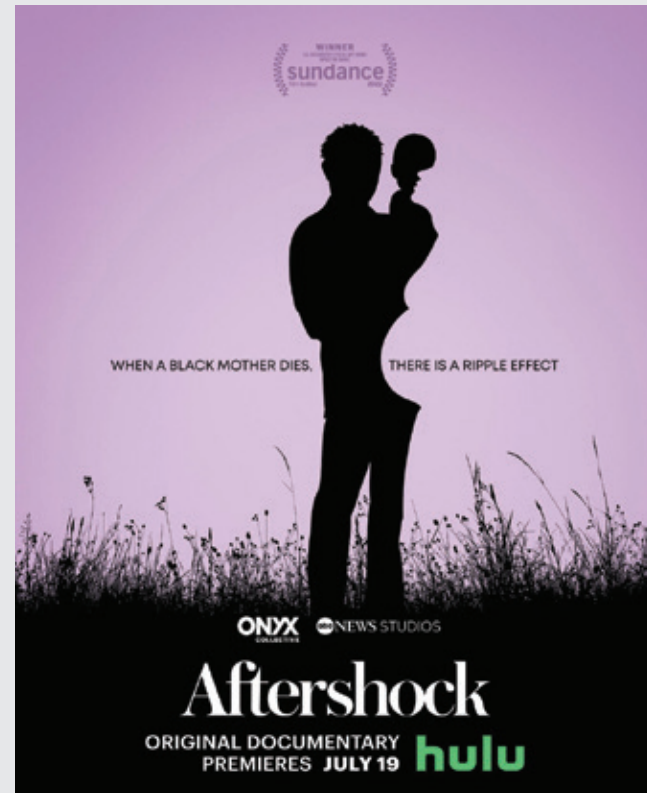
DR. MARC SCHIFFMAN: I am a human being and my passion is in medicine. Tiera [Fletcher] gave a very uplifting speech, literally. Hopefully I can bring some inspiration, too, with the uplifting changes in healthcare. My field by training is called interventional radiology. We do minimally invasive cancer and vascular surgeries all over the body. I was a special ed teacher before I went to medical school. Something that you really have to learn in that field is how to connect with the children. They’re not going start learning until they have trust. I think that applies to healthcare, too. All of the things that we hear in the press are very accurate, as far as staffing and patients not being able to have their voices heard. I’m very passionate about trying to create a level, equitable playing

field for everyone. I've had the privilege of seeing thousands of women in consults over the past 12 years. The things that I've always been passionate about are trying to help people connect and creating better ways of doing things.

HINOJOSA: I think, all of us would appreciate human connectivity within the context of the medical field. That's why I became friends with my dentist, actually. I was like, oh my God, you're a nice human being. I travel to New Jersey for my dentist. Human connectivity is really important. Paula, you're a filmmaker, among other things. What would you say is your mission at its root, your passion?

PAULA EISELT: My passion is filmmaking and within that uplifting everyday people who do heroic things. I gravitate toward stories about injustice and using art to make an impact—allowing people to see lived experiences. Like Tiera, I started my journey young. I went to an Orthodox Jewish high school and there wasn't any education about filmmaking. I had to find it. I ended up interning and creating opportunities for myself, and then went to NYU Film School where I had a wonderful professor, Marco Williams. Because of Marco I really delved into documentary filmmaking. When I graduated, I started working for Marco and then on my own films. I made a film call *93Queen* about an all-female, Hasidic ambulance corps in Brooklyn, the first to provide dignified emergency healthcare for women. The all-male corps banned women from joining. It was an incredible experience. It's on HBO Max now and was co-produced by *POV*.

I recently co-directed *Aftershock* about the U.S. maternal mortality crisis. The United States is the most dangerous place in the industrialized world to give birth. And Black women die at three times the rate of white women. We are in a crisis right now. The film focuses on the lived experiences of people within the system, not merely talking heads. I also recently made *Under G-d*, about the interfaith legal response to the Dobbs decision. As we all know, reproductive healthcare



“Black women are three times more likely to die than their white counterparts with the same symptoms. Why is that? This is a growing epidemic in our community. . . . If these numbers were flipped around and white women were dying at the rate that Black women are, it would be a national crisis.” —Paula Eiselt (Images courtesy of Hulu)

is healthcare, and I definitely have a healthcare thread in my work.

HINOJOSA: There's always a moment when you meet someone or someone tells you a story and you think, that's the film. What was that moment for *Aftershock*?

EISELT: There were two moments. The first was when I realized that we were in crisis as a country. At the end of 2017, ProPublica came out with a series called *Lost Mothers*, alerting the media that we are the most dangerous place in the industrialized world to give birth. Of course, the Black community has been saying this for decades. I read about Shalon Irving, a CDC epidemiologist who died three weeks postpartum after being dismissed over and over again by healthcare providers. I was struck to my core that this was happening in this country. I'm a mom of four and I had my own adverse experiences within the maternal healthcare system. I understood what it was like for me, and then seeing what happened to Shalon Irving, I just felt like I needed to use my skillset to help uplift these stories. I started developing the film at Concordia Studio. I was a fellow there. Later on, I met Tonya Lewis Lee, my co-director.

But the topic really became a film when I met Shawnee Benton Gibson. The people, the characters, the protagonists are what make a story. I had been on Instagram looking within the birth justice community, following different people, and I saw a call to action uplifting a woman named Shamony Gibson, who had just died postpartum. Her mother, Shawnee, and her surviving partner, Omari, were putting on an event called *Aftershock* to celebrate her life and also start a discussion about maternal health within their community. This was a mere two months after she had died. I saw there was an Eventbrite with some contact information. I just sent cold emails to see what would happen, not expecting anything. Within a couple hours, I was on the phone with Shawnee. The second I spoke to her, I knew I was speaking someone to who was going change the world.

HINOJOSA: People want to tell their stories.

Even though as journalists oftentimes we're not sure if we should call, because we don't want to be invasive. But at the same time, it's our responsibility, right? You never know what's going to happen because people actually want to tell their stories. Which leads me to you, Dr. Marc, and the work that you're doing in terms of using voice, literally voice, to keep patients connected. Talk to us about the work that you're doing with the VoiceLove project.

SCHIFFMAN: This started with Covid. By April of 2020, many of the ICU doctors at our hospital were sick, and there were more patients than we'd ever seen. They needed doctors. My colleague Tamatha Fenster and I volunteered. We studied to be ICU doctors again. It had been at least 15 years. The day that we were going start, ICU doctors from California, upstate New York, and places elsewhere in the country that hadn't had a surge yet came to New York City to help. So now they had ICU doctors. They didn't need us in that capacity. We said, "What can we do to help?" They told us, "The thing we're struggling with the most is calling the families. By the time we finish all the work, it's 11:00 at night, two hours after our shift. And we still haven't been able to call." Meanwhile, the families are sitting at home by the phone. So, we started a program with other New York-Presbyterian doctors where we would do rounds every morning with the ICU team and then call all the families. Every one of the families were desperate, and they all wanted the same thing: "Could you just hold the phone up to their ears so we know that they can hear our voice?" We were heartbroken. Tamatha and I found this kid's toy at Target, which was a speaker that connected to an app. I purchased a couple of them on Saturday night at 7:00. I remember because everyone was clapping. The next day after rounds, we gave out a couple of these speakers. For those families, it was unbelievable. They were just sending messages: We love you. We're with you. We're cheering for you.

HINOJOSA: Just to put this in context,



VoiceLove's mission is to improve patient outcomes through keeping people connected to their family and friends. For every channel purchased, VoiceLove will donate a channel to a hospice patient and their family/friends so that their time is filled with as much love and connection as possible. For more information visit VoiceLove.com (Photo courtesy of VoiceLove)

remember, everybody in a hospital was triple suited up, right? You weren't allowed to go in. There was totally restricted access.

SCHIFFMAN: After we gave it to those families, they were so happy. They were praying in multiple languages from all around the world. I reached out to the toy company and by that Sunday afternoon, they agreed to donate units for all of New York-Presbyterian's ventilator patients. For the rest of the year, patients and families were connecting with Tamatha and myself, we were purchasing these and donating them around the country. On Christmas, my mother developed a fever and we wound up bringing her to the hospital. She passed after a long ICU stay. Of course, the family couldn't be there. Tamatha and I said, "We need to change healthcare." It's not okay that you can never get in touch with your loved one. We went ward to ward and looked at all the different patients who weren't being served by communication the way it is today. We talked to nurses, techs, patients, families, and we met with the American Hospital Association, and we started to come up with a fix. That fix is VoiceLove, which basically is an app and software that turns phones into walkie-talkies. You can have

family and friends anywhere in the world right at your bedside, sending messages and prayers. We've never really cared enough in healthcare to make these provisions. If patients speak a foreign language, maybe you get an interpreter service for a couple of minutes. Otherwise, you're just sitting there alone all day. If patients are very religious, there's never been a way for them to pray with their loved ones. We've had patients have their entire church with them. And also, last rites. Many religions have several different types of last rites. We've never been able to administer those. Now we're going to be able to. It goes back to connecting people.

HINOJOSA: One of my favorite Mexican sayings is that there is no bad from which good cannot come. And that's the story, right? Turning pain into purpose. Paula, I made a film in 2012 about infant mortality, specifically looking at Black and Latina women. It turns out Rochester, New York has one of the highest rates of infant mortality for Black and Latina women. We ended up talking to a doctor based in Rochester whose infant mortality research led him to something called toxic stress, which is essentially an accumulation of potentially centuries of toxic stress in your system. You're enslaved, and then after generations of living in deep poverty, you're dealing with all of the trauma and pregnancy passes that down into your baby. It's not a surprise that there is high infant mortality. I'm bringing this up because when we wanted to focus on this in the film, we got a lot of pushback. I'm not going to name any names, but it was kind of like, what are you talking about? We had to prove that what we were talking about was scientific and data-based. Which leads to you, Paula. Part of your reporting is that what Black women, Indigenous women, Latinas, immigrant women experience is "Oh well, they're used to pain. Nothing's wrong with you. You can handle it. You're not really in pain anyway." It's a narrative that leads to death. So how do you hope to use your film, your work as a communicator, to clarify the narrative about how Black women and

“What's not talked about enough is morbidity. Morbidity is suffering. A lot of patients have complications they don't die from. It's not counted in the mortality statistics, but it can lead to weeks of hospitalization, months or years of disability, including PTSD. If you extrapolate from what we know about the maternal mortality rate in Black women, then there is much higher morbidity also.”

—DR. MARC SCHIFFMAN

pain are often completely dismissed by medical institutions?

EISELT: That's very much the foundation of all of this. It's about not having human-centered healthcare where Black women are seen and heard. When we set out to make this film, the number one thing we did not want to do was tell a doom and gloom story. We wanted to present through lived experiences, the systemic problems that need to be fixed, but offer solutions of how women can have amazing, dignified births in whatever setting they're in. As Neel Shah says in our film, having dignified care isn't a luxury. It's the key to better outcomes. It's not an extra thing—it's the thing. As you said, Black women have been blamed for their own poor health outcomes by the racist theory that Black women don't feel pain or something is inherently wrong with them biologically. This film is all evidence-based. There are systemic factors. There's nothing inherently wrong with Black women or anyone. If someone is higher risk, then they should get better care. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with them. There are so many elements that go into these outcomes, but the key is not being seen or heard, which then leads to too much intervention too soon or too little intervention too late. The too-much-too-soon is our skyrocketing C-section rate. C-sections are great when they save lives, which is 6 to 10% of births. But in this country, 33% are C-sections and in the Bronx it's almost 50%. This means that women are undergoing major abdominal

surgery at really, really high rates. With that rise in C-sections, the mortality rate rises, too. There's a correlation. It is a for-profit system. C-sections get reimbursed more. They're quick. And you can control them. So, if you are someone who's marginalized within the system, you're going to have much less say in what happens to you. It has nothing to do with socioeconomic status. A Black woman with a PhD is five times more likely to die in childbirth than a white woman living below the poverty line. There's so much in the system that's baked in, even from the time doctors are in medical school. A large percentage of medical students still think that Black people don't feel the same amount of pain. The education has to change from the very beginning.

HINOJOSA: And there's also the issue of women, right? Because you know, "Oh, it's all in your head" or "Estas loca," the old favorite. For me, it's all about owning the capacity to answer back. Which, by the way, I did not have. I watched my husband, who's an Afro Dominican man, fight after I gave birth—two C-sections—because they wanted to take the baby away because she was jaundiced. They wanted to take the baby away to put her under lights, but you know what cures jaundice? Breastfeeding. Dr. Marc, you're in that sphere. What should we do to encourage women to take up space and own their voices within the context of the medical field?

SCHIFFMAN: The first thing is in reference to the ProPublica research. I remember reading in it that women with the exact same medical



Following the preventable deaths of loved ones due to childbirth complications, two families galvanize activists, birth-workers, and physicians to reckon with one of the most pressing American crises of our time—the U.S. maternal health crisis. *Aftershock*, the recipient of the 2022 Sundance Special Jury Award: Impact for Change, is available on Hulu in the U.S. and Disney+ worldwide. (Photo courtesy of Hulu)

characteristics did much more poorly at one area's hospitals versus another. ProPublica concluded that there really is a difference in the quality of care available at different hospitals. I've had the privilege of performing a couple of dozen life-saving postpartum bleed embolizations. That's available 24 hours a day at New York-Presbyterian, but that's not a service that's available at many hospitals.

HINOJOSA: One of the main causes of maternal mortality is the postpartum bleed, right?

SCHIFFMAN: Yes.

HINOJOSA: Go ahead, Paula. You wanted to say something?

EISELT: I don't want to dispute anything, but it's not necessarily postpartum bleeds, because almost half of all postpartum deaths are after women leave the hospital, up to one year.

HINOJOSA: Maternal mortality can be within the first year, like infant mortality. A lot of people think infant mortality means the baby dies within an hour or a day of the birth. Actually, it is categorized as infant mortality anytime a baby dies within one year. And is it one year for maternal mortality?

EISELT: Yes. And you can still be bleeding when you're home.

HINOJOSA: Sure. So, you now have a way laparoscopically to treat this?

SCHIFFMAN: That's what our field does. With no incisions, we're able to stop the bleed. With up to 13% of births, that happens on the day of delivery. Afterward there are delayed bleeds and pulmonary emboli. We have treatments, little vacuums, that can go in without incisions and suck the clots out. But again, that's only if you're at a place where interventional radiologists are available. Unfortunately, that's not the case at many of the places with the highest rates of mortality. That's something that no one's really talking about. There are criteria for a postpartum bleed. If someone has a C-section, they'll allow up to a liter of blood loss, with a vaginal delivery it's about 500 cc. They pack the vagina with mesh. In 2023, that's what we're doing. If it's bleeding, just pack it with material. There's been a real lack of innovation as far as better technology goes.

HINOJOSA: Because it's just women. You know, if men had mammograms they would've been completely transformed. Okay, go ahead.

SCHIFFMAN: We've established at our hospital a pathway where we do an early consultation. It takes me about 10 minutes to do the procedure and it's just a needle stick, no incisions. What's not talked about enough is morbidity. Morbidity is suffering. A lot of patients have complications they don't die from. It's not counted in the mortality statistics, but it can lead to weeks of hospitalization,

“In all these screenings and panels, especially for providers, there's not one where someone doesn't come up and say that they're going to reassess the way they care for patients.”

—PAULA EISELT

months or years of disability, including PTSD. If you extrapolate from what we know about the maternal mortality rate in Black women, then there is much higher morbidity also. A lot of that is about where you're delivering. Do they have the services that can stop a bleed? Then you get better and can go home in the next couple of days. Or do you keep bleeding, have massive transfusions, an emergency hysterectomy, and a big incision, with recovery for months? You're not necessarily in the statistics that get all the attention, but that's much more common for Black women also.

EISELT: I want to add that part of the issue is the lack of midwives and doulas as part of our maternal healthcare system. We're one of the only countries that don't have those integrated in. Every other Western country does. We just don't have that human-centered care model. Midwives are certified healthcare providers. What they don't do is surgery, but they know physiological birth better than an OB, who is a trained surgeon. We need both. If there's an emergency, you need what Dr. Schiffman offers. But for the 85% of women who are low risk, having midwifery care, doula care, birthing in settings that you choose, having more autonomy over your own care leads to better outcomes. It leads to lower rates of morbidity and mortality because things are caught quicker. You're heard. You're listened to. You feel safe. Your birthing experience is just overall better. We need access to high-tech innovations, but we also need access to other providers that will keep the moms and the babies safer.

HINOJOSA: There's one last question I'm going to ask: What are you doing next? By the way, what I've been working on over the last six months is

a *Frontline* film: *After Uvalde: Guns, Grief & Texas Politics*. It focuses on a little girl who lost all of her friends and is transforming pain into purpose and advocacy by taking on Texas state politics. So, how do we transform pain and make it into something different, and what's your next big thing? We'll start with you, Dr. Marc.

SCHIFFMAN: My goal, in my mother's honor, is to keep people around the world connected. I'll tell you one patient example. There's a woman from Africa who had a severe postpartum bleed. She was in a coma with very little family here. We have a VoiceLove channel with messages coming through from Senegal, Nigeria, Paris, London, constantly in all different languages, prayers from her village.

EISELT: I want to talk about *Aftershock* for one second before I get to the next. The impact that we've had with the film has been incredible. It's been screened at over 250 institutions around the country—medical schools, hospital systems, insurance companies, everywhere. In all these screenings and panels, especially for providers, there's not one where someone doesn't come up and say that they're going to reassess the way they care for patients. And the protagonists, Shawnee Benton Gibson, Omari Maynard, and Bruce McIntyre, are full-time activists now. They basically live in D.C. They've used their pain and turned it into power to change policies. For me, I'm releasing my short film *Under G-d*, so I'm continuing my work in that sense. Then I'm taking a creative palate cleanser. I'm working on a film that's not healthcare-related. It's about the glory days of the Catskills.

HINOJOSA: Love that. Thank you, Paula and Dr. Marc. Have a great rest of your conference and be creative, everyone. Thank you so much.

Climate Change

Using Media to Inform, Educate, and Prepare for the Imminent Crisis



WILLIAM KENWORTHY
Regional Leader of Urban Design at HOK



CAITLIN SAKS
NOVA Senior Producer



**MODERATOR
YVONNE RUSSO**
Award-winning Producer, Director, and Writer

YVONNE RUSSO: I want to thank the Paley Center and the National Science Foundation. This conversation is about that inconvenient truth, climate change. This is an opportunity for us to engage in a dialogue to truly understand the threat that we're all facing. If I may just ask the audience, how many of you believe in climate change? Just raise your hand. Okay, that looks like almost everyone. Do you feel that you've been significantly educated on climate change?

AUDIENCE: No!

RUSSO: Well, you're at the right place, at the right moment, because we are going to learn from some distinguished guests. Please welcome William Kenworthy, the regional leader of urban design at HOK, the global design, architecture, engineering, and planning firm that transformed LaGuardia's new Terminal B, the first airport terminal to earn LEED v4 Gold certification based on its reduced emissions, water and energy conservation measures, and use of recycled materials. And welcome to Caitlin Saks, a senior producer for PBS's NOVA, the popular primetime science series, demystifying the scientific and

technological concepts that shape and define our lives, our planet, and our universe. If I may start by having you both introduce yourselves and tell us about the work that you're doing in your profession and how it relates to climate change and STEM in general. Let's start with Bill. Then I'll go to Caitlin.

WILLIAM KENWORTHY: I'm an architect and urban designer focusing on different types of large-scale projects. Not solely buildings, but all the spaces in between—the streets, the open spaces, the parks, the waterfronts that make cities the wonderful places they are. I'm truly passionate about cities, especially this city, and about making it a great vibrant place in spite of the issues related to climate change coming down the road. I work with a lot of scientists, but I'm not a scientist myself. A lot of the information and maps I'm going to share are based on the most current science from the New York City Panel on Climate Change.

CAITLIN SAKS: I'm a senior producer at NOVA, the PBS science series. Next year will be our 50th anniversary, and we're still the most popular science documentary television program. We're

also on the PBS app, the Amazon docs channel, and YouTube. We are an anthology series, which means we work with outside producers. They are really their films. As a senior producer, what I do is find and develop the stories and partner with the producers who are making the films. I help hone their story into a strong science story. We cover everything, including climate, space, dinosaurs, archeology, medicine. I oversee most of our climate programming.

RUSSO: Can you tell us how independent producers can approach NOVA and how they engage with you? Tell us about that process.

SAKS: There are a lot of different ways, including coming to events like this Summit and hearing about stories from people we meet. We do have a portal on our website for submissions, but people also email us stories. What we're really looking for is a science story. The biggest challenge with climate pitches is that climate has now permeated our culture. We always have to have that nugget of science. What is the area of engineering or science exploration or discovery that is happening here?

RUSSO: Bill, can you tell us about the intricate work that you're doing with HOK? How did your research come about? Basically, launch us in terms of the population and how we are going to be affected by climate change.

KENWORTHY: I worked on Mayor Bloomberg's Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency after superstorm Sandy. We did comprehensive plans for the areas most affected, but only looking at 3 feet of sea level rise to try to understand what protections might need to go in place to protect us going forward. Since then, the science has evolved. We now understand that there could be as much as 6 feet of sea level rise if we follow the Paris accords on reducing carbon. I started to think, wow, that's a significant height to protect the edge of the city—real estate, the waterfront, and parks. We need to start to understand if there are ways to do that other than just building a wall around the city: a managed/planned retreat that takes a couple steps back from the edge of

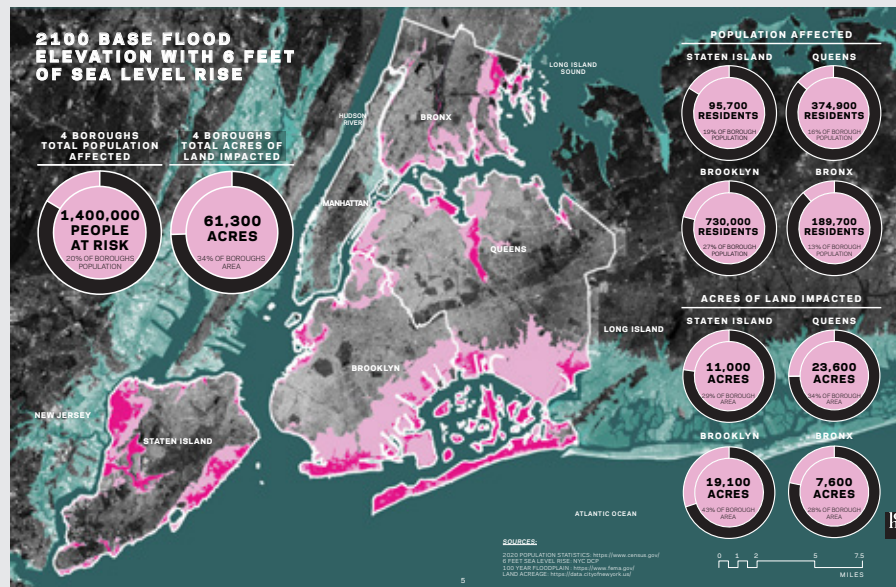
the water. We need an understanding of what the city might look and feel like going forward. Also, where will the people in those vulnerable places live in the future? This map only focuses on the outer boroughs. Manhattan has several plans in place. Everything in pink is underwater with 6 feet of sea level rise, potentially by 2100. That is 20,000 acres and 280,000 residents, based on today's census. The next map looks at the base flood elevation for a 100-year storm, which is how FEMA and insurance companies calculate flood risk. These are the areas that are at risk from powerful storms with that 6 feet of sea level rise. As you can see, we're dealing with 40% of Brooklyn and a third of Queens. Nobody's been talking about the outer boroughs.

RUSSO: This is fact, the sea levels are rising. We all know that. We understand that the Himalayas are melting. There are floods in Pakistan. There are floods in India. Populations are migrating. We have climate migration. It's happening all around us. What's amazing about this is that we have people like Bill who are working on these plans and getting the information out to the public.

KENWORTHY: After we did these maps, we started to understand what the real impacts were in terms of facilities and neighborhoods. As in most cities, the most vulnerable populations are probably living in those floodplains—130,000 public housing residents would be affected by this. We need to start planning how we are going to deal with these relocations. Where are people going to live so that New York can go forward as a thriving city?

RUSSO: You're talking about underserved communities. Can you expand on that? How are people affected and what are the plans?

KENWORTHY: First, it's about identifying the issues and then the possibilities, starting with where folks might be able to migrate that's tied to transit and existing and potential new infrastructure. It's organized in a way that allows communities to travel on subways and still have the opportunity to be in mixed-use neighborhoods.



In this image provided by global design, architecture, engineering, and planning firm HOK, the bright pink areas denote land that will be underwater with 6 feet of sea level rise and the new coastline of Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island. The light pink areas will be regularly flooded with the same 6 feet of sea level rise. (Image provided by HOK)

A lot of those opportunities came forward as we looked at the land. Of the 1.4 million people in the areas who will be impacted in the future, a million of them are Black and Brown. Also, big pieces of infrastructure, power plants, and our three major metropolitan airports are impacted on waterfront edges.

RUSSO: It's imperative to share this knowledge. We talk a lot about media literacy, but we don't always know the intricacies of what is happening. I'm learning more about this here. Caitlin, how do you address media literacy at *NOVA*? Particularly when you have certain states and politicians that don't want to address climate change?

SAKS: *NOVA* doesn't wade into politics. We leave that to *FRONTLINE*. We actually have an incredibly politically diverse audience. It's just about even between conservative, liberal, and independent. The way we approach it is as a scientific investigation, a scientific mystery, and not going in with an agenda. We're not advocating for any particular solution. We're just informing. We often don't even lead with the word climate. For example, we made a film several years ago called *Decoding the Weather Machine* about climate. Another one, *Polar Extremes*, which the National Science Foundation funded, was an action-adventure series that took you to the Arctic and Antarctica. It built up climate history

through deep time. Through it all, you gain an appreciation of the science. We stick to the science. It's just the facts, folks. The other way we do it is based on a psychological approach. There's a growing body of research on how to talk about climate change in a productive way. We try to reach the widest possible audience by leaving the politics aside and focusing on what really speaks to everyone—information.

RUSSO: Bill, when we talk about politics or dispersing this knowledge to the public, how do you go about this? How do you transfer all of this knowledge and create the action that we need to be resilient?

KENWORTHY: We're publishing as much as we can publicly. I've spoken to as many of the individuals in the city and local governments as I can. It's about getting the conversation going now, because we know we have this thing coming. There are ways to address it now. We need to start thinking long-term about how we're going to accommodate these places and people that need to be in a different situation going forward.

RUSSO: So, what are those steps?

KENWORTHY: A lot of the reason we did this work was to give political cover to folks who only have four-year terms to get these conversation going publicly. So, we can begin to take the steps for that long-term planning. In the next map, there

is a lot of the zoning to accommodate the people we're talking about. The yellow is within a five-minute walk of existing and planned transit stations, with opportunities for development that could accommodate people in vulnerable situations. It's underdeveloped or vacant today. We're talking about one million residential units potentially in need of relocation. On average, the development will be 12 to 15 stories. It's an opportunity to think at the community level. We've identified about 7,200 acres of potential development around the city tied to transit. I basically took city data and just put it on a map to help visualize it. Part of what I do is graphic storytelling. It's all about just getting the information out.

RUSSO: You're talking about migrating people. Let's talk about that.

KENWORTHY: Obviously there's a larger question about gentrification in any of these neighborhoods. As older and vulnerable neighborhoods move, what is the social infrastructure that helps support them and what are the ties that those communities have? How do we begin to understand what those issues are from a social sciences standpoint? What are these new communities going to look and feel like? What are the issues that we're going to contend with? This is not a top-down approach. It should be a community driven approach. There are hopeful ideas about how the city could be going forward. Today, the Gowanus Canal is a largely industrial area. When

you look at the new mappings, you start to see residences set back and park-like environments in the floodplains. These not only address the recreational and ecological needs, but can also be places for artists and maker spaces that can be built floodproof. You'll see the parks flood, but not the residential spaces sitting higher. We'll have more density happening in the buildings, but it will be very affordable construction, not hyper-luxury housing. Creating mixed use ground floors for maker spaces, community spaces, educational, and retail makes this neighborhood still look and feel like Brooklyn. We have to stop allowing folks to build purely luxury housing. We have to look at ways that we can offset and create more affordable housing in general.

RUSSO: Caitlin, can you tell us about your show *Weathering the Future*?

SAKS: *Weathering the Future* is one of our recent climate films. You can still find it wherever you get *NOVA*. The film looks at the impacts of climate change in the United States through the eyes of those who are on the frontlines, who are already feeling it and finding ways to adapt, to be resilient. It looks at extreme rainfall, sea level rise, drought, wildfires, and some solutions. The hope in the program is showing how in the face of this adversity, we can rise to the challenge. On the Louisiana coast they are losing land to the sea at an accelerated rate due to human land use, sea level rise, and extreme

This rendering of Ninth Street in Brooklyn, created by HOK, shows a future with new housing set back and protected from floods, fronted by recreational areas designed to accommodate flooding, including valuable wetlands and parks. (Image provided by HOK)



storms. What's interesting is they could be the first climate refugees, thinking about managed retreat. But producer/director Kiki Kapany came back and said that they're not there yet. They are coming up with some very low-tech innovative solutions to buy time. Now they know what the science is, but they are still fighting. Their story and their truth were that they needed to find some other solutions. I bring that up because

already many people who are suffering. There are already lives that are being lost. The faster we move, the less suffering there will be.

RUSSO: I agree. I don't have a doubt in my mind that we'll get there. I don't say that lightly. I'm an Indigenous person, and we've had knowledge passed down through generations. Look at the way Indigenous people used fire to manage the forest. Look at the highways that were once trails.

“This is not a top-down approach. It should be a community driven approach.”

—WILLIAM KENWORTHY

everything you're saying tells me that there are a million different stories in these communities. If I were a woman in film and TV in New York, I would be looking at those stories and how to bring that to life.

KENWORTHY: I'm looking for all of you to help figure out how we better communicate this to the broader public.

RUSSO: Speaking of that, how do we become resilient in all of this? We get the knowledge out to the people, but what do you feel is the hope for the future?

KENWORTHY: Honestly, the thing we have right now is time. It's really about getting that storytelling out as soon as possible. Storytelling is knowledge. Knowledge is power.

SAKS: I started following climate in college. I studied earth and planetary science and climate science and that's when I became very aware of the issue. Not many people were talking about it then. But I have become more optimistic in the last decade, even as we're seeing the impact get worse and all of the politics. There are so many more people who realize this is a problem and are dedicating their life's work to addressing it. I don't think climate change stands a chance with everything that humanity is going to throw at it. The question is, how much damage is going to be done? How long will it take? Because there are

It's transfer of knowledge. Knowledge is power. It's why we're all here to learn and transfer this knowledge, because the one thing we do share is our humanity. It's the love for each other in our communities. I see a hand raised over there. Yes, Leslie?

LESLIE FIELDS-CRUZ: There's a lot of apathy in our communities about this. You think the sea will rise 6 feet by 2100? I'm not going to be here. My youngest will be 95. How can we use the media to really impact our communities? Can you share some of the ways that NOVA does that?

SAKS: First, we are already being impacted by climate change. Look at the air quality alerts from the wildfires. Addressing it now can lead to a healthier future for everyone. NOVA conducts impact campaigns when we can get funding for them. For *Weathering the Future*, our approach was to lean into trying to help empower local storytelling. It's a global thing, but the impact is felt locally. The solutions will be local. This is where local storytelling becomes incredibly important. We partnered with local PBS stations to share knowledge with them on best practices, on how to communicate on climate topics, and they produced their own content. Then we helped amplify it through the platform that we have and our social media accounts. So, what can we do is empower storytellers across the nation.

CASE STUDY

The Human Trial

Putting Faces on Scientific Research



LISA HEPNER
Director/Writer/
Producer, *The Human Trial*



MODERATOR
LESLIE FIELDS-CRUZ
NYWIFT Board President

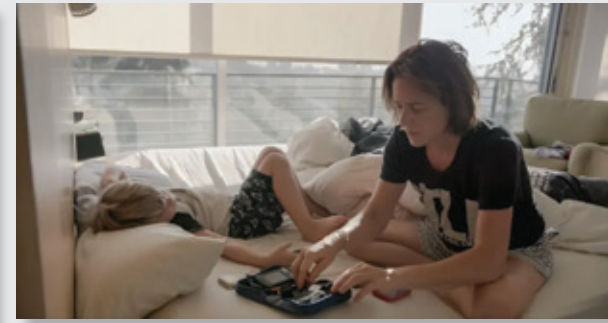
LESLIE FIELDS-CRUZ: In my work at Black Public Media, we receive a lot of different films. When we're reviewing them, often we ask ourselves, "Where's this filmmaker coming from? Why are they interested in this story?" Sometimes afterward, we'll find out that they have the issue or they're an ally to someone. *The Human Trial* is about Type 1 diabetes, the science behind it, and the discoveries that are being made. Lisa, you're in this film and you are a Type 1 diabetes sufferer. I just want you to share your journey as to why you felt the need to make this film, and at what point you knew that you needed to be in it.

LISA HEPNER: First, I just want to do a big shout-out to NYWIFT, because I moved to New York from Ottawa, Canada in 1995. I didn't know anybody. I didn't know New York. Someone said, "Oh, you should go talk to NYWIFT. They mentor young women." I got the roster for NYWIFT, and I literally called 100 women. Ten or maybe 20 of those women made time to have coffee with me. I worked with three of them very closely over the next 12 years. So, thank you, NYWIFT. I owe a lot to this organization.

Okay, so why did I do this? I've had Type 1

diabetes for 32 years. A continuous glucose monitor tests my blood sugar every 30 seconds and I have an insulin pump, but it is not a cure. Last night, I was staying with a friend in Harlem and my blood sugar was 400. That's crazy high. I couldn't get it down. I was calling my husband in Los Angeles, saying, "I need help. I'm either going to call my doctor right now, or we're going to figure this out together." Turns out I hadn't changed the clock on my iPhone and it hadn't synced with the other device. This is not a cure. We're told that it is by the people who develop these products. We're told by big pharma that with this, you can climb Mount Everest. But it is only true if you have your own personal doctor and your own personal chef. Most people do not. Diabetes is an epidemic. It's the other pandemic, but it's invisible. I purposely wear sleeveless stuff when I do speeches, because I want people to see that I am a bionic woman, but I don't have the strength of a bionic woman. My life is very fragile. And that is because when you inject insulin, you can inject too much. If you don't treat that, you can go into a coma and die. If you don't have enough insulin, you can eventually, go into diabetic ketoacidosis and die. There's a lot

In 2011, filmmakers Lisa Hepner and Guy Mossman heard about a radical stem-cell treatment for diabetes. Driven by a desire to cure Hepner of her own Type 1 diabetes, the married couple secured unprecedented, real-time access to a clinical trial using cells from discarded IVF embryos in San Diego—only the sixth ever embryonic stem-cell trial in the world. What follows is an intimate journey with the patients and scientists who put themselves on the line to be first. In the world of biotech and medical research, there are no tidy solutions. For more information visit www.thehumantrial.com. (Photos courtesy of The Human Trial.)



at stake for people with diabetes. And it's a disease that has a stigma attached to it. What made me commit to telling this story was my husband, Guy Mossman. We weren't married yet, and I had really low blood sugar in the night. I woke up drenched in sweat and discombobulated. He was like, "Holy crap, what is this?" Well, it's diabetes. He had no idea until he lived with me. And he said, "You know what? I'm a cinematographer. You're a producer. Let's make a film." And I didn't want to, because I wanted to pass as normal. I wanted to just be a producer in New York. I didn't want this disability. I didn't want it to hold me back. But then I started reading the statistics. That was in 2008. On average, five million people die from diabetes each year. In 2021, 6.7 million people died from diabetes—6.7 million people is the size of Utah and Connecticut, or the city of Madrid. You're either dying fast or you're dying slowly. Three out of the four people in that 6.7 million live in developing countries. Not only is it a terrible disease, but the treatments are very unequal. There aren't films being made about this. It was my duty to do this.

FIELDS-CRUZ: Your husband was the cinematographer. Did he put the camera directly on you

at first? Or was it "let's find other people, too"?

HEPNER: At first, I thought, no way do I want to be in the film. I'm not Morgan Spurlock. I'm not doing *Super Size Me*. Everybody has a better story than I do. Which is true. We do documentaries to give a voice to people who don't normally have a voice. But then, when I was telling people about the film over the years, they kept asking, "Why aren't you in it? You're Type 1. You have a personal motivation. It's obvious that you're sticking it out with this film because you have the disease." It wasn't until the edit room that I realized I had a place in the film. I could bridge the science with the patients. I had to distill the science for the layperson. Who better than me, who lives with the disease and has been filming for so long? I hope I'm not in there too much, because I didn't want that. But I do provide a bit of a through line.

FIELDS-CRUZ: When you got to that point of, I'm going to be in the film, it was after you were post-production, correct? So, you had to go back?

HEPNER: We had an editor, Scott Stevenson, who does narrative scripted and unscripted, whom I really respect. He taught me that it's okay to go back in time with a re-creation, because in the film

the camera was never on me except for certain Skype calls with the researchers. When we went to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, I was not being filmed. And we did a re-creation outside of Dodger Stadium with the palm trees. And it worked. Honestly, did I drive in a car in the backseat wearing an abaya? Yes, I did. Did I test my blood sugar while in that abaya? Yes, I did. I felt like it was okay to do that.

FIELDS-CRUZ: In the 1990s, I worked at a youth theater company. There was a single parent who would bring all four of her kids year after year. I saw her children grow up in this theater program. She was a force to be reckoned with. One year, though, she came in a wheelchair. I found out she had diabetes. And then she passed away. When Greg in your film says, "I want to be there for my kids. I want to see them when they grow up," that particular scene really resonated with me. I saw that devastation of what happens when this takes a family member. I saw it. These four kids are amazing. I'm in touch with them through Facebook. They are a testament to their mother. This story would've been so important back then. Talk to us more about why this story is important.

HEPNER: First of all, I'm sorry for your loss. So many people are touched by diabetes. Statistically, it's one in four. People see my insulin or my CGM [continuous glucose monitor], and they say, "You're diabetic? My mom has it, but she doesn't manage it." But why is it always put on the patient that we're not doing better? It's not our fault. Like, that's the other thing. I have friends who passed away during Covid because

they had Type 1. People think it's a benign disease. There is a stigma attached to it, like somehow you deserve it. And people will say in the diabetes community, "Oh, you're Type 1. Okay, so that's insulin. You had it since you were a kid. But Type 2, oh, you need to lose weight or you need to do this." And you know what? Diabetes is a bad disease for everybody. Nobody deserves it. And if you live in a food desert and you're working two and a half jobs as a single mom, are you going to have the best care possible? Are you going to have access to insulin? Probably not. One out of four people are rationing insulin in this country. This is America. What is going on? Thankfully, there was a cap recently passed in Congress that made it \$35 for people on Medicare, as well as people who have insurance. But that was only because big pharma was shamed in front of a senate committee. Your friend who passed left four children without a mom. It affects everybody. It affects society. It is a \$966 billion global health expenditure treating diabetes. And I'm just talking like an economist here. Never mind the human cost.

FIELDS-CRUZ: Let's go over to the science side of this. How easy or how difficult was it for you to find your subjects from the science side? We're talking here about STEM and storytelling; we want the scientists to connect with the makers.

HEPNER: I don't think anything is easy in documentaries. In terms of finding the subjects, we had followed a different company for two years before we found ViaCyte. The company before was working on a similar technology, but they

VIACYTE is a cellular therapy company with a clinical-stage stem-cell platform that delivers therapeutic proteins to restore health in people, which has been acquired by Vertex Pharmaceuticals. The company has significant clinical experience in patients with Type 1 diabetes; this includes a first-in-class gene-edited, immune-evasive investigational islet cell replacement therapy for diabetes that could potentially eliminate the need for exogenous insulin without requiring immunosuppression. ViaCyte has received support for its research from JDRF and the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine and has established collaborative partnerships with leading companies to advance its therapies for Type 1 diabetes.

“There is a very good chance for a [diabetes] cure. It just wasn't being financed properly because people think it's benign. You take care of yourself and you're going to live a long, happy life. Then big pharma beams images into our living rooms. Use this product and you can go hot air ballooning, or have a great backyard barbecue with a giant cake. It's a misrepresentation of what it's like to live with this disease.”

—LISA HEPNER



(Photo courtesy of The Human Trial.)

never made it to human trial. So, we felt no one was going to be interested. People want a Disney ending or at least an act two. I always thought I'd make a short film, but I haven't. In 2014, we did our research on ViaCyte. They had not been approved by the FDA yet. But the *vérité* gods looked down on us and the very first day of filming was when they got their IND [investigational new drug] approved by the FDA. Okay. This doesn't happen often, especially with a novel product. I thought it was going to be a lot easier. I thought we'd be done in two years. The researchers thought so, too.

FIELDS-CRUZ: And we're still not done?

HEPNER: We're a lot closer. And that's the hope part. There is real hope.

The cells may not have worked for Greg and Maren, but they're producing insulin in nine patients. Nine patients because of them. We are one step closer to a cure, but science alone isn't enough. It needs a spotlight and champion and money. If we rethink how we cure disease, then the breakthroughs that we so desperately need and want will come. Will we get there in five years? I think we can.

FIELDS-CRUZ: I want to talk about the hope. We know, having all lived through Covid, that money can quickly lead to a vaccine. Diabetes has been around for a very long time. My question is, what do you think, in terms of the money, the medical

community is hoping for? How much is it going to take for us to get to that cure?

HEPNER: That's the number one question that I get asked. How far away are we? My whole thesis was: why are we always told at diagnosis that it is five years away? That was 32 years ago for me. You know why we're told that? Because there is a very good chance for a cure. It just wasn't being financed properly because people think it's benign. You take care of yourself and you're going to live a long, happy life. Then big pharma beams images into our living rooms. Use this product and you can go hot air ballooning, or have a great backyard barbecue with a giant cake. It's a misrepresentation of what it's like to live with this disease. But there is real hope. Within the diabetes community, people will question me. "Lisa, did you just drink the Kool-Aid from the ViaCyte team?" I didn't. This is the golden age for stem-cell research, which is regenerative medicine. In 2021, it worked in nine patients. They're working with CRISPR to gene-edit their cells so that they evade the immune system. That's the holy grail. Because when you put a foreign object in a body, it's going to reject it. All of the patients I profiled were on anti-rejection drugs, which isn't great when you already have an immune disorder. ViaCyte was purchased by Vertex, a big pharma company in Boston, and it's actually been a really great thing,

because the Vertex cellular unit is run by a guy from Harvard [Douglas Melton] who has two children with Type 1. So, it's going to happen. Vertex is building on the ViaCyte technology. They are much further ahead with the gene editing, and it's working without immunosuppressants. There is full reason to hope. The caveat is that we have to keep pushing it forward. Look at the Covid vaccine. We got shots in arms in six months. mRNA technology had been developed over a decade ago during SARS. The technology was sort of shelved. The reason it worked so quickly was that we had Operation Warp Speed. You had governments around the world collaborating with one another. Profit was not the motive for industry. They worked together. The regulatory hurdles were less safe, but people signed up for clinical trials. We're on mile 19 of a 26.2-mile marathon.

FIELDS-CRUZ: Where are Maren and Greg, the two subjects you follow, now? We know Maren had the pancreas transplant, which didn't work.

HEPNER: The patients are really the heroes of medical science. Greg is going blind. He's had several operations to try to reverse it. He's in a better place emotionally, but every day is a struggle. Maren is stoic. She was the first patient in a trial at the University of Minnesota. It didn't work. She signed up for another pancreas transplant. It's so important to understand what patients do for us.

FIELDS-CRUZ: Oh, my goodness. We're so close. We have to get there. We have time for one or two questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Has there been pushback on using stem cells?

HEPNER: We don't know yet what will happen with *Roe v. Wade* being overturned. If you believe that life begins at conception, you're not going to be supportive of the stem-cell therapy. As of yet, nothing has happened. The one IVF embryo that we are talking about that was going to be discarded can cure everyone on this planet with insulin-dependent diabetes. I did IVF. It's very

hard to get pregnant with Type 1. I had some embryos left over, and I thought a lot about what I was going to do with those embryos. I had my own sort of emotional crisis, but I donated them to science. I talked to a researcher on the other end at UC Irvine, and she told me what she was using them for. I decided, let's give life to others who otherwise wouldn't have a chance.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: If this works as it's supposed to, will pharmaceutical companies block it? That's a whole lot of revenue they're going to lose.

HEPNER: At the same time, they will gain revenue. There are so many people in the world who will be able to be treated by this—220 million, because a lot of people with Type 2 are on insulin. You have to be on insulin to benefit from this. There's money to be made. Also, I think the public shaming of big pharma that we saw with insulin would happen. The latest success from Vertex was on the cover of *The New York Times* Sunday edition. There's no way this is going to get buried. No one's going to let it.

FIELDS-CRUZ: And when people live, they can live their lives. They'll spend money. So, there will be money to be made. It might not go directly to the pharmaceutical companies, though.

HEPNER: Are we just a commodity?

FIELDS-CRUZ: To the pharmaceutical companies, maybe.

HEPNER: Also, I'm Canadian, so I believe in the public sector big time. I believe in government oversight of capitalism. There's a big role that government can have in this. We're showing this film on Capitol Hill. We're showing this film on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. There is a diabetes caucus on Capitol Hill. Justice Sonia Sotomayor has Type 1 diabetes, and she's amplifying this message. We need to fund earlier science in the biotech field that has a very big connection to how we can actually accelerate cure research, which really is the underlying message of the film. It doesn't matter what disease you have—we need to accelerate this research.

Ravit Markus *Nina Is an Athlete*

IT'S AN HONOR TO BE A PART OF THIS AMAZING CONVENING.

A bit like Kevin Clark from the National Science Foundation, I had someone ask why I was speaking at this Summit. She's supported the film and thought the Summit sounded amazing, but asked me, "Where do you fit in?" Obviously, I hope this story is entertaining and fun to watch. But the film actually talks a great deal about women's healthcare, like many of the films by other participants at this Summit. Because Nina is a wheelchair user, her recovery from her C-section took longer than usual. She was not turned often enough and developed a pressure sore. A lot of people think this is just a little bruise, but for wheelchair users a pressure sore can be very dangerous—even deadly. One of my advisors on the film, another wheelchair user, said that she hopes this film will go to a lot of medical institutions to show how important it is to turn paralyzed people so they're not always staying on the same spot. This can often be forgotten, even in Israel's excellent medical system. This pressure sore endangered Nina's life and her chances of making it to the Paralympics. Nina is also fighting her biological clock, both as an athlete and as a woman, something I think about a lot. How we deal with our bodies' maturation and the changes in hormones is an important part of our healthcare.

This Summit shows how interconnected we all are, so I want to talk about alliance. FWD-Doc: Documentary Filmmakers with Disabilities



invited me as an ally because they thought this film was important, especially Jim Lebrecht, one of the founders, and co-director of *Crip Camp*, which was nominated for the Oscar. He's one of my earliest champions. Jim, the leadership, and the members of that organization became my best allies. And that is what I love about NYWIFT—it is an alliance of women, supporting each other even though we don't have the same backgrounds. I'm honored to be uplifted by all of you and hope to uplift everybody here. Thank you.

Nina Is an Athlete tracks wheelchair badminton champion Nina Gorodetsky's exciting three-year journey to try and defy the odds to fulfill her Paralympic dream without sacrificing her maternal desires. Gorodetsky aspires to conquer greater competitive heights while reckoning with the maturation of her body as both a mother and as an athlete approaching her 40th birthday. Her last chance to have another child clashes with her first, and possibly only, opportunity to participate in the upcoming 2020 Paralympic Games in Tokyo. Though she is advised by an all-male inner circle, it is Nina who must decide whether she should get pregnant or continue her rigorous training schedule. But everything changes when the stopwatches of all the world's athletes come to a screeching halt due to a global pandemic.



This project was chosen for the Loreen Arbus Disability Awareness Grant from a wide range of applications submitted by women filmmakers from around the country. "Not only is it important to give incentive to people with disability who are pursuing their dream of becoming filmmakers, but this grant in and of itself raises awareness since it's offered through organizations that have a vibrant membership," said Loreen Arbus. "NYWIFT is a preeminent organization in the entertainment industry. My nine grants have visibility throughout the entire country and reach different members of organizations, which exponentially increases the number of people who will think about advancing people with disability through their art."

In addition to a \$6,500 cash prize, this award includes NYWIFT membership, audio description of the film by Michele Spitz of Woman of Her Word, and captioning services by ReelAbilities New York. "We at NYWIFT are proud to partner with Loreen Arbus again this year to amplify the voices of those with physical and developmental disabilities. These stories are always strengthened by their honesty, intimacy, and, most importantly, their hope. These films teach us human lessons on endurance and sensitivity from unique points of view. I find them endlessly inspiring and look forward to seeing what the next round of submissions has in store," said NYWIFT CEO Cynthia López.



Left page: Ravit Markus addressing the NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summit: Storytelling STEM. (Photo by Jessie Rodriguez, CapturedXC Photo & Media Services) Above: Nina Gorodetsky on the court. (Images courtesy of Nina Is an Athlete)

The Space Race

“This film is about the untold contributions of African-American astronauts to the space program. It’s about perseverance, representation, and the rediscovery of the story of space exploration through a different lens where everyone is included.”

—LISA CORTÉS, DIRECTOR

THE SPACE RACE weaves together the stories of Black astronauts seeking to break the bonds of social injustice to reach for the stars, including Guion Bluford, Ed Dwight and Charles Bolden, among many others. Directors Diego Hurtado de Mendoza and Lisa Cortés profile the pioneering Black pilots, scientists, and engineers who joined NASA to serve their country in space, even as their country failed to achieve equality for them back on Earth. From 1963, when the assassination of JFK thwarted Captain Ed Dwight’s quest

to reach the moon, to 2020, when the echoes of the civil unrest sparked by the killing of George Floyd reached the International Space Station, the story of African Americans at NASA is a tale of world events colliding with the aspirations of uncommon men. The bright dreams of Afrofuturism become reality in *The Space Race*, turning science fiction into science fact, forever redefining what “the right stuff” looks like, and giving us new heroes to celebrate and a fresh history to explore.

STREAMING ON HULU AND DISNEY+



From Left to Right: Directors Lisa Cortés and Diego Hurtado de Mendoza behind-the-scenes at NASA Glenn Research Center. (Photo courtesy National Geographic for Disney/Keero Birla.) Guy Bluford on STS-53. (Photo courtesy NASA / Public Domain.) STS-122 Mission Specialist Leland Melvin tests his gloves for a final fitting before space shuttle Atlantis’ launch. (Photo courtesy NASA/Kim Shiflett.) Directors Lisa Cortés, left, and Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, right, pose with Ed Dwight during an interview in Denver. (Photo courtesy National Geographic/Ryan Dearth.)

The Changing Face of Science and Science Fiction



SHRUTI GANGULY



KUYE YOUNGBLOOD

From women directors using sci-fi to reinvent reality to doctors working in biotechnology to create better solutions in women’s healthcare to STEM programming that opens up new possibilities for all children, women innovators are changing the world we live in and the world we will live in. During the three days of the hybrid Summit, NYWIFT brought content creators, medical technology experts, environmental leaders, and innovators together to share ideas and come up with joint solutions to the modern-day problems that ail us. Many of these discussions focus on the impact of sexism and racism in both STEM and art. On topics ranging from questioning whether Afrofuturism reflects the full body of the African American, Latina, Latinx, and BIPOC people to examining the past, present, and future of the speculum used by gynecologists, we all have a lot to learn from each other.

We hope this publication inspires you to ask questions, embrace new collaborations, and make change in your creative work and the world around you.

Shruti Ganguly and Kuye Youngblood
 NYWIFT Board of Directors, Education and Advocacy Committee

Innovation and Creativity in the Doctor's Bag

Redesigning Women's Healthcare



DR. TAMATHA FENSTER
Director of Innovations
and Biotechnology, Weill
Cornell Medicine Fibroid
and Adenomyosis Center

MY FAVORITE TOPIC IN THE WORLD IS INNOVATION, whether in medicine or media. As the director of innovations at Weill Cornell, I get to create and innovate every day, with the mission to improve women's healthcare. As my colleague Dr. Atul Gawande, administrator for global health at the U.S. Agency for International Development and author of *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, often says, "Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try."

My story of innovation started by being willing to dump the age-old doctor's bag. To you, the photo on the left probably looks like a pewter spoon, but I see the face of Dr. James Marion Sims, who is considered the father of gynecology. He bent the handle backwards and proceeded to conduct vaginal exams on enslaved women. Without anesthesia, he performed experimental surgeries to treat vesicovaginal fistula, a condition caused by trauma during childbirth. An enslaved woman named Anarcha endured 30 such surgeries by Sims. Another, 19-year-old Lucy, became so sick from the procedure, she was bedridden for three months in agony and almost died. We know all of this because he recorded it in his diary in 1845.

The device to the right is the Sims's speculum.

It is used in the operating room today. As you can see, it's not that far away from his original bent spoon. During my second year of residency, I realized that with diligence, ingenuity, and a willingness to try, we could do better. At the time I was in my twenties and running a LEEP clinic. LEEP uses a hot loop electrode to remove cancerous cells from a woman's cervix. It is an effective and common procedure, but the catch is that it is done while women are awake. We numb them, but they can still cough or twitch. You don't need to know much about medicine to know that I could easily injure a woman's vaginal walls during this procedure using the traditional Sims's speculum. So, as I was sitting there with my helpless patients who at any moment could wind up with injuries, I kept thinking, there has to be a safer, more efficient way to examine a cervix than using something that looks like a spoon from 1845. That's when I started putting together soap containers and paperclips and silicone pads to create the first prototype of the Halo speculum. There have been many iterations since then. What has evolved is a flat silicone-coated sheet of thin surgical steel. It's malleable enough to be rolled into a tampon shape, gently inserted, and then relaxed circumferentially. We can get complete exposure, while comfortably retracting the vaginal wall, which is



Left: The Sims's speculum used by most gynecologists today. Middle: Dr. James Marion Sims's pewter spoon speculum from the 1840s. Right: The recently introduced Halo speculum, which allows for greater protection and comfort. (Images courtesy of Dr. Tamatha Fenster)

protected from injury.

Since introducing the Halo speculum, we've received accolades, awards, and a utility patent, which is very special because only about 10% of patents are issued to women. But the greatest honor is that we're using this on actual patients and taking it onto the market. As fellow creatives and innovators, you know what it's like to have an idea in your head and decades later have it come to life. This creation is in the operating room and making a difference in women's health today.

My mission is to make women's health better. It's a mission not to accept the status quo as good enough; not to accept the Sims's speculum as good enough. And we're going beyond the Halo speculum. Understudied and underserved areas are really my heart and soul, including pelvic pain—particularly chronic pain—menopause, and fibroids. In fact, fibroids are one of the most common and understudied diseases in women and they disproportionately affect African-American women—80% of whom have fibroids, 50% of whom are symptomatic. These symptoms wreak havoc with quality of life. They cause abnormal bleeding, pain, infertility, and, as a result, place a tremendous economic burden on these women. Each year, \$17 billion of losses in productivity can be attributed to fibroids, which includes women staying home after surgery and being too sick to work.

Not only are fibroids understudied, but they also have a huge variation in shape, size, and location. They follow no rhyme or reason that we know of at this time. Treatment relies on accurate imaging. When I first meet a patient, we start with an MRI, slices of two-dimensional imaging that are rendered into three dimensions, but it's more like looking at cartoon frames. I actually print these pictures and tape them on the wall to use as a GPS to find where the fibroids are. Not ideal. My brilliant colleagues at Weill Cornell and I are working to create three-dimensional images that are more lifelike. This will allow us to diagnose and treat this very common, complex issue more accurately by allowing us to see how the fibroids relate to other structures, such as the endometrium and the bladder.

It is time to modernize the doctor's bag. We can't just keep using antiquated tools because that's the way it's always been. In medical school, we talk about the Hippocratic oath—do no harm—but we need to go one step further. It's not just do no harm. It's do good. For me, it is do better for women, because they are a population that has been sadly overlooked. Innovation and creativity take a huge team. They take a force. I encourage everyone who wants to help make healthcare better for women to reach out to me, in any capacity. We would love to bring your talents into our mission.

Making It So

Women in the Sci-Fi Director's Chair



AYOKA CHENZIRA
Director
HERadventure and *Kindred*



EUNICE LEVIS
Writer/Director
InVade and *Ro & the Stardust*



**MODERATOR
MICHÈLE STEPHENSON**
Award-winning Filmmaker,
Artist, and Author

MICHÈLE STEPHENSON: I am an independent storyteller based in Brooklyn, New York, and co-founder of the production company Rada Studio. My work (*Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*, *American Promise*, and *The Changing Same*) attempts to shift the boundaries of storytelling and include Afro-surrealist journeys through time and space. Sci-fi has long been a refuge for people who don't fit into traditional roles. A place where you can imagine what it would be like to be someone else, in a different world, or even a different universe, but not always a better one. This can be especially empowering for marginalized communities—for women of color—at the center of the narrative. We are seeing women getting their due in some science fiction literature, but in film, it's come a bit later.

Today, we're going to hear from acclaimed directors Ayoka Chenzira and Eunice Levis, who are working on some of the latest science fiction projects. I'm excited to be speaking with them about progressive world-building, shattering stereotypes, and expanding horizons beyond our storytelling limits. I'd love to open this up to you,

Ayoka and Eunice, to introduce yourselves and share what you're most proud of in your career trajectories. Let's start with Ayoka.

AYOKA CHENZIRA: Michèle and Eunice, nice to meet you both. For decades, I have been writing, producing, and directing independent films. In 2018, I got a call from Ava DuVernay asking me to direct an episode of *Queen Sugar*. Most of my friends said, "Oh, you're going to hate this. It's a big machine." But I walked on the set of *Queen Sugar* and absolutely fell in love, not only with that beautiful story, but with how everyone came together to lift things up off the page. Since then, I have been regularly directing television. As it relates to this particular panel, I recently did Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (FX on Hulu), *Beacon 23* (MGM+), and *HERadventure*, an interactive project with my daughter, HaJ. In the midst of all of that, I was the division chair for the arts at Spelman College.

EUNICE LEVIS: Amazing. Hi, everyone. I am a writer and director originally from the Bronx, New York. I am most proud of *Ro & the Stardust*, my latest short film. I'm proud of it because I did

not bend with what I wanted to do, whether it was making it bilingual (Spanish and English) or the casting. I didn't bend. I'm also proud of becoming an adjunct professor at Saint Joseph's University. I'm the first in my family to graduate college and the first to get a graduate degree. My parents didn't graduate high school. Teaching college is so big to me personally.

STEPHENSON: Thank you to both of you. We're going to spend some time talking about the work that you are doing. But before I dig into those individual works, I want to set the stage a bit and acknowledge the work of others who have worked around us and before us—specifically the names and work of other women who are forging a path in this speculative space, and who are working on creating these liberating environments, stories, and platforms that bring us together and allow us

the bold, beautiful idea of turning Jackson, Mississippi, into a completely wired space for Black creativity. I got my first taste of online speculative storytelling at her institute. And of course, Nonny de la Peña, the virtual reality pioneer, continues to create and mentor the next generation. I feel it's important for us to create a moment of space to acknowledge the work of those who come with us and before us. Now, my first question to you both: Please describe your journey to speculative storytelling. How did you get to this storytelling, and what does it mean for you?

CHENZIRA: Whenever I've been asked that question, I always respond with "growing up and observing." Life seems to me like speculative fiction. I am an only child raised by a single parent in a beauty parlor. At a very early age, I was privy to women's conversations, women's stories, and as

“Black folks have to thrive and survive in spite of our reality . . . and that requires Black narratives and science fiction to be far more fantastical and grandiose to be effective.”

—MICHÈLE STEPHENSON

to reimagine our worlds. Firstly, I'd like to honor the Indigenous women filmmakers working in the context of futurism to create sci-fi stories that address the need for female-centric solutions to perverse historical realities—Danis Goulet, Nanobah Becker, and Amanda Strong, to name a few. And a bit more personally for me, I want to honor the women pioneers who have created maroon spaces for us and forged paths in immersive media, allowing us to dream and create. Women like Shari Frilot, who founded New Frontier at the Sundance Film Festival and recently won a Peabody, and the late Jacquie Jones, whose pioneering vision founded the New Media Institute in 2006 with

a child it seemed very surreal. I have always been able to imagine a place where things that seem very different from each other rub up against each other and ask new questions. I also think that growing up in the Catholic church contributed to my interests, because it's big costume drama, particularly for a young child. I grew up at a time when mass was in Latin. So, you have this soundscape against this costume drama that makes it seem otherworldly. It's a space that I've always been very comfortable with. The first independent piece that I did in this area actually came as a result of asking my students at Spelman College questions. I used to teach a course called A

* Speculative Fiction: Often called a "super genre," speculative fiction can encompass any narrative—from sci-fi and fantasy to superhero stories and fairy tales—that diverges from "mimetic fiction," or true-to-life storytelling set in our world that doesn't bend reality or break the laws of physics. —Stephanie Brown for *Celadon Books*

Cinematic Journey: Black Women as Heroes in American Cinema. I would show about 15 works from Hollywood studios, as well as independents. At the end of the course, I would say to my students, "What would you like to see? What do you think was missing?" Every year, they would say sci-fi and fantasy featuring Black women as leads. *HERadventure* comes out of those deeper conversations with my students.

LEVIS: I also grew up in a hair salon. My mom came from the Dominican Republic and worked in salons all my life, so I was also privy to the conversations. But my storytelling really began because we lived in a basement apartment. All the windows were egress windows and only showed feet. I used to try to get my friends to come and stay with me because I wasn't allowed outside. I would tell them stories and try to entertain them as much as possible. They could only see my forehead. I got really good training from living in a basement apartment. But my true journey began as a journalist. I wrote for several city daily newspapers. Within them I found speculative storytelling. I found my way there right after 9/11. I remember the exact moment. I was on Fordham Road in the Bronx waiting for the number 12 bus and a woman was frantically trying to get to Manhattan. The bus driver kept saying, "This is the detour route. This

is the detour route." Clearly, this woman did not speak the language. He might as well have been speaking backwards. At that moment, I realized that the Black experience can never be a collective. We all experienced that emergency, but not all of us were equipped with the same skills to navigate it. And that planted a seed. That was the beginning of my speculative journey.

STEPHENSON: You know the term Afrofuturism is now commodified to a certain extent. I don't know how I feel about the term personally at this point. I wanted to get your take. How would you describe your work in your own words? And in connection to how you think about Afrofuturism?

CHENZIRA: I don't really think about Afrofuturism. Black creative thought and Black people imagining themselves in the past, the present, and the future have always been there. But I agree with you in terms of the commodification. I certainly respect the literature around it, and the people who are deeply involved and invested in it. It's just not the world that I have come from, or the language that I have. I describe my work as very experimental. I enjoy doing things that I don't know how to do. I enjoy asking questions that I obviously don't know the answers to. If I already know the answer there's no reason for me to do the work. I am always in my mind playing with



Directed by Michèle Stephenson, *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project* travels through time and space to reveal the enduring influence of Nikki Giovanni, one of America's greatest living artists and social commentators. The award-winning documentary reckons with the inevitable passing of time through a collision of memories, moments in American history, live readings, and visually innovative treatments of Giovanni's poetry. (Image courtesy of HBO)

HERadventure

HERadventure is a sci-fi project combining live action filmmaking with interaction through gameplay featuring a reluctant female superhero named Her from the planet Xamtha. She accidentally falls to Earth looking for her sister and ends up discovering the truth behind an evil dark force that is eating away at her planet. What makes the movie interactive is that midway through you join forces with Her to fight the evil dark force. *HERadventure* highlights social issues that impact the lives of women and girls globally. It aims to empower them through gameplay. There are more women playing games than ever before. About 45% of gamers are women over the age of 18. To play visit HERadventure.com.



"what if" questions and thinking of different ways to answer those questions. There was a period in my life when I became bored with cinema. The work was looking very much alike. It was sounding very much alike. I decided that I wanted to think about the moving image in ways other than sitting in a theater or at home looking at a single screen. So, I went to Georgia Tech to get a PhD in digital media. I learned to use the computer as a creative partner in my storytelling. That's also where the idea of *HERadventure* was born, as interactive cinema. So, to answer your initial question, I think of my work as very experimental, independent film work, which is different from the directing work that I do in television.

STEPHENSON: Eunice, can you describe your work for us in your own words and your relationship to Afrofuturism?

LEVIS: I think that presently Afrofuturism is a catchall phrase for all things Black in fantasy and sci-fi. There are things that are emblematic of Afrofuturism in my work that I absolutely utilize, but I wouldn't describe it as only that, because for me Afrofuturism deals with symptoms and systems of oppression that are largely Western. I'm most interested in the Black experience outside of that and as a byproduct of those systems. I want to look at the world outside of those systems with people of color past, present, and future. I'm early enough in my career to make mistakes and borrow and expand. And that's the fun in sci-fi. We don't have to label it.

STEPHENSON: Let's talk about *HERadventure*.

I will start with the visual effects. Tell me a little bit about that. What was the process like for you? Was it the first time you did visual effects?

CHENZIRA: It was not the first time. I started out doing visual effects when I was teaching myself Photoshop many, many years ago. But it certainly was the first time that I had done visual effects to this extent. I worked with Crawford Media in Atlanta. We spent a lot of time talking about how much we wanted to do that was physical. For example, we decided that it was going to be too much to create the sand on the planet, so all the sand is real. Also, there are about three trees, but they are digitally enhanced. In the fight scene with the warrior women, all of that smoke is digitally done. It's just figuring out what you want to be physical and what you want to enhance with digital technologies. Also, I want to say that my friends who are in the interactive and gaming space don't come to anything that I do that's related to filmmaking and my filmmaking friends don't go to anything that's related to gaming or interactive cinema. So, knowing that my two worlds don't necessarily interact, we did an output where the game is played for you, so that you can look at it like a film if you want to.

STEPHENSON: What was the biggest priority in terms of the vision to be realized? What was the central thing you were really hanging onto?

CHENZIRA: At Spelman College, at first I was in women's studies, so I attended a lot of women's studies conferences and symposiums. Incredible work is being done in that area, but I also knew

that the students weren't always responding to texts and that there should be more opportunities and platforms that were not just text-based where both faculty and students could consider those areas. *HERadventure* takes on social issues that are important to women and girls. You're navigating through date rape, bullying, gender discrimination, and domestic violence as you move through this new world. It was an opportunity for those students involved in women's studies to have a different kind of platform and for faculty to have a different kind of platform to inspire further discussions around these issues in a non-text atmosphere. So that's what I was holding onto. As Toni Cade Bambara would say, how do you make the revolution irresistible?

STEPHENSON: How would you describe the process of integrating elements of the ancient, modern, and futuristic, and why is it so important to give a nod to how the past, present, and future intersect in your work?

CHENZIRA: Because that's what I'm interested in: where can I try to infuse that into my work? For example, the way the women are dressed. They have ancient markings on their faces and the hairstyling is contemporary, but it's also ancient.

STEPHENSON: I had some thoughts around this notion of the Black experiences being stranger than fiction. In the works of Greg Tate and even Nikki Giovanni's poetry, as well as the work of certain Black futurists, there is an acknowledgment that our lived experience of the Black diaspora and this hemisphere is that of a violent alien

encounter that our communities have already had. Our living is a surreal science fiction existence from the Middle Passage on that's created a Black Atlantic expression and mode of being on this side of the ocean. How do you react to that proposition? What are some of the ripple effects? Eunice, you mentioned communicating before, the burden of believability that is put on creators of color. Black folks have to thrive and survive, you said, in spite of our reality, and that requires Black narratives and science fiction to be far more fantastical and grandiose to be effective.

LEVIS: I love the idea of a violent alien encounter because that's exactly what it feels like. I think that this is especially painful to digest because we, the Black diaspora, are otherized by people who look exactly like us. There's this layer of resistance that we experience as a Black collective, right? But then receiving that from our brothers and sisters is a whole different level of hurt. It causes separation. It reinforces the poison of colorism. When we talk about creating sci-fi, we are competing with the taste and expectations of an audience that has been cultivated by the commercialized lens of sci-fi. So, we're dealing with the diversity of the Black experience. In broad terms, the lived experience of a Haitian American in Miami is very different from the lived experience of a Haitian Canadian. This requires the filmmaker to find the universal humanity in their work. This is what I look for. How can I ground my



InVade is a bilingual (English/Spanish) sci-fi short about an undocumented scientist and his son who try to stop an environmental disaster. (Image courtesy of Eunice Levis)

work? How can I set up the rules of this human exchange or this human experience? Once I have that, I add hella Blackness to it. I just make it Blackly Black once I have that human connection. A quick example of this is Boots Riley (*Sorry to Bother You*). He's incredible at this. In sci-fi, characters have to go beyond what we recognize in our struggle, in our pain, in our reality, and in our fears, because we are desensitized. I have to make it really big in order for it to impact us, because we are people who live in our own sci-fi every day.

STEPHENSON: I want to talk more about those tensions and solidarity within our own communities. Your work is very intentional about embracing a Black Latina lens in this speculative context. Can you speak to what it means to occupy and share that space for others both within the larger Latin community and beyond. How have different elements of the Latin community reacted to your work?

LEVIS: I've been thinking about this all day. I'll start here: My goal with my work is always to honor all of my neighbors, my ancestors, my friends. They don't get to share these stories on a larger platform. They are voiceless. Exploring the Latino diaspora and sci-fi remedies that. I get to share my gift and do that for them. Honoring is always at the top of mind for me. I have to be completely honest—I have had a

much warmer reception in Black festivals, in Black showcases, and in Black circles. The Latino diaspora is kind of still figuring out who they are. And it is my job as an artist to expose that and to challenge that. I've found that my voice is stronger in a community that acknowledges me as part of it. I'm still fighting that. Even after making the film



Adapted from the Octavia E. Butler novel *Kindred*, this series centers on Dana James (Mallori Johnson), a young Black woman and aspiring writer who has uprooted her life of familial obligation and relocated to Los Angeles, ready to claim a future that, for once, feels all her own. But, before she can settle into her new home, she finds herself being violently pulled back and forth in time. She emerges at a nineteenth-century plantation, a place remarkably and intimately linked with Dana and her family. Available on Hulu (Image courtesy of FX)

50% Spanish language, it doesn't find its way into the Latino spaces as easily. And that's okay, my tribe is out there.

STEPHENSON: I understand and appreciate you sharing that. With regard to *Ro & the Stardust*, what does the grandmother's desire to take off into space represent for you?

LEVIS: It represents the ability to identify what is home and making the decision to go back there. As part of the diaspora, when I'm in Dominican Republic, I feel at home. When I'm in the Bronx, I feel at home. Don't take that away from me. *Ro & the Stardust* was inspired by my experience with my father's end of life. He wanted to go see Yankee Stadium, the new Yankee Stadium.

STEPHENSON: I have one more question for you about your other short,

InVade. It felt like the beginning of a pilot. It leaves us on a cliffhanger. What are the next plans and what's the inspiration?

LEVIS: The short *InVade* is a standalone. However, it does serve as proof of concept for a series. Elvis Nolasco is my lead in *InVade*. He's also in

Ro & the Stardust. He was absolutely my muse. I wanted to create a hero who was an undocumented, educated person. I tend to gravitate toward atypical characters and stories, but also these are people I know—undocumented engineers, doctors, surgeons, dentists. Undocumented is a label that is Western, but it doesn't diminish the person. I wanted the hero to rub up against what we are used to seeing as somebody who's undesirable, unable to make an impact, not strong. The series will follow an undocumented scientist and his daughter, as they try to save the world from an environmental disaster.

STEPHENSON: Where is the series now?

LEVIS: We premiered *InVade* at Essence Film Festival. We have the pilot and I actually have two full seasons of content. Right now, I'm trying to decide whether I should make it an animated series.

STEPHENSON: Ayoka and Eunice, I want to end this session on this note: I see a common thread in both of your speculative projects that goes beyond centering Black women's experiences and fantasies. *Kindred*, an amazing interpretation of Octavia Butler's book, and *Ro & the Stardust* and *InVade* are profound explorations of family, intergenerational trauma, and intergenerational relationships—in some cases ancestral. Can you talk to me about the unique ways that sci-fi might allow us to address these painful issues that other genres may not be able to do as effectively?

CHENZIRA: One of the things I love about speculative fiction is that there are no boundaries. As long as you set the story rules, there's really nothing that you can't do. It's a wonderful genre for exploring really big ideas and kind of smaller ideas, too. You can move back and forth in time. You can morph into other people or things. I did a TEDxAtlanta talk on this. The commercial arena puts boundaries on speculative fiction. You can tell a lot about something by what is there and also what is absent. In the case of speculative fiction, we haven't seen a lot of people of color and gender expanding communities. As I said in my talk,

people can accept a woman who is the mother of dragons, but they have a hard time accepting Black and Brown people as leads in a genre that has no rules.




LEVIS: Yep, exactly.

CHENZIRA: The censorship is really imposed by commercial entities, and also by fans who are attached to their favorite characters looking a particular way. You asked about pain and trauma. I just had a long conversation with someone the other day, because I see the pain and trauma of Black and Brown people in particular being commodified and in some ways being celebrated. What I don't see is a focus on dreaming, imagining, and joy. When you continue to market trauma and pain to people as a fundamental way of life, you get used to it. You're in this world where there's just trauma and pain for you, and you're afraid to let your Black children go out because they may be murdered. If that's what surrounds you, then it's very difficult to dream and imagine. It's difficult to feed your spirit with dreams and imaginations. It's another form of assassination. I'm really interested in joy, play, pleasure of the spirit, and how you feed that within the context speculative fiction.

STEPHENSON: Absolutely. Eunice?

LEVIS: I think Ayoka said everything that I would say. Story helps us to make sense of the world. Fairytales, for example, are cautionary tales of the past. Sci-fi is timeless. Most women of color have a very brief past to pull from, so speculative storytelling allows us to piece together our broken identity. That's what I love about sci-fi. I love that I can be anything in the past. It doesn't have to be real, but it still can instill hope. It still can validate my existence.

For more information on our panelists' projects visit:

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CASE STUDY

STEM Gets Personal

Bringing Intimate Medical Narratives to the Screen



WILLIAM D. CABALLERO
Filmmaker, Guggenheim Fellow,
and Creative Capital Recipient



ANNETTA MARION
Emmy Award-winning
Director and Showrunner



**MODERATOR
MELISSA ADEYEMO**
CEO/Founder
Ominira Studios

MELISSA ADEYEMO: We're so excited to have you both here for this talk about health and STEM in the entertainment business. I'd love to start by hearing about your individual work. William, can you tell us about your short and what inspired you in telling this story?

WILLIAM D. CABALLERO: Sure. I am a multi-media director, producer, writer, and animator. I tell big stories using small figures. *Chilly & Milly* is an autobiographical short documentary about my parents, who lived in a trailer in Fayetteville, North Carolina. My father was a diabetic with kidney failure and he went on dialysis. The film features a lot of innovative animation techniques, as well as footage from *American Dreams Deferred*, which was an autobiographical documentary I shot during my last year of graduate school at NYU many years ago. It combines 3D animation with miniature sets. It's my second short film to get into Sundance. My work is about my Puerto Rican family explored through innovative animation techniques.

ADEYEMO: Annetta, please tell us about your latest documentary.

ANNETTA MARION: I work mostly as a director,

but I produced and second unit directed *Still: A Michael J. Fox Movie*, which premiered at Sundance. It went on to win the Hope Award at SXSW, premiere theatrically, and stream on Apple TV+. I think it was in theaters over 10 weeks, which is extraordinary in this day and age.

ADEYEMO: How did you and the team for *Still* incorporate medical and scientific information about the disease and some of the stuff that the Michael J. Fox Foundation has been working on along with a more personal journey and celebrity bio aspects?

MARION: It was really important to everyone, including Michael, that the movie be accurate. When we did the section about what Parkinson's drugs do to the brain, for example, we put together what we wanted artistically for the movie, then everything, everything, everything was run by all the medical experts at the foundation to make sure that we were being completely accurate. Especially Nelle Fortenberry, who's Michael's producer, was involved in every little detail to make sure that things were accurate, because we can't become experts on Parkinson's in the two years of making a film. We relied a lot on the experts

and the doctors to look at cuts to be sure it was being portrayed the right way.

ADEYEMO: William, I'm going throw it back to you. You talked about your parents being the focus. Why did you choose to tell this particular story? What drew you to talking about the health issues they faced. It was beautifully done, but why choose animation to tell this story?

CABALLERO: My work usually tells stories from underrepresented communities and cultures and my family. My mother was born in Brooklyn. My father was raised in the Bronx. I was born in the housing projects of Brooklyn. My family represents the

sort of low-income Black and Brown perspective of America that is oftentimes lacking from the American narrative. What they go through is indicative of the challenges that many people face, especially with healthcare.

I think my parents felt sort of defeated with my mother being not being able to work or do anything else but be my father's caretaker for many years. Our media doesn't have enough stories from this perspective. I wanted to tell the story because I knew it would impact millions of people who are going through this the same thing—and be an homage to my parents and to my father's legacy. I chose animation because I find it a medium where you can really get your hands dirty and craft beautiful visuals to match accompanying audio interviews. All of my projects tend to feature unique animation techniques. In this project, I had a miniature set designer create the trailer where my parents live. 3D models of myself and my parents were

inserted digitally into this environment. I wanted to tell the story because it challenged me as a filmmaker and pushed boundaries to change some people's perspectives on what average Americans go through.

ADEYEMO: I love that. Annetta, how did you come across this documentary on Michael J. Fox?

MARION: At the beginning of the pandemic, I got reacquainted with Jonathan Silberberg, who is a friend and colleague and Concordia Studio's very first employee. He basically said, "You've got to meet my counterpart, Nicole Stott. You're going love her." So, I talked to Nicole and she pitched me

a few projects. The one that was of interest was the Michael J. Fox movie for so many reasons. The creative work around it was to make a big Hollywood movie with a big score and big visuals—not really to make what people typically think of as a documentary.

That really got my attention because my heart is in scripted entertainment. It just sounded like a great project. And then Davis Guggenheim, the director, and I Zoomed a million times just to make sure that we would work together well. It was about two years for me, but Davis and Concordia had been in talks about the movie for a year or so before that.

ADEYEMO: When you got involved what did you already know about Michael's illness from how it was documented in the press? What surprised you while you were filming?

MARION: I was never really a Michael J. Fox fan. I clearly knew who he was because he was the biggest film and TV star in the 1980s. I definitely



Winner of the PBS Short Film Festival Juried Prize, *Chilly & Milly* uses stunning animation to follow the filmmaker's parents as they cope with his diabetic father's kidney failure. Available at pbs.org/filmfestival/films/chilly-and-milly (Image courtesy of William Caballero)

saw *Back to the Future*, but I never really watched television, so I didn't watch *Family Ties* or anything like that. I knew his professional persona. In real life, he genuinely is that: the same super-nice, always-cracking-people-up kind of guy. It was just great to be able to spend the year I got to spend with him.

It didn't really surprise me, but out of the gate Michael had one directive: this was not going to be a sad movie. He opened up his life. Nothing was off-limits. This was going to be a giant celebration of his really big, incredible life from when he was a kid from outside of Vancouver, Canada, all

the way to being a movie and TV star and Parkinson's. The Michael J. Fox Foundation has changed the life of everyone who has Parkinson's or will get Parkinson's. Only someone with that kind of celebrity can raise so much money, with the help of

a lot of other people, of course. People love him so much. It really wasn't just the money. It was everything. He was the face of it and that has really changed the world for good, for people who have Parkinson's.

ADEYEMO: I feel like every time I hear something about Parkinson's on television, it's directly tied to Michael J. Fox and his foundation.

MARION: Absolutely. I got chills when you were saying that. It's very true.

ADEYEMO: It is. William, I'm going throw it back to you. How difficult or easy was it for you to document your own family's health journey? What were some of the challenges talking about the health scare and disability that your dad was facing?

CABALLERO: In a way, it was easy and natural because I've been doing it for so many years. Some footage was from 2008. I've been interviewing my family, getting their stories, and recording conversations with them for many, many years. They're used to it. I think the last interview I captured with my father was in 2020. What I've learned over time is to be able to take their stories and tell them authentically, to be able to show them without making it seem like they are perfect, but also not overly flawed. Presenting them in a way that is honest is going to be impactful for the viewer. Editing so that I'm not putting words in



Winner of four Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Documentary, *Still* recounts Micheal J. Fox's extraordinary story in his own words, from Hollywood stardom to his Parkinson's diagnosis at 29 and beyond. (Photos courtesy of Apple TV+)

their mouths. It's one thing when you're interviewing a random subject, but it's something else when you're interviewing your parents. If you make them seem like they're something they're not . . . you spend Christmas and Thanksgiving

with them. Believe me, you don't want that. They talk about it every year. I made sure to walk that fine line. What you see in the short film is very much an honest portrayal of them. There are moments that make you laugh and a few that make you cry. I just wanted it to be something that captures that dynamic range of who they are.

ADEYEMO: Got it. Michael J. Fox is somebody who's been so open about his disability. How easy or difficult it was to capture that on screen with him? What are the challenges you found with somebody who's so used to being on camera? Does it affect the level of authenticity that you can get? Are you having to misdirect them to get a more honest portrayal of the situation?

MARION: First off, Michael actually hid his

diagnosis for a long, long, long time. He was diagnosed in his late twenties. People think Parkinson's is an old people's disease, but some people get it really young. He had Parkinson's for a really long time and hid it. He talks about the challenges of that in the movie. When he went public, he went public big. It really was at a point where he couldn't hide it anymore. I think maybe if he had been able to hide it forever, he would've, but disease progresses regardless of who you are.

ADEYEMO: How old was he when he finally announced it to the world?

MARION: I don't remember exactly—around 37. It was when he was doing *Spin City*. So, it was years after his diagnosis. His family knew, and his doctors, but I don't think anyone else knew. In terms of authenticity, Michael was an open book. He didn't shy away from any questions or any topics. The interview that you see in the movie looks the same—same frame, same location—but we actually interviewed him seven times over a year. So, we got the time to become friends. In the last interview we did, he definitely said some things he wouldn't have gone into during the first interview. It's just like any interview subject or collaborator. The beauty and the truth come when people are taken care of and feel safe.

ADEYEMO: William, my next question is for you. You describe your work as telling big stories with small characters. When you say that, is that in relationship to the everydayness of the people? Or is it the use of stop animation, literally telling

stories with small figures? And why tell these stories through stop animation? What attracted you to that?

CABALLERO: That saying is part of my mantra that I created about 10 years ago when I segued from doing more traditional cinéma vérité filmmaking. In the past 20 years, it's just become so easy to get your hands on a cheap camera and learn how to edit. It's a double-edged sword. It's awesome because it democratizes the filmmaking process. At the same time, it's oversaturated with so many stories told in similar styles. I wanted both a competitive and a creative advantage, so I thought, why don't I trademark myself as someone who can do something different? I started working with a 3D-printed character of my Puerto Rican grandfather, a caricature-like print, as part of a web series I created that later aired on HBO Latino called *Gran'pa Knows Best*. I also 3D-printed my grandmother and created a short film called *Victor & Isolina*, which premiered in 2017. There are limitations with that because each print took a long time to model and paint by hand. And they're really fragile. That's why for *Chilly & Milly*, I decided to make the backgrounds and backdrops in miniature, but the characters as 3D composite. They look as if they're tangible little figures, but they're all digital. That combination allowed for a lot more models. With my previous projects, I only had maybe 40 prints of grandpa and 20 prints of grandma. I was able to really push the limits of what I could do, but I just

wanted to challenge myself creatively.

MARION: William, I'm fascinated by that. Are those characters *not* models that you can pick up and touch? They're digital?

CABALLERO: They're all digital. I worked with a really great animation collaborator, Brad Jones, who is my friend from college. I told him, "Hey, I want these characters to have this sort of tangible quality to them." I actually worked with three people. First, the 3D modeler, Chang Kim, who I've worked with for many years. He modeled the characters to have them look sort of plasticky. Then I worked with the 3D rigger, Stephen Mann, on the skeletal framework to make them movable. And then my animation compositor/collaborator put the characters in there. I storyboarded how I wanted each character to look and then he helped me achieve that vision.

MARION: Wow. That's insanely cool.

ADEYEMO: What's the next thing, William? You've done two shorts. Are you looking to a feature, in this style now?

CABALLERO: I'm actually I'm working on an autobiographical feature documentary called *They Dream*, which has been funded by many entities, including Creative Capital, ITVS, and Latino Public Broadcasting. I'm very much in the early stages, but it is going to touch upon issues of grief, love, and loss and the meaning of life as told through people in my family who are no longer with us. It's my exploration of how my mother, especially, deals with grief. Slight spoiler alert: my father passed away. *Chilly & Milly* is the story of how he passed away and my mom's reaction to him no longer being in our lives. I have lots of interviews with my father going back years, so I'm able to bring him back to life to tell his stories. One thing I want to do is bring my mother into the creative process by making her an active participant in creating a story that brings her peace. Because my grandmother, her mother, passed away last year, my mother is still very much grieving. I want my mother not just to say her story, and then I animate it. I want her to direct and create something

that's an homage to my grandmother and give her the tools that she needs.

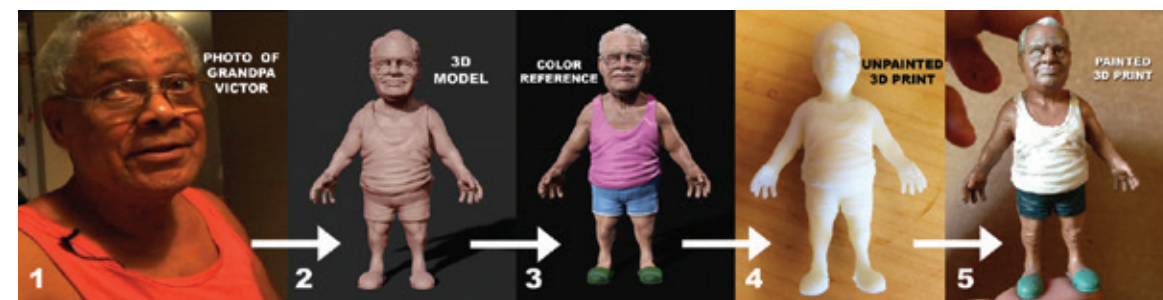
ADEYEMO: Annetta, what did you learn about Parkinson's that you didn't know before making this film?

MARION: Oh, my goodness. I don't think I knew much of anything about Parkinson's before I made this movie. I knew Michael J. Fox had it and I knew what it was. I thought it was an old people's disease. The early onset Parkinson's that Michael got was shocking to me. It's a terrible disease.

ADEYEMO: I just want to thank you guys for this amazing talk. William and then Annetta, if you could give us a few closing words on your projects and being able to talk through the particular health issues that you touch on in your films that would be great.

CABALLERO: Sure. I travel to colleges and educational conferences across the country. I always say that as people from underrepresented communities, whether it's based on ethnicity or on gender or sexuality, we need to tell our own stories before somebody else does. That's the only way we inject authenticity into filmmaking and empower the viewers to want to tell their own stories and encourage the next generation of filmmakers. I didn't find many role models in terms of Latino filmmakers when I was growing up, so I had to invent that for myself. Now I want to make it a little bit easier by showing people that you can tell stories about your family and have that be something that could change the world and open the door for you to find yourself as a creative.

MARION: Okay, I think, this is true about the movie *Still: A Michael J. Fox Movie* and about creating anything. If you have love and you have family, you have everything, and you can do anything that you want to do. You just have to start. Do it. Learn. Do it again. Just keep creating. Whatever you want to make is the right thing. Trust yourself. Do not ask for permission. We're all trained to do that. We need to shake that off as soon as possible. Do not wait for permission.



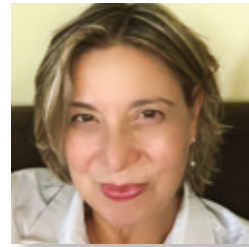
The evolution of Grandpa Victor for the web series *Gran'pa Knows Best*. Available at wilcab.com/granpa (Image courtesy of William Caballero)

Inspiring Next Gen STEM Leaders

Children's Programming



MARIA AGUI CARTER
Director and Series Producer/
Advisor, *Latina SciGirls*



DOROTHY BENNETT
Director of Creative Pedagogy,
New York Hall of Science



CHRISTINA DELFICO
iDig2Learn, Founder &
Independent Producer



JANE STARTZ
Multi-Emmy Award-winning
Producer and President of Jane
Startz Productions, Inc.



**MODERATOR
MARIBEL LOPEZ**
Senior Director and Head
of PBS Digital Studios

MARIBEL LOPEZ: I am in such fantastic company for this panel. These women are stacked with credentials, awards, and accolades. I'm going to start off by having each of you elaborate a bit about your career trajectory. How did you get to now? And then tell us about your company or the institution that you work for. I'm going to start with you, Maria.

MARIA AGUI CARTER: It's such a pleasure to be here. I've been a writer and director of film for decades. I'm also a professor at Emerson College, where I teach film. I have a first-look deal with Concordia Studio. For many years, I have specialized in films about gender, politics, and equity. I did the *Latina SciGirls* series with Twin Cities PBS, where you are, Maribel. They had already done

several seasons of *SciGirls*, so I was thrilled when they decided to respond to the need for additional STEM education for Brown girls by doing an entire season specifically for Latina girls. I like to say that they had decided to do dual-language programming to serve their existing fan base, but they did trilingual programming because we did English, Spanish, and Spanglish.

LOPEZ: Thank you so much, Maria. It's so nice to meet you and to share that connection. I'm going to pass it over to Jane.

JANE STARTZ: My name is Jane Startz. I have produced and developed movies and television for children and families for over 40 years. My first job when I graduated from college was at Scholastic. I started and ran its film and television

company for over 20 years. While I was there, I had the opportunity to generate some wonderful programming, including *The Magic School Bus*. I'm very proud of that show. It's the longest running science show for kids in broadcast history. And I got to work with the amazing Lily Tomlin.

What I try to do is to find high-quality children's literature that's aspirational. Because that's my bias, most of it focuses on girls and young women. They are stories that show how characters can survive tough situations through good will, hard work, intelligence, and perseverance. I've probably done over 200 hours of television and many feature films: *The School for Good and Evil* (which was a book series that I helped develop and sell), *The Baby-Sitters Club*, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and *Tuck Everlasting*. Last year's *Sneakerella* for Disney+ won four Emmys, including one for best fiction work. I'm very proud of that movie. We got the ReFrame Stamp, which meant that it was a completely female-led effort, including my producing partner Rachel Watanabe-Batton. It's a contemporary and diverse reimaging of the Cinderella story that takes place in Astoria, Queens. We changed the paradigm of the story. I'm a firm believer in the power of narrative. My love has always been straddling education and entertainment and letting all kinds of different children see themselves in stories.

DOROTHY BENNETT: Hi. I am just so honored and pleased to be here with you amazing women, and at this conference. I am currently the director of creative pedagogy at the New York Hall of Science, which is a science museum in Queens, New York. Jane, *The Magic School Bus* lived in our museum for quite a while. It was one of the most visited areas within the museum. Hats off to you for such an amazing series. It inspired so many children.

My pathway has been a long one and an unpredictable one. In high school, I was one of those young women who sat at the intersection of wanting to be creative and liking science, but not really finding a place where those things



SciGirls has the bold goal of changing how millions of girls think about STEM. Each half-hour episode highlights the processes of science and engineering, following a different group of middle school girls who design, with the help of scientist mentors, their own inquiry-based investigations on a variety of topics. Funded by the National Science Foundation, Twin Cities PBS's *SciGirls* has garnered seven Emmy nominations, including one for *Latina SciGirls*. Available at pbskids.org/scigirls and at scigirlsconnect.org (Photos courtesy of Twin Cities PBS)

would meet. At Hunter College, I took computer science, communications, and all kinds of other things. That journey is what fueled my passion to make STEM accessible to everyone, particularly to people who feel like they don't belong. I started at Sesame Workshop in their production department and then moved into research and development. Then I went to graduate school at the Bank Street College of Education because I wanted to learn more about how kids learn and how to infuse digital media into experiences to help kids. I was very fortunate to work with the Bank Street Center for Children and Technology, which was run exclusively by women. We were the only women at the table talking about the introduction of computers and the Internet in schools. I'm aging myself here, but it has been a long journey.

And now I'm at a museum. We sit in Queens, which is one of the most diverse counties in the country. Fifty languages are spoken by the young people employed to facilitate our floor experiences who come from the community. It gives us the opportunity to redefine STEM learning for young people. When you speak to scientists, you find many of them started with an early passion about something. My job at the museum is thinking about how to pique that curiosity in all kids.

LOPEZ: We have one more introduction. Christina, I would love for you to introduce yourself.

CHRISTINA DELFICO: It's a thrill to be here. Big shout out to the National Science Foundation for funding this. And of course, NYWIFT, Cynthia López, and her entire crew behind the scenes for making this seamless. Thank you all.

My path, in a phrase, is from puppets to plants and beyond. In the household I grew up in there were an aeronautical engineer and a museum educator. We spent a lot of time at the Smithsonian museums learning about art and about science. My career started at the Sesame Workshop hanging out with Big Bird and creating content. This included primetime specials for PBS and a lot of family-friendly work, like toolkits to navigate life

through tough times and with coping strategies on topics like when parents are away or separated and financial hardship. There were also a lot of fun things, like the giant Hollywood Bowl Muppet concerts for 18,000 people. In addition, there has been a lot of planetarium work in Beijing, at New Jersey's Liberty Science Center, and at Chicago's Adler Planetarium.

But 10 years ago, I founded iDig2Learn. I guess I'm the nature representative here in the group. After a lot of work in production and the editing room, I had an urge to get back outdoors. iDig2Learn in a nutshell is a grassroots organization that allows children and their grownups into the wonders of nature (plants, animals, sky, and water) and spotlights smart waste-reduction practices that bring neighbors together to support a healthy environment. We do everything from growing carrots with school kids to looking at the night sky in New York City through astronomers' telescopes to putting plankton we catch in the East River under a microscope. Basically, I want to know things, so I love talking to scientists. We also have an animation series about plants. But with all these beautiful television shows and films, I just want to make a plea to everyone here to think about the outdoors. Don't forget about the outreach: the touch, smell, and feel element. It's unforgettable. The aerospace engineer who kicked off this summit said the reason she wanted to work with rockets is because when she was 11, she went on a field trip. I think we all can dig deep and think about how our eyes were opened to whole new worlds.

LOPEZ: Awesome. Thank you so much, Christina. Thank you everybody for giving us a peek into everything that you have done in your career. So inspiring. I'm in amazing company. I'm excited for folks to take a deeper look at some of the work that you all do. Maria, starting with you, can you tell us about *Latina SciGirls*?

AGUI CARTER: Sure. Latinos are about 19% of the United States, the largest ethnic population in the country. We're expected to double by 2050.



Left: The New York Hall of Science's 5000 square foot Maker Space offers hands-on learning for kids of all ages. Right: The newly renovated Great Hall was designed to mimic being under the sea by renowned architect Wallace Harrison for the 1964 World's Fair. (Photos courtesy of New York Hall of Science)

We're also the largest ethnicity in the schools. Our kids are a third of the entire K-to-12 school population. Our kids will grow up to make up the largest ethnicity in the U.S. workforce. But we have very few Latina role models, like teachers, principals, and administrators in the schools. And there aren't a lot of role models in STEM who are Latina, so our media representation really matters. If we care about helping to lift up underprivileged communities and helping our kids learn STEM, we need something to inspire them to seek those skilled 21st-century science and tech jobs.

Latinas are about 2% of scientist and engineers. That's very similar to Latina representation in the media field. We need to know how to spark and strengthen girls' interests and confidence in STEM subjects before they get to high school, because at that point academic choices either open or close. This is especially true for girls in underrepresented groups like Latinas. That's why *Latina SciGirls* is so important. For example, in one episode our characters, Marilyn, Nazaret, Sheila, and Marielli, work together to code robotics to make light-up dance costumes for a very ambitious public performance at the Museum of the Moving Image theater.

The series penetrated about 92% of U.S. households with 100% percent participation in the top 25 markets. Additionally, it played on Univision, Vimeo, DirecTV, Dish Network, AT&T, and now it's on Amazon Prime. I particularly loved the impact work Twin Cities PBS did. They have 24/7 availability beyond the broadcast, website access, and additional materials like hundreds of games and parent tools. They worked with over 100 Latino-facing youth organizations nationwide to deliver this STEM content, which was particularly successful and ended up getting an Emmy nomination.

I grew up in the U.S. as an undocumented kid and ended up going to Harvard on scholarship. I didn't go on field trips. The opportunities and the dreams that I had came out of television. That's how I learned the language. That's how I learned about role models. I never saw people like me on TV unless we were criminals or cleaning houses. It's so incredibly important that we have BIPOC mediamakers making films about our community for general audiences as well as for our communities, because the role models inspire people.

LOPEZ: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Maria. Jane, I would love to pass it to you. You shared a

bit about your career and your work with Scholastic and *The Magic School Bus*, but I know you wanted to tell us about two other recent projects.

STARTZ: Yes, essentially I was thinking about both *Sneakerella* and *The School for Good and Evil* as re-imaginings of classic fairytales. *The School for Good and Evil* is based on a book about two young women who live in a picture-perfect medieval town except for the fact that every four years, two children disappear. One is the most beautiful and loved; the other sort of the least popular. It's really a look at how we make judgements about young women. Nobody is really good or evil. We're all a little of both.

LOPEZ: Yes, that's so important. I was talking to our intern earlier today about knowing that it's not a straight path. One opportunity takes you one way, and who knows what's on the other side. It's about never thinking of it as linear. There are really good examples of that here on this panel. Dorothy, I'd love to hear more about your work at the New York Hall of Science.

BENNETT: My role at the New York Hall of Science (NYSCI), the director of creative pedagogy, has me focusing across departments, exhibits, programs, outreach, and digital tool development. I'm thinking about transformative ways of teaching and learning that we can integrate into our practices to reach a broader audience. But even more than that, it's about the approaches that promote

agency for the people who come to our space and beyond the walls of our museum.

NYSCI was born at the World's Fair in 1964 when the building was built. The World's Fair was trying to visualize the future of science. I remember going as a small child with my mom and standing in this cathedral to science and saying, "Wow, it feels like I'm in space." It was this beautiful blue wavy building, and it turns out the architect designed it to feel like you are in space. I am so happy to have taken a circuitous route to this destination.

Exhibitions are a big piece of working with the community. When we come up with exhibition ideas, we're asking our community—as well as science experts—about what they're interested in. It's not just about communicating science. It really is about experiencing science. In our exhibition Design Lab, we were almost insanely ambitious. There are five pods in a makerspace with a design and engineering space. We've done a lot of research around the idea of engineering, the design process. It's a gloriously big space, about 5,000 square feet. Actually, it's in the space where *The Magic School Bus* used to be.

I think, the important piece there is the opportunity to give a free space to people, particularly people whose voices have been absent in engineering, to realize their ideas—sometimes whimsical ones, like creating art using technology

Scholastic's *The Magic School Bus* has been introducing kids to science since Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen's books first appeared in 1986, but in 1994 Ms. Frizzle, voiced by Lily Tomlin, took another giant step for STEM education and jumped into television. (Image courtesy of Scholastic)



Founded ten years ago, iDig2Learn is a grassroots organization that connects the public to the wonders of nature and spotlights smart waste reduction practices that bring neighbors together to support a healthy environment. Here founder Christina Delfico explores plants with New York City kids at Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island. (Photo by Audrey Grey)

and LEDs. We have dress design in there. Yes, it does involve STEM. We also have things like Help Grandma, which has a set of materials to create something that will solve a problem for nonna or abuela or whoever the important elder is in your life. And amazing things happen!

LOPEZ: That's great. Thank you so much, Dorothy. I want to jump over to Christina from iDig2Learn.

DELFINO: This has been great. It's so interesting. Part of what iDig2Learn does is engage youth with real-life growing gardens. We planted 100 trees on Roosevelt Island in the middle of the East River in New York. Everyone's trying to design carbon intake and create a way to pull carbon dioxide out of the air, but trees have been doing that for a living for millions of years. We're also big on food scraps for compost. Everything is connected, the entire cycle. We do a lot of hands-on activity to give people the ability and the time to reflect and absorb. So, I invite you all to reach out to iDig2Learn. There's something called a slack tide when the water isn't rushing one way or the other. I feel like the young children and the young at heart need absorption time.

Our short film, *PLNT Stories*, looks deeply into people's memories of plants. And I would argue that everybody has a plant memory. It's something from the kitchen that grandma or abuela made. It's something that grew in a pot on the windowsill.

It's a tree a child was under. Everyone has this plant story that they can tap into. That was the impetus for *PLNT Stories*. We're hoping we can do more of them. The first short animation, *Sugarcane Summer*, is by a local artist named Andrés "Jay" Molina and an illustrator named Micheline Hess from Michmash Arts.

LOPEZ: So important. Thank you all so much. I'd love for you to go around and tell us of your own inspiration for getting into this field and a piece of advice for anybody who is looking to move into STEM media.

BENNETT: I think we're at a moment when there's more and more awareness that we can't continue keeping STEM the way that it is. Diverse perspectives are going to be our way out of this, or we're not going to survive. I know that sounds a little dramatic, but it is true. Particularly in the age of AI, different communities are being unequally served because the designers of many of these innovations have been a pretty closed community. Don't be discouraged. You're needed. That's my advice, or rather my plea. We need more people not to be discouraged.

DELFINO: One great thing is all you need is an idea that you're personally passionate about and your friends. If you're passionate about something at any age, go for it.

LOPEZ: I love that.

STARTZ: I was supposed to get a PhD in English

literature at Columbia, but then I realized I really didn't know why I was there. I come from a family of teachers and that was the expected thing for me to do. I always loved storytelling, so I decided to take a major leap of faith and see if I could make my way in New York by perseverance. My advice always is that it's really important to have a goal or dream and not to be intimidated. Too often young women feel that it's not possible. It's very important to trust yourself. Respect your talent and your judgment. Persevering is really critical.

LOPEZ: Thank you so much. We have a question from the audience for Jane: Are you accepting any youth-based female-led STEM stories, ideas, treatments, pitch decks? If not, do you have any recommendations on where to pitch?

STARTZ: I'm always accepting material and I'm particularly interested in youth-based female STEM material. My advice is to research what production companies are interested in the area and pursue them. If you don't have a great deal of experience, see if you can build partnerships with people who may have access. That way you can approach the streamers and broadcasters. But I would pursue it very aggressively and not be discouraged if it takes a long time. I have an animated movie coming out next year called *The Tiger's Apprentice* that I started in 2003. You've got to realize it's a long game.

LOPEZ: And we're always accepting pitches at PBS. We have a grant from the National Science Foundation that is really helping us focus on delivering, curating, and developing content that's focused on being inclusive and bringing more women and BIPOC creators into the fold, specifically as it pertains to STEM. You can send materials to me at mlopez@pbs.org.

We have another question: What are some unconventional ways of getting into the field without a traditional lit/media background? What are some pathways?

STARTZ: That's a tough question. Starting as an intern would be my advice. I'm so proud of all

my interns, and many of them did not come from media backgrounds. If you can get some kind of an internship in a production company, a film company, or a publishing company, or anything that's related, that could be a help.

DELFIKO: I also love internships. We always took time to have those programs. You're almost more interesting when you don't come from media because you're bringing something to the table.

BENNETT: And if you're young there are a lot of youth media programs and internships as well. I was a product of that. I found my way to the Sesame Workshop through internships after a route that wasn't traditional. Cultural institutions and museums are looking for more and more science communication. Ours is called Explainer TV. We had producers work with the young facilitators in the museum to learn the skills of science, communication, and production. It's a specialized field. There are always opportunities to do smaller scale projects and build those skills.

AGUI CARTER: I want to build on what everyone's saying, because I didn't go to film school. I was a post-doc in history. My undergraduate study was in anthropology and visual and environmental studies. So, I don't think you have to specialize early. I think mid-career changes are terrific. We need every perspective, particularly in a field that has hated women growing older. Our perspectives are really important at every age. There are also adult education classes in media. The other thing that I would really encourage is to join organizations. Come to NYWIFT. Go to festivals. Show up. And there are so many things now online that you can access. You can watch films at Cannes or Sundance from the comfort of your home, and you can follow up and connect. But networking through joining organizations is deeply important.

LOPEZ: I'll add one more thing: Public media and nonprofit organizations are always looking for volunteers, so that might be another way to start. As you all have said, it is an industry of connections.

NYWIFT CREATIVE WORKFORCE SUMMIT: STORYTELLING STEM

NYWIFT & BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC (BAM) PRESENT

Science in Motion Screening Series

FEBRUARY 6 - MARCH 12, 2024

WITH SUPPORT FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

From urgent documentaries to empowering fictions, these groundbreaking contemporary films delve into science and technology in the modern world.

To the End

FEBRUARY 6, 2024

Stopping the climate crisis is a question of political courage, and the clock is ticking. Over three years of turbulence and crisis, four young women fight for a Green New Deal—and ignite a historic shift in U.S. climate politics. (Roadside Attractions)

totheendfilm.com

Director: Rachel Lears

Writers: Robin Blotnick, Rachel Lears

Executive Producers: Dan Cogan, Geralyn White Dreyfous, Rebecca Gang, Liz

Garbus, Harold Gale M., Martin Marquet, Jenny Raskin

Producers: Robin Blotnick, Rachel Lears, Sabrina Schmidt Gordon

Directors of Photography: Rachel Lears, Ray Whitehouse

Editor: Robin Blotnick



Space: The Longest Goodbye

FEBRUARY 13, 2024

Social isolation affects millions of people, even Mars-bound astronauts. A savvy NASA psychologist is tasked with protecting these daring explorers. (ARD TV)

facebook.com/TheLongestGoodbye

Director: Ido Mizrahy

Writers: Ido Mizrahy, Nir Sa'ar

Executive Producers: Sally Jo Fifer, Susanne Gebhardt, Amit Goren, Kai Henkel, Guy

Lavie, Maryse Rouillard, Lois Vossen, Valda Witt

Producers: Paul Cadieux, Ido Mizrahy, Nir Sa'ar

Director of Photography: Boaz Freund

Editor: Anouk Deschênes



My Love Affair with Marriage

FEBRUARY 20, 2024

A young spirited woman, Zelma, is determined to conform to the pressures of singing mythological sirens in order to be loved, but the more she conforms, the more her body resists. A story of inner female rebellion. (8 Above)

myloveaffairwithmarriagemovie.com

Director: Signe Baumane

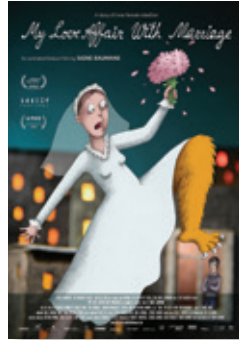
Writer: Signe Baumane

Executive Producers: John Jencks, Matthew Modine, Adam Rackoff

Producers: Signe Baumane, Raoul Nadalet, Roberts Vinovskis, Sturgis Warner

Director of Photography: Signe Baumane

Editors: Signe Baumane, Sturgis Warner



Every Body

FEBRUARY 27, 2024

Every Body focuses on three individuals who overcame shame, secrecy, and unauthorized surgery throughout their childhoods to enjoy successful adult-hoods, choosing to ignore medical advice to conceal their bodies and coming out as who they truly were. (Focus Features)

focusfeatures.com/every-body/watch

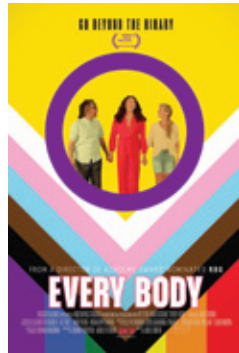
Director: Julie Cohen

Executive Producers: Andy Berg, Liz Cole, Elizabeth Fischer, Noah Oppenheim

Producers: Tommy Nguyen, Molly O'Brien

Directors of Photography: Leah Anova, Kate Phelan

Editor: Kelly Kendrick



93Queen

MARCH 5, 2024

93Queen is a documentary film that follows a group of Hasidic women in Brooklyn who create the first all-female volunteer ambulance corps in New York City. The film provides insight into their struggles, determination, and the challenges they face within their own community while trying to establish this pioneering emergency medical service. (Abramorama)

93queen.com

Director: Paula Eiselt

Executive Producers: Sally Jo Fifer (ITVS), Justine Nagan (POV), Chris White (POV), Marco Williams

Producers: Adam Bolt, Paula Eiselt, Heidi Reinberg

Director of Photography: Paula Eiselt

Editors: Rebecca Laks, Sunita Prasad



Chilly & Milly

MARCH 12, 2024

Exploring the director's father's chronic health problems as a diabetic with kidney failure, and his mother's role as his father's caretaker, this movie combines 3D-modeled characters with an autobiographical documentary shot 13 years ago. Screened with *Over-Flow*.

wilcab.com/chilly-and-milly

Director: William D. Caballero

Writer: William D. Caballero

Producers: William D. Caballero, Elaine del Valle



Over-Flow

MARCH 12, 2024

Filmmaker Elizabeth Ramjit ventures to the Caribbean island of Trinidad to document unregulated air pollution and marine contamination concerns, but once there she shifts her focus to a recent flash flood in Trinidad and Tobago that has led to continuous accumulation of waste. The result is a firsthand account from Ramjit, a first-generation American Trinidadian filmmaker, of the devastation from overbank floods and flash floods in the twin-island Caribbean nation. Ramjit interviews activists on a quest for revival. These activists reassure citizens that if they refrain from littering and recycle, they will no longer be deemed instigators of seemingly natural disasters or environmental anarchy. Screened with *Chilly & Milly*. (Labocine)

imelizabethramjit.org/projects

Director: Elizabeth Ramjit

Writer: Elizabeth Ramjit

Producers: Elizabeth Ramjit, Hannan Louis

Director of Photography: Tamara Smith

Editor: Elizabeth Ramjit



Whales, Elephants, and Scientists: NYWIFT Members Find Inspiration Everywhere

BY KATIE CHAMBERS

Ocean Storyteller Blends Filmmaking and Marine Science

With additional reporting by Catherine Woo

Gaelin Rosenwaks has always been fascinated by the marine world. She began diving at the tender age of 14 and has never stopped. Now she brings her camera with her. “I am a marine scientist and ocean storyteller,” Rosenwaks said. “I use film, photography, and writing to inspire people to care about the ocean and our planet.” As a scientist, explorer, photographer, and filmmaker, Rosenwaks began her career at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and earned her master’s degree in coastal environmental management from Duke University, working with the Tag-A-Giant program and conducting research on the migratory movements of giant bluefin tuna. Her fieldwork has since taken her around the world, from the Antarctic to the Arctic on icebreakers and to both the Pacific and the Atlantic on fishing vessels.

Her network is made up of filmmakers and scientists alike. “The best advice I ever received was to ‘make myself indispensable’ whenever I was part of a team,” Rosenwaks said. She is a

U.S. Coast Guard licensed captain, a fellow of both the Royal Geographical Society and the Explorers Club, and a member of the Society of Women Geographers. As an expert in her field, Rosenwaks has published articles in scientific journals, newspapers, and magazines and has delivered lectures at global conferences and many institutions, including the Explorers Club, Patagonia, Duke University, and Yale University, as well as appearing as an expert on TV programs on the Discovery Channel, Science Channel, CBS News, and Business Insider. She was even one of the few women to be featured on the cover of *Outside* magazine. All of her accomplishments can be traced back to her initial passion for the sea. “To me, there is nothing better than being in the open ocean surrounded by endless blue water and passing wildlife,” she said.

Rosenwaks’s work has allowed her to see climate change close-up, and she founded Global Ocean Exploration in response to alarming changes to our oceans. The company is devoted to bringing cutting-edge expedition science to the public through photography, writing, and film. Rosenwaks now participates in and conducts

expeditions in every ocean to alert the public not only to the challenges facing the oceans, but also to what science is doing to understand these changes.

She has taken a “deep dive” (her words!) into the world of sperm whales, as the author of *Sperm Whales: The Gentle Goliaths of the Oceans*, featuring beautiful up-close and never-before-seen photographs of these magnificent creatures. “The first medium that I worked with as a storyteller was photography, so for me, it was a wonderful return,” Rosenwaks said. “My approach was different [than filmmaking] as I had to capture the one perfect frame that encapsulated what was often a longer encounter, and to ensure that the movement and dynamic nature of these interactions were captured in one still frame. It was a challenge, but also an opportunity to allow the viewer’s imagination to wander.” The book explores close bonds between mother and child whales in the waters off of Dominica, exploring the matriarchal multi-generational family units of whales that resemble those of elephants and humans.

Rosenwaks’s latest project, the documentary film *Finding Physty*, also tackles whale family dynamics and is a companion piece to the book. In a unique moment of life reflecting art, Rosenwaks invited her own mother along for the journey. “It has been wonderful to bring my mother on these expeditions and have her join my team,” Rosenwaks said. “She introduced me to the ocean and art as a child, so introducing her into my world of expedition film and photography has been a privilege. She taught me so much growing up, and now we have come full circle and I have been able to teach her new skills.” Rosenwaks hopes

her own projects and passion for the ocean will inspire generations to come to learn more about and protect these unique ecosystems.

Filmmaker Draws on Neuroscience to Understand Human Behavior

Neuroscientist-turned-filmmaker Ifeyinwa Arinze has always been drawn to unique personalities and perspectives, whether exploring them through biology or through the magic of storytelling. “A few years ago, during a critique session, a directing professor commented on my work, saying that he could see that I was ‘drawn to the behavior of my characters,’” Arinze recalled. “I felt so seen,

and in that moment the dots connected for me—that my interest in how we behave as humans, which is what drew me to neuroscience, shows up in how I write my characters and direct my actors.”

Born in Nigeria and based in New York, Arinze is a 2022 recipient of the NYC Women’s Fund for Media, Music and Theatre, a

2021 BAFTA New York scholar, and the inaugural recipient of the Hayden5 x Video Consortium Gear Grant in 2021. She received her BA from Mount Holyoke College and is an MFA candidate in the graduate film program at NYU Tisch School of the Arts.

Arinze’s move from a career in science to a career in media did not come as a total surprise. “Filmmaking is storytelling, and my interest in stories began at a very young age. I read voraciously growing up, but I never had a concrete creative outlet. Looking back, I believe I was storing up all those inspirations for the moment when I had the right tools. That moment came in my sophomore year of college,” Arinze said. “I discovered



Ifeyinwa Arinze on the set of *Two or More* (Photo courtesy of Ifeyinwa Arinze)

Gaelin Rosenwaks on location in the ocean and at her desk. (Photos courtesy of Gaelin Rosenwaks)





Ifeyinwa Arinze on set (Photo courtesy of Ifeyinwa Arinze)

photography and that exposed me to visual storytelling. It was refreshing and intoxicating. Eventually, I began to yearn to do more with visuals. Film became a natural evolution for me.”

The STEM influences in her creative life are subtle, she said, but ultimately, her “work draws inspiration from human behavior and prioritizes intimate portrayals of Black women and girls that are grounded in generosity and care.” One of her latest short films, *Two or More*, premiered at the 2022 New York African Film Festival and screened at the 2022 Palm Springs International ShortFest, the 2022 Bushwick Film Festival, and the 2022 TIDE Film Festival, where Arinze received the 2022 NYWIFT Outstanding Woman Content Creator Award.

The film draws directly from personal experiences, and positions the harsh biological realities of life and death alongside ideas of faith and identity. “The seed of it was from witnessing a family member’s death as a child after I had prayed for their healing. That experience rattled the foundations of my faith,” Arinze said. “A few years ago, it bobbed around in my consciousness, and I wondered what it would look like, in a fictionalized version, if space had been made for a child like me to voice that doubt.”

Her STEM background has influenced her

upcoming creative projects as well. “I’m currently developing a character-driven documentary about the experiences and mental health of three Black women navigating doctoral programs in the U.S. and where they go to be soft,” Arinze said. Through her work, she hopes to break down barriers and change perceptions of Black identity, though she tries not to let such a “tall order” get in the way of her creativity.

“I just hope to keep showing up and making work that feels honest to me—work that validates the experiences of those who rarely see themselves on screen in a way that is tender and generous,” she said. “Through those efforts, I hope my work brings into existence something that is bigger than myself.”

Wildlife Tales Bring Conservation into Focus

With additional reporting by Kristin Reiber Harris

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) is a global conservation organization founded as the New York Zoological Society in 1895. Today, WCS works to conserve the world’s largest wild places in 14 priority regions, home to more than 50% of the world’s biodiversity. WCS also runs four zoos and an aquarium in New York City—the Bronx, Central Park, Prospect Park, and Queens Zoos and the New York Aquarium in Coney Island—educating four million visitors each year about the importance of conservation. And part of the way it accomplishes that mission is through film. That’s where Natalie Cash comes in.

Cash is the executive video producer at WCS, where she produces short-form programming about WCS projects for multiple platforms, helping to advance conservation and understanding of our natural world, advocate for stronger policy, and raise funds in support of this work. Cash’s career began not in environmental science but in film—as a film specialist with the New Orleans Film Commission. “I knew to make my own films, I would probably need to relocate to Los Angeles or New York, and I fell truly, madly, deeply in love with the Big Apple,” Cash said.



Left: Natalie Cash. Right: Cash filming geladas in the Simien Mountains Ethiopia (Photo courtesy of Natalie Cash)

She found herself drawn to documentary, and after directing and selling some shorts, she interned for *American Masters* on WNET/Thirteen, which opened up a whole new passion. “I relished the research process. I got to work on the Leonard Bernstein episode, which as a music lover, was an absolute thrill,” Cash said. These research skills would serve her well throughout her transition into wildlife filmmaking. “The editor of the Lena Horne *American Masters* episode, Sak Costanzo, recommended [me] for a position at the Emmy Award-winning natural history production company Pangolin Pictures, and I started there in 1997.”

At Pangolin, Cash found amazing mentors and produced films for National Geographic, the Discovery Channel, *Reader’s Digest*, and the WNET/Thirteen series *Nature*. “I’ve always been fascinated by wildlife, wild places, the environment, and with the alarming state of the planet today—from climate change to biodiversity loss to the global pandemic that has transformed our lives in just three years—I wanted to be a part of that conversation and connect with general audiences,” Cash said. In her current position at WCS, she can drive that conversation. “The part of my job that keeps me excited is knowing that every film we create is in service of conservation and the preservation of wildlife and wild places.”

And her work has certainly taken her to wild places! She said her favorite project for WCS was *An Elephant’s Tale: The Matriarch*, a short film that looks at the poaching crisis through the eyes of

a single elephant. “I wrote the script in the back of a pickup truck while we were monitoring a herd of elephants in Kenya’s Laikipia province,” Cash said. “It was a magical experience, and the words came so effortlessly. I love when that happens—when it feels more like transcribing than writing—and cherish it because it’s so rare and so pure. If that film helped improve the life of even one elephant, it’s the fuel that pushes you to keep going.” The film was shown at WCS’s annual gala in 2014, which honored Hillary Clinton for her efforts to protect biodiversity.

While Cash relishes the wild moments, she doesn’t mind working close to home either. “I love to travel, but I also love that we are headquartered inside the Bronx Zoo, a 265-acre urban wilderness. It is such a special place,” Cash said. “For many New Yorkers, it can be the only opportunity they will have to see these animals up close, and as proud as I am of my films, nothing on-screen matches the sight and sound of having the animal in front of you. Each visit to any of the five parks is an act of conservation and education.”

Cash recently graduated with an MFA in screenwriting from Stephens College and hopes to expand her network and filmmaking opportunities through her NYWIFT connections. “I think the future is very bright as more and more women today hold positions of power and wield greater influence than when I started out 30 years ago. There are more opportunities, and the diversification of gatekeepers has resulted in more and better projects being made.”

NEW YORK WOMEN IN FILM & TELEVISION

Founders



Marilyn Casselman



Lenore DeKoven



Morna Murphy Martell

ON JULY 13, 1977, New York producer and director Lenore DeKoven and *The Hollywood Reporter* bureau chief Morna Murphy Martell called a meeting of 25 women colleagues at a Manhattan apartment, including soon-to-be NYWIFT Board President Marilyn Casselman, to discuss forming an organization for women in the film industry. And then the lights went out across New York City. While the creation of NYWIFT did not cause the 1977 New York City Blackout, those women did start a power surge that has continued for over 40 years.

All three women have continued to be vibrant advocates for women in the entertainment community. Through the 1980s, Martell covered theater for *The Hollywood Reporter*. Today, her reviews can be found in her monthly column for the senior newspaper *Not Born Yesterday* and her blog Theatre Spoken Here. Her one-woman show *Harriet Tubman Herself*, starring NYWIFT member Christine Dixon, is in its second decade touring the East Coast.

DeKoven's career as director, producer, and educator has spanned both East and West Coasts and includes theater, film, and television. She has held executive positions at Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, the N.Y. Shakespeare Festival, Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre, the National Repertory Theatre, and Roundabout Theatre Company in New York and was chairperson of the board of Theatre West, L.A.

In addition to leading NYWIFT during its early years, Casselman worked in international sales and marketing for Warner Communications, RPTA London, Impact Films, and American Documentary Films. She is also a theater and film producer, writer, and director. Her published works include *Talking the Walk: The Grassroots Language of Feminism*. Currently, she is working on a two-volume novel based on witchcraft set in England and France circa 1700.

A special heartfelt thank you to our founders. The struggle for pay equity, diversity and inclusion, and safe work environments continues....

NEW YORK WOMEN IN FILM & TELEVISION

Board of Directors



Leslie Fields-Cruz
President

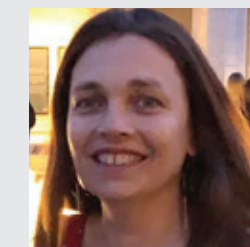
Leslie Fields-Cruz started at Black Public Media (BPM), formerly National Black Programming Consortium, in 2001, managing grant-making activities that supported the production and development of documentary programs for PBS. By 2005, she was the director of programming, leading the distribution of all funded programs to public television. In 2008, with six independent titles in need of a public television broadcast, Fields-Cruz launched *AfroPoP: The Ultimate Cultural Exchange*, a documentary series highlighting the variety and depth of the global Black experience. *AfroPoP* has garnered several awards and is the only national public television series focused solely on stories from the Black experience. In the fall of 2014, Fields-Cruz became BPM's third executive director. While she continues the development of program content and its distribution across public media platforms, she is focused on growing BPM's resources to enable it to support more stories about the Black experience.



Kim Jackson
VP of Development

Kim Jackson is recognized for producing dozens of notable independent films. Her early creative expression began with dance and choreography, and that has remained the spark that ignites her creative passions. Having majored in environmental science, she has a

natural curiosity for how things work. Technology as it relates to serving and advancing humanity is of special interest to Jackson. She's the co-founder of the creative studio Evotion and is active on several boards in addition to the NYWIFT board, including those of ACE Programs for the Homeless and the Gwen Ifill College of Media, Arts, and Humanities at Simmons University. Jackson is a member of the Producers Guild of America and the Producers Union.



Christina Kiely
VP of Education & Advocacy

Christina Kiely has been producing and directing documentaries for over 25 years. Most recently she has been directing and producing (with her producing partner Sean Gullette) *Grrrls in Exile: The Sixsters*, a feature documentary about an all-girl Ukrainian rock band who fled the war to become anti-war rock ambassadors. Kiely wrote, directed, and produced the first digital documentary series from ABC News, *A Murder On Orchard Street*, and co-produced the accompanying podcast to the seven-part series, which hit number one on Apple Podcasts. In 2004 she was nominated for an Emmy for her work on the ABC News documentary series *NYPD 24/7*. While at ABC she also produced for *In the Jury Room* and *Primetime Mondays*. Outside of ABC, Kiely has produced and directed numerous programs, including the A&E *Biography of Yo-Yo Ma*, 12 hours of the TLC series *Code Blue*, the PBS newsmagazine *Rights & Wrongs: Human Rights Television*, and documentaries for the

International Labour Organization of the United Nations. In development she has *Ace to Ace*, a docuseries about diversifying the world of tennis. Kiely is also part of a screenwriting duo with her sister, Maria Kiely. Their family comedy *We Should Celebrate* is in development with producers Rachel Watanabe-Batton and Jane Startz.



Sibyl Reymundo-Santiago
VP of Special Events

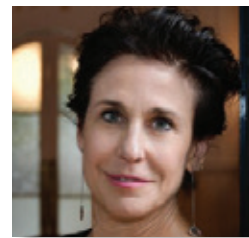
For over 30 years, Sibyl Reymundo-Santiago has been involved in film, television and stage production both in the United States and Asia, working with major studios such as Myx, Regal Films, Star Cinema, Metro Style, and ABS-CBN. As president of Sitting Cat Productions, she has had several films released, including Nicholas Brooks's debut feature film *Sam, Alone/Together* with Philippines stars Liza Soberano and Enrique Gil, and the feature film *Follow Her*, directed by Sylvia Caminer. Reymundo-Santiago is an active member of BAFTA and the Producers Guild of America (PGA) and is a founding member and former co-lead of the PGA's AAPI Working Group as part of the One Guild initiative. She is a recipient of an Outstanding Filipinos in America award. She also is a member of SAG-AFTRA and Actors' Equity and has appeared in several film, television, and stage productions in New York City. She is in post on a documentary where she received the p.g.a. mark, while developing her own series. She is currently in her 13th year as the executive director and head of programming for the SOHO International Film Festival.



Gretchen McGowan
Treasurer

Gretchen McGowan is an award-winning producer and the head of production for Goldcrest in New York City, where

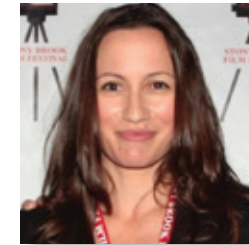
she oversees titles such as *Carol*, *Mojave*, *Slumber*, *Restrepo*, *Carrie Pilby*, and *Danger Close*. McGowan has collaborated with Sebastian Junger on five films and she is now working with Junger and Fisher Stevens on a new film about Mexican cartels and the caravans. McGowan independently produced Jim Jarmusch's *The Limits of Control*, a Focus Features release, and *American Swing* from Magnolia Pictures. While head of production with Mark Cuban's HDNet Movies, Blow Up Pictures, and Open City Films, she supervised over 25 features, including *Redacted*, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *Broken English*, *Bubble*, *Lovely and Amazing*, and *Coffee and Cigarettes*. She line-produced *Dancemaker*, *Buffalo '66*, *Two Girls and a Guy*, *American Psycho*, and *Heavy*.



Joyce Pierpoline
Secretary

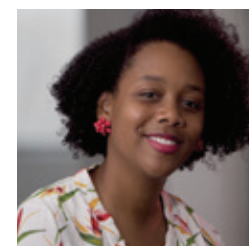
Joyce Pierpoline is a producer of award-winning films and founder of Pierpoline Films, based in New York. She recently executive produced *Mediha*, winner of the Grand Jury Prize at DOC NYC 2023; other films include *The Listener*, starring Tessa Thompson and directed by Steve Buscemi, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival; *The Transfiguration*, at the Cannes Film Festival; Sundance award-winning cult favorite *Teeth*, considered one of the top 10 political horror films of all time; *Happy Tears*, *Angelica*, and the multi awarding-winning first film by Neil Labute, *In the Company of Men*. Prior to producing, Joyce was a production and acquisitions executive for French studio UGC, where she was instrumental in the acquisition and co-production of numerous titles from some of the world's most acclaimed filmmakers, including Ang Lee, Christopher Nolan, Kenneth Branagh, and Terry Gilliam. She began her career in France as head of international press for the Cannes Film Festival. She serves as Chair of the Board of BAFTA North America, and is member of the European Film Academy, European

Producers Club, International Emmys, and Producers Guild of America, where she co-founded the Women's Impact Network, promoting gender equality in the industry.



Sirad Balducci

Sirad Balducci is an independent feature film producer based in New York with over 25 years of experience. Fueled by a passion for supporting creative visions that drive positive change, she works closely with talented directors and writers to bring incredible stories to life. As one of the founders of the Give Film Foundation, Balducci strongly believes in the profound power of film to make a social impact. Her award-winning short film *Generation Lockdown*, which she wrote and directed, sheds light on the traumatic psychological effects experienced by children in the face of the gun epidemic. Currently, Balducci is writing and developing a new feature film focusing on mental health and inspired by the Rainbow Roll for the End of AIDS, a cross-country inline skating event she produced and documented in 1994. Balducci is a member of the Directors Guild of America and is represented by Gersh NY.



Kia Brooks

Kia Brooks is the deputy director of The Gotham Film & Media Institute. Her experience in strategic communications (including PR and marketing) and events spans more than a decade. At The Gotham, she oversees programming and communications and supports the organization's development efforts. Brooks is the founder of The Gotham's Owing It program, which supports women and non-binary mediamakers and entrepreneurs who break boundaries in the media and entertainment industry. She also developed

the Expanding Communities program, which is dedicated to providing resources, a community space, and industry access to individuals with disabilities and Black, Indigenous, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ creators across film, TV, and audio industries. Through partnerships with organizations aligned with uplifting historically excluded voices, the program acts as a platform for both creators and organizations to reach new audiences, develop networks of potential collaborators, and access career advancement resources and opportunities within the media and entertainment industry. Previous to working at The Gotham, Brooks worked in film publicity for companies such as Focus Features, Oscilloscope Laboratories, and Tribeca Festival. She has a bachelor of arts degree in public communication from American University and is currently enrolled in a fundraising certificate program at New York University.



Shruti Ganguly

Shruti Ganguly is a filmmaker and writer based between New York City and Oslo. Ganguly was a member of Obama's ECCO committee of 30 leaders and creators in entertainment, chairing its Asian Caucus, and is on the Creative Council for Emily's List. She has produced several feature films (including Spirit-winner *H.*, and the Nora Ephron Prize-winner *Initials SG*) that have premiered at Sundance, Venice, Tribeca, Telluride, and Berlin. Ganguly recently directed *Tripped Up*, which will be distributed by Decal (North America) and Universal Pictures (Global). Ganguly sold *Deathspa*, a psychological horror film about a bachelorette party that goes wrong to Sony International, and is currently writing *Secret Daughter* for Amazon Studios, a feature drama that will star Priyanka Chopra and Sienna Miller, directed by Cannes-winner Anthony Chen. Her coming-of-age feature comedy, *Priya, at 12*, will be produced by Nikki Silver and Meena Harris's Phenomenal Media. On the TV front, Ganguly

is a writing-EP on the half-hour TV series *Brown Baby*, which will star Himesh Patel, set up at Apple UK, and has been developing *Flossy*, a half-hour with comedian and writer Kerry Coddett.



Ameyna Makuku

Ameyna Makuku is an independent producer and the head of development and production for Courtney Lee-Mitchell's 4th Power Films (*Kindred*, FX), with previous tenure at Edward Norton's Class 5 Films, where she worked from development through physical production on *Thanks For Sharing*, and FilmNation Entertainment, where she worked on Oscar-nominated *Room*; Oscar-nominated *Arrival*; and then-in-development titles *The Good House*, *The Rules of Inheritance*, and *Tokyo Vice*. Makuku recently wrapped production on Craig Webster's *The Woman in the Cabinet*, started during the pandemic. She co-produced director Josephine Decker's Sundance 2018 smash *Madeline's Madeline* (released by Oscilloscope Laboratories). Makuku has produced the shorts *Here*, *Heidee*, *Crone's Disease*, *The Middlegame*, *Linda*, and *Obviously*. She is the film/TV advisor for theater-incubator The Playwrights Realm.



Neyda Martinez

Neyda Martinez is a producer, strategist, writer, and longtime cultural worker. Selected in 2023 as a Sundance Woman to Watch x Adobe Fellow, and a faculty fellow for the Mellon Initiative for Inclusive Faculty Excellence, Martinez currently has in production documentaries such as *Bartholo* and *A Chasm in Chinatown*. Past documentary credits include *Lucky* and *Decade of Fire*, a PBS *Independent Lens* Audience Award winner. For over a decade she was a communications strategist for American Documentary's *POV* and

America Reframed series, managing publicity, marketing, and branding efforts with local, regional, and national partners. She has worked for the Expo Chicago, El Museo del Barrio, and the Public Theater and consulted on initiatives for Hachette Book Group, WNYC, the New York City Mayor's Office of Adult Education, Creative Justice Initiative, and the Futuro Media Group and WNYC podcast *La Brega*. Martinez serves on the editorial board of NYU's Latinx Project Interventions and on the boards of nonprofits Pepatián, UPROSE, and Women Make Movies. She is an associate professor in the School of Media Studies, director of the media management graduate program, and co-director of the Impact Entrepreneurship Initiative at the New School. Recent fellowships include the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Lab and a New School for Social Research Heilbroner Fellowship. Originally from Chicago's West Side, she earned a master's in public administration from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.



Zenaida Mendez

Zenaida Mendez was awarded the 2022 Jewell Ryan-White Award for Cultural Diversity from the Alliance for Community Media. Mendez holds the position of director of Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) El Barrio Firehouse Community Media Center. As an activist, she is an avid voice for tolerance and has many years of experience working as an advocate for women's and LGBTQI+ rights, as well as economic, racial, and environmental justice. She also develops dynamic event-based programming initiatives, including developing partnerships with local nonprofits and community groups. She is currently executive producer of the monthly facilitated MNN productions *Both Sides of the Bars*, *The Radical Imagination*, *Critica NYC*, *Punto de Vista*, *Makilala TV* (the only national Filipino-American TV program), *Feminismo*

Global with former New York City councilwoman Margarita López, *Health Action TV* with former Manhattan borough president C. Virginia Fields, and *Adelante Juntos/Forward Together*. As a filmmaker, Mendez collaborated on the film *Coffee and a Donut*, named the best short film by Viva! Latino Film Festival NYC, and winner of an Indie Works audience choice award. She is co-producer of *ClanDestiny*, an Artemis Women in Action award winner.



Okema T. Moore

Okema T. Moore is an Emmy-nominated PGA producer and rising director, as well as a writer and actor. A 2021 directing fellow in Minorities in Film's inaugural Branded Lab, she has directed and produced content for the likes of Lifetime, Netflix, Nickelodeon, DreamWorks, Fox, and Disney/Marvel. In 2021, Moore earned her first showrunner title on BRIC TV's first late-night variety talk show, *Hella Late!*, which she also directed. The same year she served as director and EP for a new sketch series presently being shopped. Moore also directed a series of award-winning short plays off-off-Broadway. She's built a successful career producing TV shows such as Kenya Barris's *Klutch Academy* for BET, and *Beat Bobby Flay* and *The Kitchen* on the Food Network. Moore has also produced a host of unscripted shows and documentaries/docuseries, including Oprah Winfrey's *The Color of Care*, *Founding in Color* season two on Peacock, and *Nomad with Carlton McCoy* on CNN. She serves on the boards of the Black TV & Film Collective.



Audrey Rosenberg

Audrey Rosenberg is a Peabody-Award-winning, Emmy-nominated producer. She co-founded Invisible Pictures, a New York-based

woman-led production company focused on authentic representation, and has since returned to independent producing. Rosenberg is lead producer on the HBO documentary *Katrina Babies* that premiered at Tribeca 2022 in competition and aired on Max. She produced *Bull*, which premiered at Cannes, executive produced the series *Soul City*, which premiered on Topic in 2020, and produced the feature *Long Weekend*, which was released by Sony in 2021. Other credits include the Emmy-nominated HBO documentary *His Way* and HBO's Emmy-winning *By the People: The Election of Barack Obama*. Rosenberg was part of the producing team on Douglas McGrath's *Infamous*. She produced Sean Gulleter's award-winning feature *Traitors*; co-executive produced Dawn Porter's *Trapped*; and was consulting producer for the multi-award-winning and Academy Award-nominated *I Am Not Your Negro*. Rosenberg is a member of the Television Academy, the Producers Guild of America, and the Documentary Producers Alliance.



Yvonne Russo

Yvonne Russo is an award-winning producer, director, and writer of film and television specializing in inspirational Indigenous and cross-cultural stories. As an independent producer, Russo has worked on a diverse range of productions in over 17 countries, from India to the East African nation of Rwanda. She is currently directing *Ring of Fire: The Life of Annie Mae Aquash* for Hulu/Onyx Collective and is in post-production on *VIVA VERDI!*. Recent credits include *Woman Walks Ahead*, the HBO mini-series *Lewis and Clark*, and *The Rescuers: Heroes of the Holocaust*. She's a member of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences and co-chair of the Producers Guild of America diversity committee. She is also a Sundance Institute Producers Lab Fellow and a Tribeca All Access Program Fellow and is on the board of The Language Conservancy, which

works to revitalize endangered languages. She's a contributing author for HuffPost and *Produced By* magazine. Russo is a member of the Sicangu Lakota tribal nation.



Emelyn Stuart

With a degree in business and less than a decade in the industry, Emelyn Stuart has exemplified leadership and provided inspiration to film-

makers globally. Stuart has been involved with a vast range of projects, including a successful off-Broadway play. Her web series *12 Steps to Recovery* earned her the Best Producer award at the 2011 LAWebFest. Stuart is partly responsible for multiple award-winning feature films, including *The Turnaround* and *Title VII*. Her feature film *Life Is Too Short* premiered to sold-out audiences in New York during its debut screening and in 2017 it was awarded Best Feature Film at various domestic and international film festivals. In 2018, Stuart opened an independent movie theater in New York called Stuart Cinema & Cafe that offers distribution deals to independent filmmakers and serves as a resource hub for artists. She is currently building a multiplex movie theater in New York, where she will be the first Afro Latina to own a multiplex.



Kuye Youngblood

Kuye Youngblood is an Emmy award-winning producer with experience in scripted and documentary series. Formerly the head of development and

production, she is currently the general manager of the BRIC TV network. Her responsibilities include creative development from script to screen, managing a team of dynamic filmmakers, and sourcing distribution opportunities for new film works. Her EP work has screened at Tribeca,

Sundance, Lower East Side Film Festival, New Voices in Black Cinema, Hot Docs, ABFF, Urbanworld, Bentonville Film Festival, Bushwick Film Festival, New Orleans Film Festival, and Seattle International Film Festival, among others. Original series include *The Show About the Show*, *Brooklynification*, *Dinette*, *All Hail Beth*, and *The United Space of America*, and she executive produced the *Inspector Ike* feature film. She's been a speaker and mentor at SXSW, a juror with SeriesFest, and a producer/moderator for IFP panels. She was also series producer for *Neighborhood Beat*, a show about her hometown of Brooklyn.

Legal Counsel



**Marsha S. Brooks, Esq.
Legal Counsel
to NYWIFT**

Marsha S. Brooks is a partner in the New York City law firm of Brooks & Distler. She has worked

primarily in the areas of entertainment and intellectual property law for over 30 years. Brooks represents producers, writers, directors, rights owners, and for-profit and not-for-profit institutions in the fields of legitimate theater, motion picture, television, and new technology. She is general counsel for the National Alliance for Musical Theatre in addition to NYWIFT. Brooks served as co-vice chair of the theater and performing arts division of the American Bar Association Forum on the Entertainment and Sports Industries. Brooks has been a guest lecturer on a variety of subjects in the areas of intellectual property and arts-related law at Stanford Law School, Columbia Law School, Fordham University School of Law, New York University School of Law, Hofstra Law School, Commercial Theater Institute, symposia of the American Bar Association Forum on the Entertainment and Sports Industries, Showbiz Expo East, and Duke University, among others.

(Legal counsel continued on page 78.)

**NEW YORK WOMEN IN FILM & TELEVISION
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Executive Producer/Producer

Alexis Alexanian
Producer

Laverne Berry
Law Office of Laverne Berry

Grace Blake
Producer

Mirra Bank Brockman
Director/Producer

Marsha S. Brooks, Esq.
Brooks & Distler (Legal Counsel to NYWIFT)

Beth Dembitzer
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TV Guide Network

Wendy Sax
Producer

Marcie L. Setlow
Setlow Media

Claire Shanley
Producer

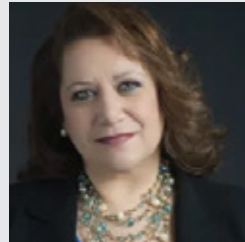
Diane Sokolow
Sokolow & Company

Caren Spruch
Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Patrizia von Brandenstein
Production Designer

Ellen Zalk
Fractional

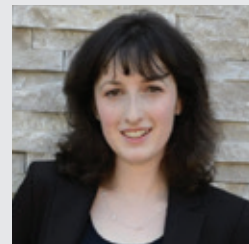
NEW YORK WOMEN IN FILM & TELEVISION Staff



Cynthia López
Chief Executive Officer

Cynthia López is an award-winning media strategist and the former commissioner of the New York City Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, where she implemented strategies to support film and TV production throughout the five boroughs. López joined the City of New York from American Documentary | POV, where she had worked since 2000, eventually becoming executive vice president and co-executive producer of the award-winning PBS documentary series. During her tenure at POV, she championed diversifying the national PBS schedule through the CPB-funded Power of Diverse Voices Program, which provided mentorship and financial support for diverse filmmakers who had not been featured on a national broadcast. López's ability to forge strategic partnerships among corporate and public interest media has been a signature of her work, as exemplified by the POV town-hall special with ABC News, *NIGHTLINE: America in Black and White: Two Towns of Jasper* with Ted Koppel. She has formed other notable partnerships with *The New York Times*, Reuters, Al Jazeera Network, Discovery, The Moth, StoryCorps, and Harpo Studios. Under her leadership, POV earned numerous awards, including a MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. López is the recipient of 11 News & Documentary Emmy Awards, four George Foster Peabody Awards, two duPont-Columbia Awards, and many other accolades. She is the founding chairperson of the board of directors of the National Association

of Latino Independent Producers and served on boards for the Paley Center for Media, NYC & Company, Museum of the Moving Image, and the Tribeca Film Institute Latin America Fund. She is currently on the boards of directors for Latino Public Broadcasting and Manhattan Neighborhood Network and sits on the Hunter College IMA advisory board. She has been named one of *People en Español's* 25 Most Powerful Women and one of the Imagen Foundation's Top 20 Influential Latinos in Media, and *Variety* listed her in its New York's Entertainment Elite. In 2019, Women's eNews honored her as one of its 21 Leaders for the 21st Century and she received the Leading Light Award from DOC NYC at its Visionaries Tribute.



Katie Chambers
**Senior Director,
Community and
Public Relations**

Katie Chambers is a communications executive and event producer with a lifelong commitment to supporting artists and advocating for inclusion. She received national recognition for her work at NYWIFT from Association Trends, which named her one of the top young and aspiring executives in 2021, and was recognized by the New York Society of Association Executives with their Rising Star Award in 2020. She is also currently the communications chair of one of New Jersey's leading volunteer organizations, the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs, and a regular contributing writer for From Day One, a media outlet focused

on innovations in corporate HR. Chambers was previously a talent agent at Abrams Artists Agency and has worked for leading entertainment companies, including Buchwald, Manhattan Theatre Club, and Scott Rudin Productions. She served on the Next Generation Committee of the NY Television Festival and produced a critically acclaimed play at the New York International Fringe Festival. Her writing has appeared in HuffPost, *Honeysuckle Magazine*, and several essay collections.



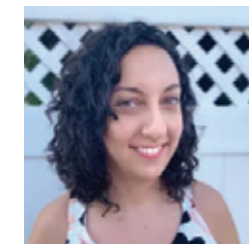
Easmanie Michel
**Director, Artists
Programs and Finance**

Easmanie Michel manages NYWIFT's fiscal sponsorship program; works closely with NYWIFT's CEO and treasurer on the monthly profit-and-loss statement and annual budget; handles the day-to-day tasks of recording financial transactions; works with the finance controller on reconciliations and the yearly audit; co-produces the Muse Awards and Designing Women; coordinates the animation series; and curates the Immigrant Stories series. Michel has worked continuously in the film and television industry since 2004, filling various roles for the films *Transporter*, *Miami Vice*, and *Hoot* and the TV series *Miami Ink*, *Burn Notice*, and *CSI: Miami*. Michel is currently producing the feature *Caroline's Wedding*, which she co-wrote. The script was a finalist for the New York University Fusion Film Festival and was selected to participate in the Women at Sundance Financing and Strategy Intensive in 2016. In 2018, the script won the grand prize in the American Zoetrope Screenplay Competition. The script was also a finalist for the New Renaissance Film Festival London in 2021. Michel received a New York State Council on the Arts individual artist grant for *Caroline's Wedding*.



Rashiek Smart
**Manager of Operations
and Special Projects**

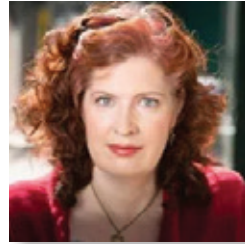
Rashiek Smart works closely with NYWIFT's CEO and board of directors to provide administrative and IT support. She serves as the primary contact for managing board meetings and elections; serves as office manager, coordinating closely with communications and programming groups; recruits, trains, and supervises interns and work-study students; coordinates NYWIFT's grants and scholarship programs; and provides logistical support for special events and projects. Prior to joining NYWIFT, Smart worked in production for the Emmy-nominated show *Here & Now* hosted by Sandra Bookman. Smart also was an award-winning video journalist for the Fios1 show *My Long Island*, where she covered newsworthy stories all across the area.



Sara Tandoi
**Membership
Coordinator**

Sara Tandoi currently serves as the membership coordinator at NYWIFT. She handles day-to-day membership duties, such as processing and reviewing membership applications, membership renewals, and event registrations, and providing admin support to the senior director, community and public relations. Tandoi assists members with questions and concerns regarding their membership benefits, events, and resources. Outside of NYWIFT, Tandoi is a filmmaker, writer, and production staff member. Prior to joining NYWIFT she interned for *The Chris Gethard Show*, *The Onion*, and Nine Stories Productions. She has an extensive background in production and has worked on many studio and indie projects, including *Manifest* (NBC), *Gotham* (Fox), and *Dietland* (AMC).

Editorial Staff



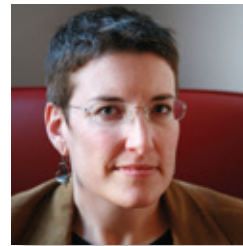
Maud Kersnowski-Sachs
Senior Editorial and Development Consultant

Maud Kersnowski-Sachs has led publications for the Sundance Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, and Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers and was editor-in-chief of *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*. She has covered arts, entertainment, and media for publications from *Metropolis Magazine* to *IndieWire*, where she also held the post of West Coast editor. She consults on editorial and development projects for a variety of arts and culture organizations, including NYWIFT and Film at Lincoln Center. Kersnowski-Sachs founded and manages a scholarship and engagement program at Bard College's Fisher Center for the Performing Arts and is a member of the Bard College Board of Governors.



Kerstin Vogdes Diehn
Design Director

The founder of 501c Design, Kerstin Vogdes Diehn has over 20 years of experience as an art director and designer. She has managed teams of writers, designers, and developers on a wide variety of NGO, government, and nonprofit projects. Her clients include Common Cause, the Dodge Poetry Festival, and Summer on the Hudson. Diehn teaches graphic design at Seton Hall University. She previously taught at Pace University, FIT, and the Art Institute of New York City.



Natalie Danford
Copy Editor

Natalie Danford is a writer, an editor, and a translator of Italian. She is the author of several books, including *Inheritance*, a novel about a woman investigating her father's past in Italy.

Legal Counsel continued:

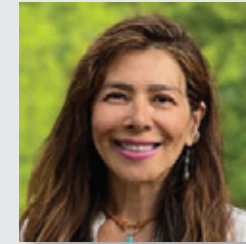


Maria C. Miles, Esq.

Maria C. Miles is the founding partner of an entertainment law firm with offices in New York. Maria's practice focuses on all areas of entertainment and media law including, film (both documentary and narrative), television (scripted and non-scripted), literary publishing, and new media. Her clients consist primarily of independent film producers, directors, writers, and talent. Prior to starting her own practice, Maria was general counsel for a multi-media digital start-up working on a diverse range of subject matter including a web series and editorial content; corporate

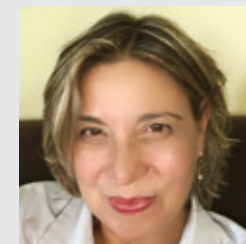
and financing transactions; technology development and licensing; employment and intellectual property, including a large catalogue of trademarks, copyrights, and patents both in the U.S. and abroad. Prior to her role as in-house counsel, Maria was associated with a large law firm where she served as counsel to numerous award-winning actors, writers, producers, television hosts, multi-platinum recording artists, sports teams, and corporations in the fashion and retail industries related to their entertainment and intellectual property matters. Maria is an Adjunct Professor at The Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema and The School of Visual Arts. She is a former member of the NYWIFT board and the president of the Hellenic Film Society USA.

NYWIFT Creative Workforce Summit Participants



Maria Agui Carter

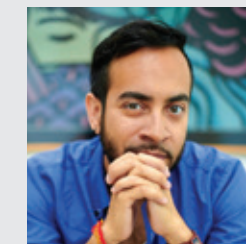
Maria Agui Carter is a writer, director, and professor at Emerson College. Born in Ecuador, she grew up undocumented in New York City and graduated on scholarship from Harvard. She's written and directed documentaries and series aired on national and international networks, from PBS to ZDF, ARTE, NHK, Discovery, and streamers. Her film *Rebel* about Loreta Velazquez, a woman soldier and spy in the American Civil War, won an Erik Barnouw award for Best Historical Documentary. Her pilot for *Latina SciGirls*, which aired on Univision, PBS, and Amazon, was nominated for an Emmy. Agui Carter has a first look deal with Concordia Studio, which will executive produce her new project on embracing joy in the wake of anti-fat bias and toxic diet culture. Her project *Birthright*, on belonging and citizenship, is supported by NEH and Firelight Media grants.



Dorothy Bennett

Dorothy Bennett, the director of creative pedagogy at the New York Hall of Science (NYSCI), leads groundbreaking initiatives embodying NYSCI's signature pedagogical approach: Design, make, play. With more than 30 years of experience in formal and informal education, she transforms this interest-based, learner-centered approach into impactful practices. She develops professional development experiences for museum facilitators

and K-12 educators, creates stimulating STEM apps, and designs captivating exhibits and programs that inspire diverse audiences of all ages to perceive and apply STEM to problems worth solving in their everyday lives. Prior to joining NYSCI, Bennett pioneered gender equity and design-based STEM education at esteemed institutions such as EDC's Center for Children and Technology, Bank Street College of Education, and Sesame Workshop. Her fruitful partnerships with national and international entities, including IBM and the Australian Children's Television Foundation, have resulted in immersive design experiences and engaging digital media that fuel curiosity and empower learners of all backgrounds to become STEM creators.



William D. Caballero

William D. Caballero is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker and writer. Born in Coney Island, New York, and raised in North Carolina, Caballero obtained the Gates Millennium Scholarship in 2001 and returned to New York City, where he graduated from Pratt Institute and New York University. Caballero's directorial debut was a feature-length autobiographical documentary entitled *American Dreams Deferred* that focused on the diverse health, financial, and social difficulties facing his Puerto Rican American family. This cinéma vérité film was selected for the NALIP (National Association of Latino Independent Producers) Latino Producers Academy and received the first annual HBO-NALIP documentary grant. Five years after

its conception, it premiered on PBS in December 2012. Post-premiere, Caballero has screened the documentary at over 40 American universities. He received funding from Latino Public Broadcasting to create *Chilly & Milly*, an animated short film about his Puerto Rican parents, that premiered at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival and won the Jury Award at the PBS Short Film Festival. He received a 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship and a 2021 Creative Capital Award.



Ayoka Chenzira

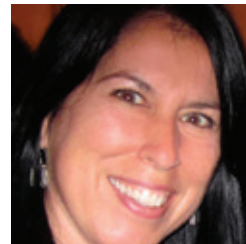
Ayoka Chenzira is an Emmy- and NAACP Image Award-nominated television director and an award-winning pioneer in Black American independent cinema. She is one of the first African American women to write, produce, and direct a 35-mm feature film, *Alma's Rainbow*, and an animated film, *Hair Piece*, which in 2018 was inducted into the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress. Her early films recently received 4K restorations by the Academy Film Archive and the Film Foundation. In 2023, Bowie State University named its stop-motion animation studio in Chenzira's honor. Along with her daughter, HaJ, Chenzira created the groundbreaking interactive sci-fi/fantasy film *HERadventure*, the first such project to feature a woman of color as a superhero. Chenzira has directed television episodes of *Queen Sugar*, *Trinkets*, *Greenleaf*, *Dynasty*, *Delilah*, *A League of Their Own*, *The 4400*, *Octavia Butler's Kindred*, and *Beacon 23*.



Kevin Clark

Kevin Clark holds a PhD and has extensive experience in higher education, digital technology, and children's media. His goal is to have all children see themselves (and their communities) in the

content they consume. Currently, Clark is a program director at the National Science Foundation, where he provides oversight for a multimillion dollar portfolio that focuses on the use of digital technology and media for STEM learning. Clark's professional journey began as part of an ed tech startup that created innovative educational video games for children in grades K-8 on the Sony PlayStation. Previously, he was director of preschool animation at Netflix, where he sourced, evaluated, and guided the development of preschool television shows. Clark began his work with Netflix as the creative producer on *Bookmarks: Celebrating Black Voices*, where he developed the show's educational framework.



Christina Delfico

In addition to her two primetime Emmy Award nominations as executive producer of shows hosted by Katie Couric, Queen Latifah, John Mayer, Al

Roker, and Big Bird, Christina Delfico has garnered over 40 awards in media production. She has served as VP and EP with Sesame Workshop and collaborated with CBS, PBS, and others. Delfico has produced concerts with the Hollywood Bowl and created international productions in China, Germany, Spain, and Greece. While chair of the green committee of the Producers Guild of America, she supported NYC Film Green to reduce waste in media. Honored to present at the United Nations on a 2019 panel highlighting sustainable practices in the film, food, and waste industries, she continues to advocate to protect nature. In 2012, she founded iDig2Learn, which engages youth and the young-at-heart with hands-on programming that allows the public to explore nature, grow food, and understand how sky, land, and water are connected to our existence. She is a Producers Guild of America and Television Academy member based in New York City.



Paula Eiselt

Paula Eiselt is a Peabody Award-winning independent filmmaker known for timely and intelligent cinematic stories led by strong-willed characters.

Her films have screened at over 100 film festivals worldwide, including Sundance, SXSW, and Hot Docs, and are distributed on platforms such as Hulu, Disney+, HBO Max, PBS's *POV*, and Arte. She is best known for her award-winning documentary features *93Queen* and *Aftershock* (Sundance Film Festival). Her most recent film is *Under G-d*. Her awards include the Full Frame Film Festival's Kathleen Bryan Edwards Award for Human Rights, the NIHCM Foundation Television and Audio Journalism Award, and two Critics Choice Documentary Award nominations, including Best Documentary Feature. She has been a Concordia Studio fellow, Sundance Producers Summit fellow, IFP Filmmaker Lab fellow, and Wyncote Fellow. In 2022, *IndieWire* named Eiselt one of 22 Rising Female Filmmakers to Watch and she was a 2022 DOC NYC 40 Under 40 honoree.



Dr. Tamatha Fenster

Dr. Tamatha Fenster serves as the director of innovations and biotechnology of the Weill Cornell Medicine Fibroid and Adenomyosis Center.

She is an assistant professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at Cornell University and assistant attending obstetrician and gynecologist at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. She specializes in minimally invasive laparoscopic and robotic gynecologic surgery and uses the latest surgical innovations to treat all types of benign gynecologic conditions, such as fibroids, endometriosis, and ovarian cysts. Fenster is the winner of a Best of Humankind Healthcare award and was inducted into the medical Gold Humanism Honor

Society. Currently, she has inventions in the areas of patient education, imaging, and medical devices, including a novel speculum. She has earned two utility patents and currently has three preliminary patents pending.



Tiera Fletcher

From Mableton, Georgia, Tiera Fletcher graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a BS in aerospace engineering in

2017. During her senior year at MIT, Fletcher also worked as a rocket structural design and analysis engineer at the Boeing Company, specifically working on NASA's space launch system—the most powerful rocket ever built. After earning a master's of engineering management from Duke University, she is now a modernizations program manager and site project engineer, working on groundbreaking space projects in Maui, Hawaii. Outside of work, she focuses on encouraging youth through mentorship, motivational speaking, and teaching through outreach organization Rocket with the Fletchers, which she co-founded with her husband, Myron Fletcher, who is also a rocket scientist. Fletcher is the co-author of the book *Wonder Women of Science*, in addition to the *I Can Be* book series.



Lisa Hepner

Lisa Hepner and her partner, Guy Mossman, run Los Angeles-based Vox Pop Films, a production company specializing in nonfiction content. For the last 25 years, Hepner has produced a variety of films and programs for Sony Pictures Classics, HBO, A&E, PBS, Lifetime, Discovery, MTV, TLC, and the CBC. She has produced for acclaimed directors Jonathan Demme, Michael Apted, Julie Taymor, and Lisa

F. Jackson, among others. Hepner previously worked at the PBS station WNET/Thirteen, producing a variety of programs, including the Emmy Award-winning series *AIR: America's Investigative Reports*. The film *The Human Trial* is her feature directorial debut. Hepner is a member of the Writers Guild of America and the Producers Guild of America.



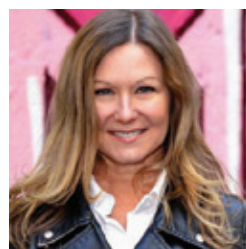
William Kenworthy

As an urban designer and architect, William Kenworthy leads HOK's urban design projects across the northeast region. He has been responsible for high-profile initiatives throughout his 24 years in the field, and his work includes efforts for government agencies, private developers, institutions, and Fortune 500 Companies. Kenworthy is passionate about urban coastal resilience and equity within the public realm, which led to his work on the New York City Mayor's Office Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency; PlaNYC's A Stronger, More Resilient New York sustainability plan; the State of New York's NY Rising Community Plan for Red Hook, Brooklyn; and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Rebuild by Design initiative. He has also served as a subject matter expert for the Rockefeller Foundation's National Disaster Resilience Academies and 100 Resilient Cities programs. Kenworthy led HOK's climate-change focused research studying the impact of six feet of sea level rise on New York City, which was selected as a finalist for a Fast Company World Changing Ideas Award. He is currently leading the urban design for the new professional soccer stadium in Willets Point, Queens.



Eunice Levis

Writer and director Eunice Levis is a first-generation Dominican American from the Bronx, New York. Levis's work focuses on genre-bending stories that combine her love of horror, sci-fi, and fantasy, often through a diasporic lens. She is a two-time Sundance Lab second rounder, a Stowe Story Lab fellow, and a Netflix/NALIP Narrative Short Film Incubator for Women of Color fellow. Levis's Caribbean folklore horror micro short *Fell Ends* was an extraordinary selection at NYX's 13 Minutes of Horror film festival and streamed on Shudder. Levis currently has two short films on the festival circuit. *InVade*, an environmental dark sci-fi that made the second round of the 2020 Sundance Institute Episodic Lab with its pilot script, and *Ro & the Stardust*, a space fantasy short that won Best Narrative Short at the Reel Sisters of the Diaspora Film Festival. In addition to writing and directing, Levis is an adjunct professor at Saint Joseph's University and cohosts the podcast *Café Negro con Genre*.



Annetta Marion

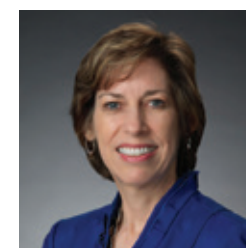
Annetta Marion is a primetime Emmy Award-winning director and showrunner known for her work on *Oprah's Master Class* and NBC's *Making It* with Amy Poehler and Nick Offerman. She has worked with the biggest stars on major shows for Netflix, ESPN, OWN, MTV, VH1, Apple TV+, and Investigation Discovery. The latest project she produced—*Still: A Michael J. Fox Movie*—premiered at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival. She serves the Directors Guild of America as a national board alternate, sits on the Eastern Directors Council and co-chairs its Focus on Women Committee. Among other projects, she is currently developing a new series, *Park Slope Moms*, about a high-powered

attorney who becomes a stay-at-home mom, and a one-hour drama series, *Twice Royal*, about the real-life Princess Nest of Wales, who was famous for her beauty and her impact on powerful men.



Ravit Markus

Writer, director, and producer Ravit Markus's latest documentary feature, *American Pot Story: Oaxsterdam*, had its world premiere and won an Audience Award at the 2023 Slamdance Film Festival as part of the disability-focused Unstoppable program. It is a 10-year-follow-up on a group of Oakland underdogs who are the reason for the huge change in California and worldwide in cannabis policy. Markus was awarded the NYWIFT Loreen Arbus Disability Awareness Grant for her next documentary, *Nina Is an Athlete*, which is currently in post. It follows Israel's champion of wheelchair badminton, Nina Gorodetsky, and her journey to the Tokyo Paralympic Games. Markus's previous documentary features include the critically acclaimed *Yiddish Theater: A Love Story*, which she wrote and produced. Markus co-produced Jewish film festival darling *Rock in the Red Zone* and produced the Channel 4 UK documentary *Porn Shutdown*, which aired worldwide, including on the Sundance channel in the United States.



Dr. Ellen Ochoa

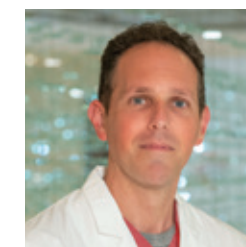
Dr. Ellen Ochoa became the first Latina to go to space when she served on a nine-day mission aboard the shuttle *Discovery* in 1993. She has flown in space four times, logging nearly 1,000 hours. Her 30-year career at NASA culminated in serving as the 11th director of NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston from 2013 until her retirement in May 2018. Prior to her astronaut career, Ochoa was a research engineer and an inventor, with three

patents for optical systems. She currently serves on several boards, and she recently concluded a term as chair of the National Science Board. She is honored to have seven schools named for her and has been inducted into the Astronaut Hall of Fame, the California Hall of Fame, the International Air & Space Hall of Fame, the Government Hall of Fame, and the National Academy of Engineering.



Caitlin Saks

Caitlin Saks is a senior producer for the science documentary series *NOVA* on PBS. Much of her work has focused on climate and environmental topics. She senior-produced *Weathering the Future*, *Chasing Carbon Zero*, *Arctic Drift*, and *Can We Cool the Planet?* Saks also produced and co-hosted *NOVA's* digital series *Antarctic Extremes*, hosted its online companion game—the Polar Lab—co-produced *NOVA's* Emmy-nominated television special on climate change, *Decoding the Weather Machine*, and co-produced the virtual reality experience *Greenland Melting*. She also senior-produced the five-part series *Universe Revealed*; produced, wrote, and directed the short documentary *Gene-Editing Reality Check*; and co-produced the duPont-Columbia Award winner *Decoding COVID-19*. Previously, as science editor for *NOVA*, Saks developed story content for *Polar Extremes* and the Emmy-nominated, Kavli Prize-winning film *Poisoned Water*. Before joining *NOVA*, she worked on a variety of films for *FRONTLINE*, including *League of Denial*, *The Choice 2012*, and *Money, Power and Wall Street*.



Dr. Marc Schiffman

Dr. Marc Schiffman is the executive co-director of the Weill Cornell Medicine Fibroid and Adenomyosis Center. Schiffman earned his BS degree

from Cornell University and was awarded his MD degree from the State University of New York Upstate Medical Center. He received a commendation for top clinical performance and was elected to the Alpha Omega Alpha medical honor society. Schiffman completed his radiology residency training and fellowship at Mount Sinai Medical Center. He was recruited to the full-time faculty at Weill Cornell Medical College in July 2009. He performed the first adrenal radio frequency ablation; liver, kidney, and bone microwave ablations; balloon retrograde transvenous variceal obliteration; and laparoscopic renal cancer cryosurgery at New York Hospital. He successfully completed the world's first percutaneous construction of an absent inferior vena cava and has performed multiple additional first-in-the-world surgical procedures. Schiffman is the co-founder of VoiceLove, a company founded in his mother's honor that was recently awarded a \$3 million NIA grant to keep families and loved ones connected in healthcare.



Jane Startz

Jane Startz is the president of New York-based film and television production company Jane Startz Productions, which acquires, develops, and produces properties across all media platforms. Prior to starting her own company, she was the co-founder and executive vice president of Scholastic Productions. Among her credits are the major theatrical releases *Ella Enchanted*, *Tuck Everlasting*, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, *The Mighty*, and *The Baby-Sitters Club*. She developed and served as executive producer on the award-winning animated television series *The Magic School Bus*, which became a major franchise and the longest-running kids science in broadcast history. Startz also has produced over 100 award-winning television productions for HBO, Paramount,

ABC, FOX, PBS, NBC, A&E, Netflix, Apple TV+, Amazon, Disney Channel, and Disney+. Her most recent projects include *Sneakerella*, *The School for Good and Evil*, *The Tiger's Apprentice*, *Max and the Midnighters*, *Duck & Goose*, and *Get Rolling with Otis*.



Rachel Watanabe-Batton

Rachel Watanabe-Batton has been a producer of film, TV, and popular culture for more than 20 years. She founded New York-based production company Contradiction and Struggle to connect cinema, causes, and capital and create authentic content that cultivates community, diversity, and empathy. Current projects include the documentary *Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* with NYWIFT Muse and Nancy Malone Directing Awardee Julie Dash, which is based on chef Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor's memoir cookbook and received a 2019 National Endowment for the Humanities production grant. She was a 2019 IFP Week Creator/Fellow for the documentary with Dash and the narrative series *1850* about mixed couples, migration, and polarized politics during an epidemic (co-created with NYWIFT member Lara Stapleton). Her work has been supported by grantors, including the NEH, the NEA, Black Public Media, the Ford Foundation, and Radcliffe. Watanabe-Batton is an in-demand consultant, moderator, speaker, and juror at film festivals and conferences and known for spearheading diverse inter-guild readings, women's industry mixers, and the popular Celebration of Women parties during Tribeca and Sundance. She was honored by Mayor Bill de Blasio and former NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment commissioner Cynthia López with the Made in NY Award for her leadership as Producers Guild of America East vice chair, Producers Guild of America Diversity Committee chair (2008 to 2018), and co-founder of the guild's Women's

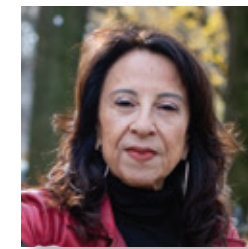
Impact Network. She currently serves as chair of the board of the Manhattan Neighborhood Network (the largest media access center in the United States) and on the board of Women Independent Producers. Watanabe-Batton is committed to creating quality storytelling and cultivating gender, race, and class equity for a more humane world.

Fourth Annual Summit Journalists/Moderators



Melissa Adeyemo

Melissa Adeyemo is a Nigerian American producer and the founder of Ominira Studios, a New Jersey-based production company. Ominira produces dynamic and visually ambitious stories by and about Black and African people. Adeyemo's first feature, *Eyimofe*, premiered at the 2020 Berlinale, has shown at over 20 festivals, and was acquired by Janus Films. It is currently a part of the Criterion Collection, where Adeyemo is the first African female producer to be featured in her own standalone spotlight interview. Her first documentary feature, *Dusty & Stones*, premiered in 2022 at DOC NYC and screened at Big Sky Documentary Film Festival 2023. Adeyemo was recently named a BAFTA Breakthrough fellow and a Film Independent Amplifier Fellow, and she is a part of the 2023 European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs (EAVE) program. Prior to producing full-time, Adeyemo worked for ROK Studios of iROKOTv, a Lagos-based media and technology start-up. She also worked in the telecommunications, media, and tech arm of PwC Strategy and at Nickelodeon, New Line Cinema, and Women Make Movies.



Maria Hinojosa

In 2010, Maria Hinojosa founded Futuro Media, an independent, non-profit newsroom based in Harlem, New York, with the mission of creating multimedia content from a POC perspective. As anchor and executive producer of the Peabody Award-winning show *Latino USA*—celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2023—and co-host of the award-winning political podcast *In the Thick*, and most recently the Pulitzer Prize-winning podcast *Suave*, Hinojosa has informed millions about the changing cultural and political landscape in America and abroad. Today she seeks to challenge newsrooms across the world with her new Latina-led investigative journalism unit and its flagship bilingual podcast, *USA v. García Luna*.



Maribel Lopez

Maribel Lopez is senior director and head of PBS Digital Studios. She is responsible for identifying opportunities to expand reach and implement strategies to advance the legacy of PBS to the next generation of fans and supporters of public media. Prior to joining PBS in 2021, Lopez spent the greater part of 11 years in creative and editorial leadership roles at member station Twin Cities PBS, located in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She served as executive producer of *Sound Field*, a music education YouTube series, and managing director of *Racism Unveiled*, a multiplatform storytelling initiative. In these roles, she led the editorial vision, developed and implemented audience-centered content strategies that grew and engaged audiences across platforms.



Yvonne Russo

Yvonne Russo is an award-winning film and television producer, director, and writer specializing in Indigenous and cross-cultural stories. As

an independent producer, Russo has worked in 17 countries, from India to the East African nation of Rwanda. She is currently directing *Ring of Fire: The Life of Annie Mae Aquash* for Hulu/Onyx Collective and is in post-production on *VIVA VERDI!*. She is a member of the Directors Guild of America, the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, and the Producers Guild of America, and a contributor to *Produced By* magazine and *HuffPost*. She is a member of the Sicangu Lakota nation.



Michèle Stephenson

Filmmaker, artist, and author Michèle Stephenson pulls from her Haitian and Panamanian roots to think radically about storytelling and build a practice that centers the lived experiences of the Black diaspora in the Americas. She tells personal stories that are created by, for, and about communities of color and reimagine and challenge the status quo. She is a Grand Jury Prize winner at the Sundance Film Festival and Tribeca Festival, a four-time Emmy Award nominee, and the recipient of an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work. Stephenson has also received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Creative Capital Award. She lives in Brooklyn with her creative and life partner, Joe Brewster.

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“I’m a NYWIFT member because my fellow members inspire me to do more: to hire more consciously and to elevate the films we make.”

Gretchen McGowan
NYWIFT Board Member
Head of Production, Goldcrest Films

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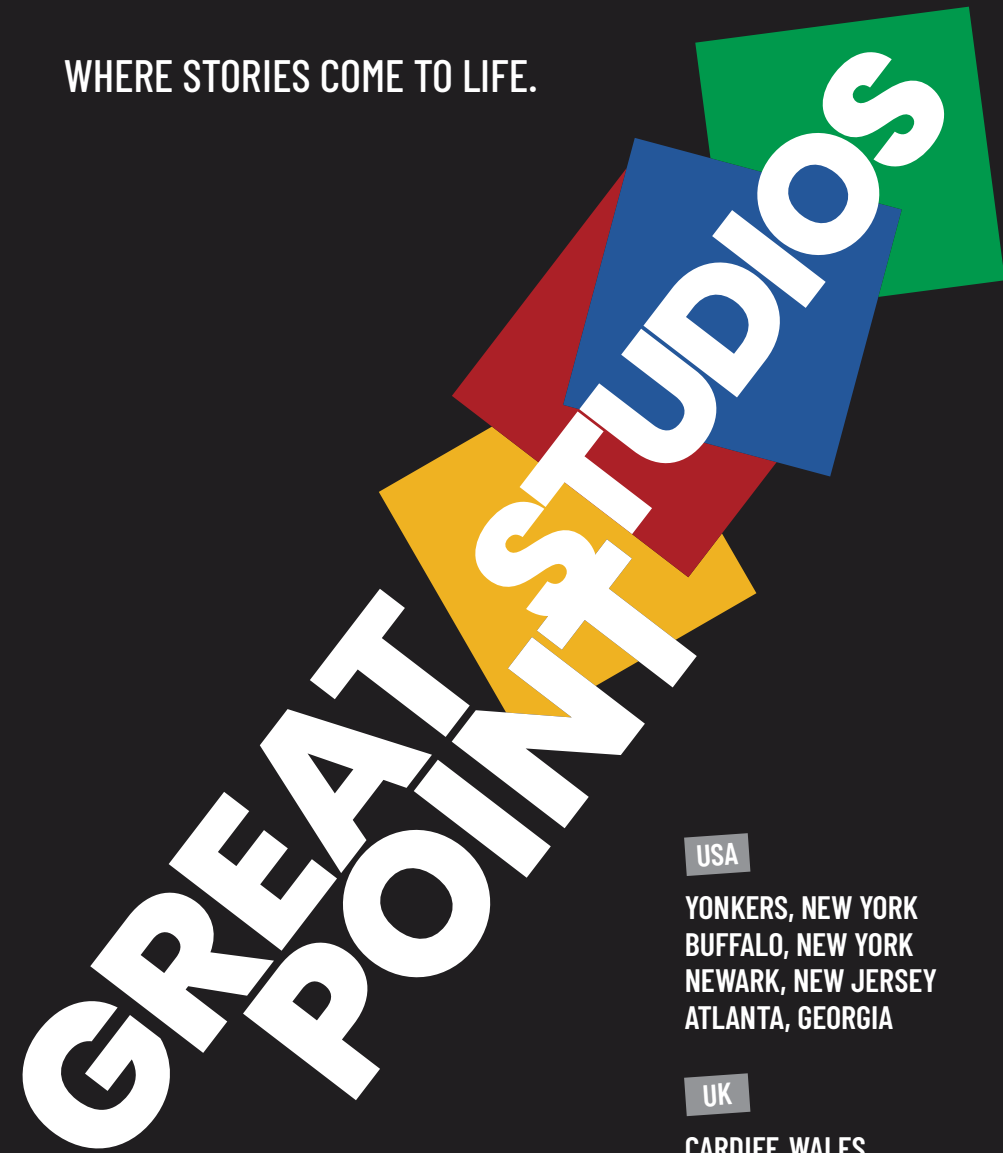
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