

2025

ATHENA FILM FESTIVAL PRESENTS
DOCUMENTARY PITCH PROGRAM



CREDIBLE FEAR



HUMAN SHIELD



WATCH YOU RISE



THE FRUIT OF THE PACAY TREE

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JULIE PARKER BENELLO
BARNARD '92

ABOUT

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

1 CREDIBLE FEAR

dir. Gabrielle Ewing | prod. Azadeh Nikzadeh

When Yojana, a Guatemalan asylum seeker, and Amy, a DC attorney, are matched through a pro bono legal aid program in the US' largest immigration detention center, a chance encounter turns into a lifelong friendship, forged in their shared determination to find justice. Filmed over the course of 7 years, this longitudinal film reveals the intricacies and failures of the asylum system through the intimate journey of one case, serving as a sobering counterpoint to a hyper-politicized and widely misunderstood issue.

2 HUMAN SHIELD

dir. Erin Persley | prod. Rajal Pitroda & Erin Persley

Facing a growing far-right extremist movement, HUMAN SHIELD is an intimate portrait of abortion clinic escorts protecting vulnerable patients as they endure one of the most hostile 30-second walks of their lives. Told through the perspective of three clinic escort leaders in Ohio, North Carolina and Maryland, this film investigates the struggle to maintain safety and battle mental exhaustion on the front lines of America's longest culture war.

3 WATCH YOU RISE

dir. Isabella Grace Cohn | prod. Elizabeth Woodward & Marina Hunt

WATCH YOU RISE is a believing-into-being documentary that grows up alongside director Isabella Grace Cohn as she works to understand and expose the roots of sexual harm — her peers', her mother's, and eventually her own. Along the way, she meets diverse survivors, perpetrators, and experts. Together, they explore the cultural, educational and legal gray areas that fuel the cycle of harm in a quest for hope and transformation.

4 THE FRUIT OF THE PACAY TREE

dir. Ruolin Luyo | prod. Stivens Luyo & Kristal Sotomayor

After decades as an undocumented immigrant, Celina returns to Peru to fix her status, torn between two countries while seeking stability and reconciling her past.



CREDIBLE FEAR

dir. Gabrielle Ewing | prod. Azadeh Nikzadeh

CREDIBLE FEAR is a feature length documentary that follows Yojana, an asylum seeker from Guatemala, and Amy, a DC law firm partner who meet in a chance encounter inside the US’ largest family immigration detention center. Both Yojana and Amy are fiercely devoted moms, which sparked an instant connection that transcended their circumstances. When Amy learned that Yojana and her daughter Fernanda were to be released to Boston, where Amy grew up, she felt it was one small opportunity to make a tangible difference, and decided to try to help Yojana as much as she could with on the ground support. Over the last seven years they’ve formed a life-changing friendship while fighting for Yojana’s asylum case together. This longitudinal film elegantly dovetails the emotional arcs of Amy and Yojana’s personal journeys with the informative arc of teaching the viewer how asylum actually functions, something that is not currently explored in the landscape of asylum-focused films.

TOTAL BUDGET	\$380,000
FUNDING TO DATE	\$107,000
BUDGET GAP	\$273,000
TARGET FOR COMPLETION	LATE 2026

NOTES

TEAM

CREDIBLE FEAR

DIRECTOR



Gabrielle Ewing is an Emmy-nominated documentary filmmaker and journalist. She produces, writes, and edits digitally distributed web series and short documentaries on a wide variety of topics, including science, social justice, and history. She has worked at NBC, CNN, and National Geographic where her work was part of a package that was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Gabrielle graduated with honors in Journalism and Film & Television from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and recently earned a Certificate in Diversity & Inclusion from Cornell.

crediblefeardoc@gmail.com

PRODUCER



Azadeh Nikzadeh is a highly accomplished director, producer, and activist in the film industry. As the visionary founder of Burnt Generation Studios, she leads an intellectual property development and production company committed to crafting and championing authentic narratives. Azadeh excels in developing and packaging documentary projects, adeptly pitching them to leading industry agents and forging strong relationships with top agencies like Octagon, UTA, and WME. Her expertise extends across various genres, including award-winning short films and impactful feature documentaries that tackle pressing social issues. Azadeh's creative vision and dedication to storytelling have earned her recognition from esteemed institutions and festivals worldwide, including the Busan International Film Festival and the Athena Film Festival. Through Burnt Generation Studios, she strives to provoke thought and inspire change, leveraging her artistic talent to advocate for women's rights, social justice, and human dignity on a global scale. On this project, Azadeh will be providing critical feedback on the project's narrative and creative structure.

crediblefeardoc@gmail.com



HUMAN SHIELD

dir. Erin Persley | prod. Rajal Pitroda & Erin Persley

Outside of reproductive health clinics, patients are bombarded by pro-life protesters, Crisis Pregnancy Center staffers, and aggressive evangelical church members using graphic posters and bullhorns. Standing on the frontlines are clinic escorts, ensuring the safety of patients seeking basic and, in some cases, life-saving healthcare. Using peaceful non-engagement tactics, they use their bodies to protect patients from protesters' abuse. HUMAN SHIELD weaves together the story of escort team leaders Kristin, Kelsea and Jeremy, who run volunteer groups in critical areas of Ohio, North Carolina, and Maryland. Over four years, we observe each of the leaders face increased dangers at the clinic while balancing family demands, mental exhaustion and activism burnout. Will Kristin, Kelsea, and Jeremy be able to persevere as conditions around the clinics steadily rise to crisis levels? The fate of these clinics weighs on these brave and passionate volunteers, facing the newly emboldened groups Post-Roe, who want to suppress reproductive freedom by any means necessary.

TOTAL BUDGET	\$671,023
FUNDING TO DATE	\$175,000
BUDGET GAP	\$400,000
TARGET FOR COMPLETION	DECEMBER 2025

NOTES

TEAM

HUMAN SHIELD

DIRECTOR



Erin Persley is a documentary director and producer. Her work aims to tell compelling personal journeys that connect disparate communities. Erin's films include *LIVING INSIDE OUT*, exploring prison reentry from the perspective of three women in the San Francisco Bay Area, and *EMPOWERING THE YARD*, which examined an HIV peer education program in an Oklahoma women's prison. *EMPOWERING THE YARD* was selected to participate in the 2009 American Documentary Showcase, where it screened at U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Uganda. As a Producer with Actuality Abroad, she has worked on documentaries in Nicaragua, Nepal, Morocco, and Cambodia. She is an Associate of the U.C. Berkeley Investigative Reporting Program and a 2019 & 2020 SFFILM FilmHouse Resident. She produced *BLEEDING AUDIO*, a music documentary detailing The Matches' career as they navigate the digital age of music. It screened at the Slamdance Film Festival and won the Audience Award at Dances with Films, San Francisco DocFest and Cinequest Film Festival. She is currently directing *HUMAN SHIELD*, which centers on abortion clinic escorts at three U.S. clinics.

elpersley@gmail.com

PRODUCER



Rajal Pitroda is a producer of fiction and non-fiction films. She is a Women at Sundance Fellow, Impact Partners Producers Fellow, Film Independent Documentary Producing Lab Fellow, and Sundance Creative Producing Fellow. Rajal most recently produced *A SHOT AT HISTORY*, a documentary short about scientist Nita Patel and her all female team who developed a lifesaving vaccine during the pandemic. She also produced *DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL*, a feature documentary on race and the criminal justice system that premiered at the True/False Film Festival and was broadcast on Independent Lens. Prior to producing, Rajal was the Founder and CEO of Cinevention, a media company focused on marketing and distribution, where she designed and executed distribution strategies for feature films. Rajal's work has been supported by Chicken & Egg Films, the Tribeca Film Institute, SFFILM, Black Public Media, Firelight Media and more. Rajal started her career working in international marketing for Bollywood movies based in Mumbai.

rajalpitroda@gmail.com



WATCH YOU RISE

dir. Isabella Grace Cohn | prod. Elizabeth Woodward & Marina Hunt

WATCH YOU RISE is an unflinching examination of the impact of sexual trauma from the perspective of youth. At the heart of the film is a groundbreaking, one-on-one dialogue between the filmmaker, Isabella, who was assaulted during the making of the documentary, and her perpetrator. This raw, unfiltered conversation creates a unique space for accountability and reflection, offering viewers an intimate glimpse into the potential for and process of healing and reckoning. As their conversation unfolds, WATCH YOU RISE weaves between dozens of interviews with survivors, perpetrators, and experts from diverse backgrounds, offering a 360-degree view of sexual assault and its aftermath. Simultaneously, the film explores the intergenerational relationship between Isabella and her mother, who was also a victim of assault, and their respective experiences in overcoming the effects of sexual violence.

The film expands on this core dialogue through a youth-led exploration of the gray areas of sexual harm and the ways they are exacerbated by ineffective laws, insufficient sex education, narrow portrayals of victims and perpetrators, and intergenerational cycles of trauma. These issues are excavated on a systemic and interpersonal level through the lens of those often excluded from mainstream conversations — particularly Black, Indigenous, and youth of color and the LGBTQIA+ communities. Visually, the film puts these testimonies in conversation with poetic animated depictions of people reclaiming their bodies, experiences of closeness and safety, and resilience. WATCH YOU RISE invites you to turn towards your best friend, old classmate, parent, sibling, child, partner, and yourself to listen, validate, and create pathways of healing.

TOTAL BUDGET	\$495,560
FUNDING TO DATE	\$98,474
BUDGET GAP	\$397,086
TARGET FOR COMPLETION	FALL 2025

NOTES

TEAM

WATCH YOU RISE

DIRECTOR



Isabella Grace Cohn is the director of WATCH YOU RISE, a documentary film and impact campaign born from Cohn's earlier initiative, the Me Too Teen Project, which provided an online platform for teens from across the world to share stories of sexual abuse survival. She graduated in three years with a BFA in Socially Engaged Arts from Goddard College. Cohn's activism has garnered significant attention, including mainstream media coverage and the honor of receiving the 2024 YWCA "Energizing The Future Award," and giving her recent TEDx Talk. She was invited to attend the 2024 Telluride Student Film Symposium and has had numerous public speaking engagements, such as at the 2022 YWCA Reproductive Rights protest and for the Boulder County D.A.'s office during Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Looking ahead, she will be the keynote speaker at Front Range's "Take Back The Night" event. Cohn's commitment to fostering dialogue through film is evident in her efforts to engage young adults both in front of and behind the camera. Through her work, she strives to create spaces for meaningful conversations and change.

watchyourise@gmail.com

PRODUCERS



Marina Hunt is a Co-Producer at WILLA supporting projects across the slate. She was Associate Producer on ANOTHER BODY (Emmy nominee, SXSW Special Jury Award), Distribution & Impact Manager on Alonso Ruizpalacios' LA COCINA (Berlinale, Film Independent Spirit Award Nominee) and Distribution & Impact Coordinator on Dina Amer's YOU RESEMBLE ME (Venice Film Festival, Executive Produced by Spike Lee, Spike Jonze, Alma Har'el, Riz Ahmed, Claire Denis). Marina previously worked for award-winning directors Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern's company Break Thru Films (Netflix's Emmy Nominated REVERSING ROE, Film Independent Spirit Award and Emmy Nominated THE TRIALS OF DARRYL HUNT, Emmy and Gotham nominated THE DEVIL CAME ON HORSEBACK), where she conducted research and wrote pitch materials for documentary films & series in development, and liaised between Break Thru Films and its collaborators. She got her start working at the Council on Foreign Relations, where she developed multimedia content on subjects relating to international relations and governance for the CFR's World 101 website. Marina attended Brown University, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in History and contributed to a year-long investigative reporting project led by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Tracy Breton, published in The Providence Journal and The Public's Radio.

marina@willa.org



Elizabeth Woodward is the founder and CEO of WILLA. She was selected for Forbes 30 Under 30, DOC NYC 40 Under 40, Berlinale Talents, and is a Sundance Catalyst Fellow, an Impact Partners Producers Fellow, and a Film Independent Fast Track Fellow. Her recent films include ANOTHER BODY (SXSW Special Jury Award, Emmy nominee), YOU RESEMBLE ME (Venice Film Festival, executive produced by Spike Lee, Claire Denis, Spike Jonze, Alma Har'el, Riz Ahmed) and ON THE DIVIDE (Tribeca Film Festival, POV on PBS). Other notable projects include Netflix's THE GREAT HACK (Academy Award shortlist, Emmy nominee, BAFTA nominee, Sundance Film Festival), HBO's hit series THE VOW: A NXIVM STORY (New York Times Best TV Shows of 2020), a VR experience PERSUASION MACHINES (Sundance New Frontier, SXSW). Her films have been supported by Sundance Institute, Impact Partners, Film Independent, Field of Vision, The Gotham, Chicken and Egg, New York Foundation for the Arts, the International Documentary Association, among others. She is a member of the Producers Guild of America, BAFTA North America, the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, the Council on Foreign Relations Young Professionals Group, the Documentary Producers Alliance, and the Frontline Club. Elizabeth graduated magna cum laude and phi beta kappa from Brown University and received a masters with distinction from the University of Cambridge.

elizabeth@willa.org



THE FRUIT OF THE PACAY TREE

dir. Ruolin Luyo | prod. Stivens Luyo & Kristal Sotomayor

THE FRUIT OF THE PACAY TREE is a poetic meditation on the sacrifices and resilience of immigrant women. The film follows Celina, a loving, hardworking, and tenacious middle-aged immigrant from Peru. Despite working and paying taxes in the US for three decades, Celina remains ineligible for citizenship due to a deportation order received in 1995. Now of retirement age, she is unable to access healthcare and pensions, intensifying the stakes of her struggle. The film is structured in three acts, weaving together present-day verité scenes and memories, revealing the intricate ties between immigrants' homelands and the lives they forge ahead. After filing for a pardon in 2020 and waiting until 2023 with no response from the immigration office, Celina decides to return to Peru, where she must stay for at least 10 years to apply for a green card. In this new chapter of life, she reunites with her extended family, but must remain separated from her own children and grandchildren. A Pacay tree, planted with her family years ago, stands as a symbol of Celina's roots and search for a sense of home, yet the tree, like her journey, has never fully bloomed. The film poses a poignant question: Where will Celina ultimately find a place to call home?

TOTAL BUDGET	\$533,200
FUNDING TO DATE	\$66,854
BUDGET GAP	\$466,346
TARGET FOR COMPLETION	JANUARY 2028

NOTES

TEAM

THE FRUIT OF THE PACAY TREE

DIRECTOR



Ruolin Luyo is a Chinese-born, Los Angeles-based director and editor specializing in powerful, intimate character-driven documentaries. Her work focuses on uplifting the voices of immigrants to provide a perspective that's often missing in US mainstream media. Her films hone in on her personal experiences as an immigrant to tell authentic, poetic, and creative stories. Through her award-winning films, she aims to spark meaningful conversations among audiences on relevant issues that challenge stereotypes. A 2023 Karen Schmeer Editing Fellow, Ruolin started her career in 2018 as an assistant editor on numerous award-winning documentaries, including WALK RUN CHA-CHA (Oscar-nominated), HIDDEN LETTERS (Oscar-shortlisted), and OUR TIME MACHINE. Most recently, Ruolin has directed and edited a series of impactful short documentaries for EST Media, focusing on topics of immigration and social justice. Her works are distributed by Reach TV and GuideDoc.

ruolinluyo@gmail.com

PRODUCERS



Stivens Luyo is a cinematographer, producer, and animator based in Los Angeles. As a Peruvian immigrant, he came to the US at a young age with his mom, an experience that profoundly ignited his passion in immigrant stories. As a visual storyteller, he excels in utilizing visual metaphors to enrich storytelling. Since 2012, he has worked on a diverse range of films with a keen eye for cinematic visual aesthetics. Notably, he produced WHAT WOULD YOU BRING?, a series spotlighting Jewish Holocaust survivors, for which he earned a New York Indie Shorts Awards nomination and was selected for Venice Shorts. In his spare time, he makes special effect tutorials in Spanish to support the voices of filmmakers in Latin America.

stivensluyo@gmail.com



Kristal Sotomayor is an award-winning nonbinary Peruvian American director, producer, journalist and curator based in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Named one of "10 Latinx Filmmakers You Should Know About" by HipLatina, they have received distinctions such as the DOC NYC Documentary New Leader Honor and Rockwood Documentary Leadership Fellowship (formerly known as the JustFilms Fellowship). Kristal's short Latinx immigrant rights documentary EXPANDING SANCTUARY won the Philadelphia Filmmaker Award at the 2024 BlackStar Film Festival. Their short experimental documentary DON'T CRY FOR ME ALL YOU DRAG QUEENS has screened across the globe at Newport Beach Film Festival, NewFest, GAZE International LGBTQIA Film Festival, and Sidewalk Film Festival. Kristal is currently in post-production on their debut narrative short film LAS COSAS QUE BRILLAN, a coming of age story about a Trans Latina mermaid, produced with support from the BlackStar Filmmaker Lab. They are in-development on a number of short and feature-length directorial projects through their company Sotomayor Productions. Kristal's work has been supported by the Outfest Creative Hope Fellowship, If/Then & CIFF North Shorts Residency, MDOCS Storytellers' Institute Visiting Fellowship, DCTV Docu Work-In-Progress Lab, and NeXtDoc Fellowship. They have curated acclaimed programming across the country at SFFILM, Frameline, True/False Film Fest, and the Philadelphia Latino Film Festival. They are the Editor-in-Chief of the cinéSPEAK Journal and their freelance writing bylines include The Philadelphia Inquirer, Documentary Magazine, Autostraddle, AL DÍA, and WHYY.

kristal@sotomayorproductions.com

"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 \$300K 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.

