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**FILM INDEPENDENT ANNOUNCES
2026 DOCUMENTARY STORY LAB PARTICIPANTS**

The Cayton-Goldrich Family Foundation Fellowship will award a \$10,000 cash grant

LOS ANGELES (May 1, 2026) — Film Independent, the nonprofit arts organization behind the Film Independent Spirit Awards, announced today the selection of nine filmmakers across six projects for its 2026 Documentary Story Lab, kicking off May 4. Vanessa Carr, Josh Gleason, Roni Jo Draper, Marissa Lila Kongao, Cecilia Brown, Winslow Crane-Murdoch, Katyayani Kumar, Alex J. Bledsoe and Èlia Gasull Balada were selected for the third edition of the one-week intensive program. The program includes the Cayton-Goldrich Family Foundation Fellowship, which awards a \$10,000 cash grant.

The Documentary Story Lab supports the critical stage where documentaries are truly shaped: the edit. By guiding filmmakers through the process of transforming raw footage into a cohesive narrative—refining structure, emotional impact and character—the Lab helps elevate both the clarity and ambition of each project.

Fellows will be paired with experienced Editing and Directing Advisors, who provide one-on-one creative guidance during and after the Lab. The program culminates in a final pitch session, where Fellows receive individualized feedback and engage in discussions with industry executives.

“This year’s Documentary Story Lab Fellows are engaging with questions of truth, legacy and survival in ways that are both deeply personal and broadly resonant,” said Daniel Cardone, Senior Manager of Documentary Programs & Fiscal Sponsorship at Film Independent. “These projects take on complex, often unresolved subjects—from a decades-long mystery in the

American West to environmental injustice and cultural preservation—with a level of depth and access that demands careful, intentional storytelling. We're excited to support the filmmakers in refining their storytelling and sharpening their vision.

The Documentary Story Lab, an expansion of Film Independent's long-running Documentary Lab program, will connect filmmakers with Editing Mentors Alejandro Valdes-Rochin (*Maxima*), Claire Didier (*Enigma*), Pablo Proenza (*Natchez*), Christy Denes, ACE (*Murdaugh Murders: A Southern Scandal*), Veronica Pinkham (*Selena Gomez: My Mind and Me*) and Inbal B. Lessner, ACE (*Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult*).

Guest speakers and Directing Advisors include composers Gil Talmi and Andrew Gross; industry veteran Sarba Das; distribution specialists Orly Ravid and Annalisa Shoemaker; and Film Independent Fellows Alys Nahmias (*Cookie Queens*) and Smriti Mundhra (*Indian Matchmaking*). Additional Directing Advisors are Michèle Stephenson (*Going To Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*), Jeremy Workman (*Secret Mall Apartment*) and David Osit (*Predators*).

The Cayton-Goldrich Family Foundation Fellowship is a \$10,000 grant that is awarded to a Jewish filmmaker selected for a Film Independent Artist Development Program. We are honored to award this unrestricted cash grant to 2026 Documentary Story Lab Fellow Cecilia Brown, participating in the program with her project *A Bird with a Knife*.

Notable projects supported by Film Independent's Documentary Story Lab include Daniel Lombroso's *Manhood* (South by Southwest Festival, 2026), Suzannah Herbert's *Natchez* (Tribeca Film Festival 2025, Winner Best Documentary) and *Harvest* (Tribeca Film Festival 2026), directed by Natalie Baszile and Hyacinth Parker. Projects previously supported by Film Independent's Documentary programs include Academy Award-nominated *Ascension* by Jessica Kingdon, Academy Award-nominated and Film Independent Spirit Award-winning film *Minding the Gap* from Bing Liu and Diane Quon, Alina Simone and Kirstine Barfod's *Black Snow*, Sarita Khurana and Smriti Mundhra's *A Suitable Girl*, Tracy Droz Tragos and Andrew Droz Palermo's *Rich Hill* and Dyana Winkler and Tina Brown's *United Skates*. Filmmakers supported by the program include Academy Award winner Shane Boris (*Navalny*), Academy Award nominee Sara Dosa (*Fire of Love*) and Emmy Award winner Lana Wilson (*Brooke Shields: Pretty Baby*).

Film Independent Artist Development programs promote unique, independent voices by helping filmmakers create and advance new work through Project Involve, Filmmaker Labs (Episodic Directing, Documentary Story, Documentary Producing, Episodic, Fiction Producing and Screenwriting), Fast Track, Fiscal Sponsorship, Amplifier Fellowship and the Imaginar Producers Residency, as well as through Grants and Awards that provide over one million dollars annually to visual storytellers.

The Documentary Story Lab is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

For more information on the Documentary Story Lab and supported projects, please contact Daniel Cardone, Senior Manager of Documentary Programs & Fiscal Sponsorship, at dcardone@filmindependent.org. Additional information and an application form can be found at filmindependent.org.

The 2026 Documentary Story Lab projects and Fellows are:

A Bird with a Knife

Director: Cecilia Brown and Winslow Crane-Murdoch

Logline: *A Bird with a Knife* explores the 50-year mystery surrounding thousands of cattle mutilations across the American West. Following a veteran investigator, an Oregon sheriff and the ranchers whose cases they're working to solve, this film is about folklore, faith and the stories we tell when no absolute truth exists.

The Hummingbird Paints Fragrant Songs

Director: Èlia Gasull Balada

Logline: After a lifetime of hardship, 75-year-old Indigenous artist Sara Flores emerges from the Peruvian Amazon into the global contemporary art scene. As she confronts the emotional and physical toll that comes with being in the spotlight, she defies the lure of material wealth and transforms her art and legacy into a force for the territorial and cultural resistance of the Shipibo Nation.

Oaklead

Director: Alex J. Bledsoe

Logline: In Oakland, California, we fight to protect our children from lead poisoning in our own homes and schools—and confront over a century of environmental racism. This is the story of the longest ongoing pediatric epidemic in U.S. history.

Sons of the River

Director: Katyayani Kumar

Logline: As bodies surface daily in Punjab's Bhakra Canal, two rivals retrieve the dead from its wake, revealing a life-and-death struggle over power, morality and survival in a society abandoned by the state.

Untitled Nomads Documentary

Director: Vanessa Carr and Josh Gleason

Logline: When an American family of five trades their house for an RV, teenage daughter Leilani must come of age on the road. Over six years, her parents' radical attempt to educate her and her brothers through lived experience reveals the joys and costs of living outside societal norms.

We Arrive with Fire / Ne-kah Nuue'm Mehl Mech

Director: Roni Jo Draper and Marissa Lila Kongao

Logline: Since time immemorial, Yurok people have placed fire on the land to maintain a balanced ecosystem. In the past century, settlers banned fire, and both the environment and people have suffered. Now, Yurok people are returning fire medicine to heal the land.

ABOUT FILM INDEPENDENT

For over 40 years, Film Independent has helped filmmakers get their projects made and seen. The nonprofit organization's core mission is to champion creative independence in visual storytelling and support a global community of artists and audiences who embody diversity, innovation, curiosity and uniqueness of vision.

In addition to producing the Film Independent Spirit Awards, the organization supports creative professionals with Artist Development programs, grants and labs. Signature mentorship program Project Involve fosters the careers of talented filmmakers from underrepresented communities. Weekly Education events and workshops equip filmmakers of all ages and experience levels with tools and resources. International programs provide cultural exchanges and career-building opportunities for film professionals around the world. And year-round screening series Film Independent Presents offers a robust program of unique cinematic experiences, including screenings, conversations, Live Reads and Bring the Noise musical events.

For more information or to become a Member, visit filmIndependent.org.

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