

“Fund Festival: The Council on Foundations,”  
International Documentary, March 2002

By Pat Aufderheide

A film festival that celebrates the funders of a film or video? That’s what the annual Council on Foundations Film and Video Festival does. It showcases a dozen selections of films and videos produced over the last few years at several of the conferences held each year by the Council on Foundations, an association of private foundations. The festival debuts at the annual conference, and then travels to smaller COF conferences targeted at corporate, community and family foundations. It evidences foundations’ growing awareness of the importance of media in a wide range of action agendas, and their increasing interest in funding outreach as well as production.

Conference-goers can watch the films on closed-circuit cable in their hotel rooms, or in a suite of the hotel where the films run in permanent rotation. The festival is only open to attendees, but directors and producers of the showcased productions are sometimes invited. There, the questions reflect the concerns of the crowd: Do you circulate this to people in rural areas? Does this video have a study guide? How many calls did you get on the 800 number? Did broadcasters air that public service announcement in afterschool hours? And of course, there are also the familiar questions that producers everywhere want answers for: How do you get to audiences?

The Festival began in the politically tumultuous years 1960s, when some foundation officers saw that media were critically important tools for social change, and that communications technologies offered new opportunities for expression and access to audiences. To educate and inspire their colleagues, they decided to show off good media funded at least in part by private foundations. The festival has since become a treasured part of the Council’s activities.

In the several years that I’ve been asked to curate the festival, working with a selection committee made up of COF members, I have been impressed by the many kinds of creative collaboration between funders and makers, to produce media that makes a difference. Foundations are often instrumental in shaping a project.

Sometimes funders commission media to be at the center of a major project. Take *this Heart* (a 1999-2000 selection), Katheryn Hunt’s powerfully moving, cinema verité portrait of one successful foster family, is one example. It was the centerpiece of the first phase of The Foster Care Project, designed and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Fund, in partnership with the Seattle public TV station KCTS and the Child Welfare League.

The foundations, which are concerned with children and families, wanted to address foster care. The number of children who need it has risen dramatically over the last decade, while the number of foster families has declined. The film was designed as a high-profile focal point of an action and policy strategy. Partnering with public television

ensured broadcast. They also commissioned several versions of the film, including 3-minute and 8-minute versions, to be used in discussion and advocacy, as well as other outreach tools such as an 800 number, printed materials and a website. In communities around the country, grassroots organizations used the broadcast and off-broadcast versions of the film to increase support for foster children and foster parents.

Another example of foundation-driven media projects is the award-winning, three-part set of half-hour training videos for caregivers of children who live in violent environments, The Power of Our Relationships (a 2000-2001 COF selection). It was developed by the producers of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Family Communications, working with nonprofits concerned with children, at the request and with the backing of the Heinz Family Endowments and state government agencies. The directors of The Heinz Endowments, two family foundations working collaboratively to improve quality of life in southwestern Pennsylvania, wanted to intervene in the cycle of violence at the early childhood level. They focused on training of childcare providers, and chose video for its power to model successful behaviors, to capture the many subtle ways in which the caring adults demonstrate the supportive, structure-building behaviors that help children at risk learn and grow. Each of the three resulting videos concludes with a series of short, "trigger" videoclip excerpts from the video, keyed to the training manual. The package has been so successful that it's been adopted in other states as well.

Funders can also adopt projects into their campaigns. Reproductive health is a large issue for many foundations, including the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a leader in innovative mass media strategies for public health education generally. Blood Lines (in the 2000-2001 COF festival) got on MTV, under the title It Could be You, with strategic help from Kaiser. Two HIV+ teens, Jennifer Jako and Rebecca Guberman, had decided to make a film out of their own and other teens' experience with HIV, although they had no expertise when they started. "We just felt that a lot of what was out there wasn't made in a way that youth would really watch," said Jennifer Jako. They got startup help from The Equity Foundation, founded by the gay and lesbian community of Oregon to fund conversations and connections among all Oregonians.

Vicky Rideout, director of the foundation's Entertainment Media and Public Health Program, saw a rough edit of the film they had offered to MTV, and was impressed enough to offer crucial post-production funds that made it MTV-friendly. Kaiser has an ongoing, multimillion dollar relationship with MTV to raise awareness on sexual health. "MTV had a perfect audience for us, and knows how to speak to that audience in a voice that is authentic and compelling," said Rideout. "Here they found two young filmmakers who spoke directly from the heart about an incredibly important issue to young people." Kaiser also paid for outreach at the grassroots throughout the U.S, using a special nonbroadcast version funded by The Funding Exchange's Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media, which supports progressive media.

Major foundations, such as the Ford Foundation and MacArthur Foundation, often now build a media element into any large project, whether it is about community housing initiatives or micro-credit or rural development. Far rarer among foundations is

grantmaking for film art. That is why the Rockefeller Foundation's media arts fellowships are treasured. The latest COF festival season features two Rockefeller fellows's documentaries. Mexican filmmaker Juan Carlos Rulfo, the son of renowned Mexican author Juan Rulfo, was funded to make Juan, I Forgot I Don't Remember, a wry and nostalgic look at the peasant world his father left behind. In interviews with sometimes cagey oldsters, memories freely mix with fantasies. Alan Berliner's Nobody's Business, an instant classic as a portrait of his cantankerous father, was completed with funds from Rockefeller.

Increasingly, the COF festival draws submissions that use new communications technologies. This year, the work of Witness is highlighted. Witness, an organization that creates and uses video as a tool of human rights activism, Witness has capitalized on the fact that camcorders are now a commonplace piece of luggage for human rights activists; if they lack the basics to do amateur video, they can use a Witness training video (don't swing the camera around, beware noisy environments, avoid close close-ups). Witness counts more than half a million hits a month on its website, [witness.org](http://witness.org). There, if you have a fast modem you can watch videos from Kosovo, India, Mexico, Burkina Faso—or wherever a human rights activist has taken video that shows you the need to act for human rights. Then you can click over to a website that lets you take action. The Reebok Human Rights Foundation was an early funder of Witness, which musician Peter Gabriel co-founded and continues to support.

“It's a very different kind of festival,” remarked filmmaker Judith Helfand, whose The Uprising of '34, co-directed with George Stoney, and whose A Healthy Baby Girl were both COF festival selections. “You have to remember you're there to present, not to pitch. But I wish there were more natural forums for funders and filmmakers to talk about the impact of our work.”

For more information on the festival, go to <http://www.cof.org/glossary/index.htm>, where there is a downloadable submission form, or write to Evelyn Gibson, Council on Foundations, 1828 L St., Washington, DC, 20036. For more information on funders and film, consult [fundfilm.org](http://fundfilm.org).