

ATHENA FILM FESTIVAL PRESENTS
**2024 DOCUMENTARY
PITCH PROGRAM**



Meant to Be Maddie



Rubbish: The Queer Kingdom of Leilah Babirye



Widow Champion



Sister Senators

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The Athena Film Festival's Documentary Pitch Program is an intensive pitch training and storytelling strengthening opportunity, that in addition to the training includes a live pitch in front of a panel of esteemed industry representatives, introductions to a network of potential supporters and partners, peer mentorship, and a cohort to grow with, all wrapped into a festival event. Each filmmaker participates in intensive pitch training with Peabody Award-winning filmmaker, Judith Helfand who is the co-producer of the program.



Peabody award winning filmmaker **Judith Helfand** is best known for her open-hearted, artfully self-deprecating and very transparent approach to non-fiction filmmaking. The resulting body of work , includes: A HEALTHY BABY GIRL ("Sundance/PBS POV 97), BLUE VINYL (Sundance/HBO 2002), COOKED: SURVIVAL BY ZIP CODE (DOC NYC 2018/PBS Independent Lens 2019-20) and LOVE & STUFF the feature (Hot Docs 2020 PBS/POV 2022)

As much a filmmaker as she is a committed field-builder, Helfand co-founded two field-changing non-fiction organizations, Working Films in 1999 and Chicken & Egg Pictures in 2005. Over the last five years, she has produced, designed and moderated a range of intensive pitch training/storytelling workshops including, Chicken & Egg Pictures' live Sheffield Pitch for emerging makers, a pitch program at DC's DOUBLE TAKE film festival for just graduated/poised to graduate visual journalists from J's schools with their capstone projects, "Pitch and Kvell" for The Jewish Film Institute, a pitch for interactive/immersive storytellers for The March on Washington Film Festival and for the past seven years with The Athena Film Festival's Doc Pitch Program.

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PITCH ORDER

Widow Champion

Director/Producer: Zippy Kimundu; Producer: Heather Courtney

Thrown out of her home and off her land by her in-laws, a resilient Kenyan widow transforms into a fierce advocate for women's land rights in a highly patriarchal community.

Meant to Be Maddie

Director/Producer: Anna Clare Spelman; Producers: Bridgette Cyr, Luchina Fisher

Volatile politics, changing social norms in the U.S., and an ever growing list of transphobic legislation provide a backdrop to this coming of age story of a North Carolina transgender teenager and her family.

Rubbish: The Queer Kingdom of Leilah Babirye

Director: AX Mina; Producers: Kira Simon-Kennedy, Flor de Oro Tejada

One artist's decade-long quest to build a liberatory queer kingdom from rubbish.

Sister Senators

Director: Emily Harrold; Producer: Robin Hessman

In South Carolina, the only five women of the State Senate defy party lines and join together to fight for women's representation and reproductive justice in a legislature that is overwhelmingly male and conservative.



Widow Champion

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Thrown off their land and out of their homes, widows in rural Kenya are forced to live destitute with their children in markets or under trees. Rhoda, known as the "Widow Champion," spearheads a courageous movement, rallying fellow women to reclaim their rightful property. Amidst the clash of tradition and progress, her narrative unfolds, depicting the struggle to navigate the tension between an ingrained culture and a rapidly evolving world.

Total Budget: \$407,411

Funding to date: \$170,000

Budget gap: \$237,411

Target for Completion: January 2025

Notes:

Team

Widow Champion

Director/Producer



Zippy Kimundu is an award-winning Kenyan filmmaker who has been working in film for over a decade as a Director/Editor in more than 20 countries, with her production collective AfroFilms International. Most recently, her feature documentary, *Our Land, Our Freedom*, had its World Premiere at IDFA 2023. The film tells the story of how a Kenyan woman's search for her father's remains becomes a movement to reclaim ancestral land. She is currently in production on *Widow Champion*. Her earlier works include, among others, the short documentary, *a fork, a spoon & a KNIGHT*, co-directed with Mira Nair, and assistant editor on the Disney film *Queen of Katwe*. These and other films have been screened internationally receiving various nominations for her short films 'Burnt Forest' and 'Give me back my Home;' and a win for Producing 'Manilla Running' screened at the Directors Guild of America. She has worked for various clients including Universal Studios, World Bank, Google, VICE, BBC, NATGEO/DISNEY, USAID, UNHCR, HIAS, JRS, Standard Chartered Bank and The British Council. She is a film fellow of Hotdocs, IDFA, IDA, Sundance, World Cinema Fund/ACP, Chicken & Egg pictures, Doc Society, Ford Foundation, and Docubox.

Producer



Heather Courtney is an Emmy-winning filmmaker, and a Guggenheim, Sundance, and Fulbright fellow. Her film *WHERE SOLDIERS COME FROM* was broadcast on the PBS series *POV*, and won an Emmy, an Independent Spirit Award, and a SXSW Jury Award. Her latest feature documentary, *BREAKING THE NEWS*, premiered at Tribeca Film Festival in 2023 and had its broadcast and streaming premiere on PBS' *Independent Lens* in February 2024. Her latest short documentary, *FOR THE RECORD*, about a community newspaper in rural Texas, premiered at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival and has screened in Detroit, DC, New Orleans, and Colorado. It will broadcast on the PBS strand *Reel South* in spring 2024. Her earlier films include the Ford-funded feature doc *THE UNAFRAID*, which was broadcast on the national PBS series *America ReFramed*, and *LETTERS FROM THE OTHER SIDE* (supported by a Fulbright) and *LOS TRABAJADORES* (IDA Award, SXSW Audience Award, and Indie Lens broadcast). Prior to receiving her MFA in Film, Heather spent eight years writing and photographing for the United Nations and several relief agencies, including in the Rwandan refugee camps after the 1994 genocide there.

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Meant to Be Maddie

Director/Producer: Anna Clare Spelman;

Producers: Bridgette Cyr, Luchina Fisher

Volatile politics, changing social norms in the U.S., and an ever growing list of transphobic legislation provide a backdrop to this coming of age story of a North Carolina transgender teenager and her family.

In 2014, Maddie was in first grade in North Carolina when a TV crew showed up unannounced and reported that “a student who started school as a boy came back this fall as a girl”. Two years later, North Carolina’s “Bathroom Bill” would catapult the state and trans youth to center stage, singling out Maddie yet again. With Trump’s election in 2016, the family was faced with the decision of whether or not to become activists, risking their safety and their privacy. They chose to fight. While Maddie finds her voice in activism, she also wants to be like any other teenager. Maddie’s mom, Katie, at age 45, decides to become an attorney specializing in trans rights to fight for the safety and sanity of her daughter. This decade-long film follows Maddie through adolescence as she and her family work to build a life filled with joy, love, unconditional acceptance and purpose, while the outside world bombards them with transphobic legislation and rhetoric.

Total Budget: \$796,000

Funding to date: Investors and Grants: \$5,500 – Producer/Director Cash and In-kind: \$230,000

Budget gap: Production: \$100,000 – Post Production: \$175,000 – Impact/Marketing: \$100,000 – Other: \$44,000

Target for Completion: Dec 2025

Notes:

Team

Meant to Be Maddie

Director/Producer



Anna Clare Spelman (she/her) is a documentary filmmaker who is particularly passionate about films that focus on healthcare and human rights, particularly in immigrant and LGBTQBTQ communities. Her work has been nominated for a News and Documentary Emmy, named a Vimeo Staff Pick and has been recognized by the GLAAD Media Awards, the Webby Awards, the Edward R. Murrow Awards, Pictures of the Year International, and NPPA Best of Photojournalism among others. SONGS OF THE SEPHARDIM IN IZMIR, a short she directed and filmed, premiered at the Boston Jewish Film Festival and I AM VANESSA GUILLEN, a feature film she co-edited, won the Webby Award for Best Documentary in 2023. She is the Director of Photography for a film in production about abortion clinic escorts, and regularly collaborates with news outlets including Univision, Al Jazeera, and The New York Times. MEANT TO BE MADDIE is her first feature film as a director.

Producers



Bridgette Cyr (she/her) is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, video journalist, and audio producer based in Richmond, VA. Film collaborations have taken her to a Q-Anon rally in Tampa, Florida; the bedroom of a revenge porn victim; the recording studio of feminist hip hop artists in Havana, Cuba; and to the hideout of a North Carolina woman as she sought refuge in sanctuary, fearful of deportation. As of late, her work has a focus on access to education, healthcare, and LGBTQIA+ rights in the rapidly evolving American South. She is the Director of Photography and Producer of PICKUP (2023), a short fiction film about a rideshare to the airport that takes an unsettling turn. She is also the Director of Photography and Associate Producer of SANTUARIO (2018), which won the Jury Prize for Best Documentary Short at the New Orleans Film Festival. She was among 12 selected for the Investigative Reporting Workshop for Filmmakers at UC Berkeley in 2018. Her work has been screened at festivals around the country and was broadcast on UNC-TV's program Reel South, and Al Jazeera's Witness program. Currently, she is editing a short documentary film about a quick-talking mule trader in Vicksburg, Mississippi using archival footage filmed in the 1970s.



Luchina Fisher (she/her) is an award-winning director, writer and producer whose work is at the intersection of race, gender and identity. Her feature directorial debut MAMA GLORIA was a 2022 GLAAD Media Award nominee and broadcast on PBS. Her latest film, the short documentary THE DADS, about five fathers of trans kids on a weekend fishing trip, premiered at SXSW and was acquired by Netflix. The film made DOC NYC'S 2023 Shortlist and has been specially recognized by GLAAD. Luchina's short documentary TEAM DREAM, executive produced by Queen Latifah, was a finalist for The Wrap's Shortlist and has won numerous festival jury awards. Her second feature LOCKED OUT, about the barriers to Black homeownership, won Best Documentary Feature at the American Black Film Festival. Fisher was awarded the PitchBLACK Film Forum's top prize for her new project about Black queer representation in music. She is the director of two scripted short films and has written and produced several nationally broadcast documentaries. Her work has been supported by Black Public Media, the Field Foundation, Sisters in Cinema, Brown Girl Doc Mafia, the Queen Collective, Women Make Movies, the Athena Film Festival, Firelight Media and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Luchina also teaches documentary filmmaking at Yale University.

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Rubbish: The Queer Kingdom of Leilah Babirye

Director: AX Mina; Producers: Kira Simon-Kennedy, Flor de Oro Tejada;
Co-Writer: Leilah Babirye

One artist's decade-long quest to build a liberatory queer kingdom from rubbish

Rubbish: The Queer Kingdom of Leilah Babirye tells the story of a queer artist-activist from Uganda transforming discarded rubbish into visions of liberation. Outed in homophobic media amidst a climate of rising hateful legislation, she applied for asylum in New York City and began building the liberatory queer kingdom of her dreams. A 10-year film about one extraordinary artist's work to reimagine life for the queer diaspora based on compassion, beauty and celebration. From underground pride parties in Kampala to the drag shows of Fire Island to her own Bushwick studio, this film follows her building online community and constructing incredible totemic sculpture work, shown in some of the most celebrated spaces of the international art world.

Total Budget: \$850,000

Funding to date: \$4,281

Budget gap: \$845,719

Target for Completion: Dec 2026

Notes:

Team

Rubbish: The Queer Kingdom of Leilah Babirye

Director/Producer



AX Mina is a filmmaker, artist and author. Mina has led exhibitions in spaces such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Mozilla Festival Open Artist Studio (curated by the V&A Museum and Tate Modern), and the Museum of the Moving Image. She is author of *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power*, hailed as a “remarkable new book” by *The Atlantic* and “a visionary and sweeping history of the internet phenomenon” by DJ Spooky. Her second book, *Hanmoji Handbook*, co-authored with Jason Li and Jennifer 8. Lee, is a Kirkus Best Book of 2022 and she teaches the Chinese language through emoji. She is a current Senior Civic Media Fellow at the USC Annenberg School for Journalism and Communications, and she served as associate producer on the award-winning documentary *Ascension*, directed by Jessica Kingdon, and co-director of the *Lijiang Creative City Guide*, produced by China Residencies with support from the British Council China.

Co-Writer



Leilah Babirye was born in 1985 in Kampala, Uganda. She studied art at Makerere University in Kampala (2007–2010) evolving a multidisciplinary practice that transforms everyday materials into objects that address issues surrounding identity, sexuality and human rights. Publicly outed in Uganda by a viruently anti-gay local newspaper, she fled to New York in 2015; participation in the Fire Island Artists Residency was her refuge. In spring 2018, with support from the African Services Committee and the NYC Anti-Violence Project, Babirye was granted asylum, settling in Brooklyn where she lives and works today.

Leilah presented her first solo show at Gordon Robichaux, New York in 2018, her first solo show in the UK and Europe in 2021 hosted by the Stephen Friedman Gallery and has exhibited in group shows around the world from LA's Hammer Museum to the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria. In May 2022 she created site-responsive work with the Public Art Fund in New York's Brooklyn Bridge Park and currently has a residency at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (UK) where she's creating new work towards major exhibitions opening in 2024 including the Venice Biennale. Yes, her Bushwick, Brooklyn studio is very busy.

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Sister Senators

Director: Emily Harrold; Producer: Robin Hessman

In South Carolina, the only five women of the State Senate defy party lines and join together to fight for women's representation and reproductive justice in a legislature that is overwhelmingly male and conservative.

Three Republicans arm in arm with a Democrat and an Independent is akin to seeing a unicorn in today's hyper-partisan, bitter political landscape. But that's exactly what one sees at the South Carolina State House. They are the only women in the South Carolina State Senate and they call themselves the Sister Senators. As other states implement strict abortion bans post-Dobbs, the Sister Senators successfully block a total abortion ban from becoming law—keeping South Carolina an unlikely refuge for women. But wheeling and dealing behind their backs by conservative male colleagues leads to the passage of a 6-week ban — and the loss of abortion access for women throughout the entire Southeast. As the 2024 election cycle looms, the Sister Senators learn that conservative forces are intent on making the state Senate all male again. But these women are not deterred: they vow to fight to keep their seats and get other women to run as well. With unprecedented access to the inner workings of state government, SISTER SENATORS follows South Carolina's female senators as they stand up for women's rights, jockey with political challengers, and ultimately discover a bond that transcends partisan politics as we know it.

Total Budget: \$1,032,000

Funding to date: \$160,000 *The Harnisch Foundation, Ruth Ann Harnisch, Filmmaker Investment, InMaat Foundation, Mountain Film, Huiying Memorial Foundation*

Budget gap: \$872,000

Target for Completion: December 2025

Notes:

Team

Sister Senators

Director/Producer



Emily Harrold (Director/Producer) is a documentary filmmaker from Orangeburg, South Carolina. She graduated with honors from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and has a Masters in Film & Media Studies from Columbia University. She is a regional Emmy winner, a DuPont Columbia finalist, and a Silver Telly awardee. Her first feature documentary WHILE I BREATHE, I HOPE is Executive Produced by Charlamagne Tha God and won a 2020 Southeast Region Emmy. She is part of DOC NYC's 2021 40 Under 40 cohort. Her film MELTDOWN IN DIXIE won numerous festival awards before qualifying for the Academy Awards and broadcasting on MSNBC Films and PBS's America ReFramed. SISTER SENATORS is her second feature documentary film.

Producer



Robin Hessman (Producer) has been in documentary film for 30 years. She most recently produced Simple As Water (HBOMax), which was short-listed for Oscar for Best Documentary, nominated for Emmy, Peabody and IDA Awards and for which she was nominated for a PGA award. Previously Robin directed and produced the critically-acclaimed My Perestroika which premiered at Sundance, was a NY Times Critics Pick and was released in over 30 countries worldwide. Robin is a member of the Documentary Branch of AMPAS, a member of the Television Academy, and Vice President and a founding board member of the Karen Schmeer Film Editing Fellowship. She graduated from Brown with a degree in Russian and Film and received an MFA in film directing from the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow.

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“You can’t be what you can’t see.” – Marian Wright Edelman

Inspired by this quote, the Athena Film Festival was founded in 2011 to champion and promote diverse, nuance, complex, and underrepresented stories of women’s leadership on screen. Our annual festival, held each year on the Barnard College campus in NYC, serves as a platform and showcase for narrative, documentary, and short films all centering strong women leaders at the center of the story.

Since the festival’s founding, we have supporting 700+ filmmakers and screened 540+ films — 90% directed by women or nonbinary individuals.

Through our year-round Creative Development Program, we support the writers bringing these stories to life. We offer numerous programs that support writers and projects at various stages of development. Accomplishments include shepherding 40 films in our Documentary Pitch Program, 51% of which were made by BIWOC filmmakers; and giving out more than \$200K in grants to the people who most need it in the industry.

In partnership with our community of supporters, friends, filmmakers, and allies, we are challenging our culture to be more inclusive and inspiring the next generation with a new, more complex and complete understanding of all that women can be and do.

The festival's founding sponsors is the Artemis Rising Foundation and its CEO Regina K. Scully.

