



JANUARY 2015

THE FLEDGLING FUND

Inspiring a Better World Through Film

By Ann McQueen

This Funder Portrait is part of a series of brief papers and podcast interviews featuring funders who are supporting arts and culture as a creative strategy to achieve community building and development, civic engagement, or social justice goals. Visit the Animating Democracy website for other [Funder Portraits](#) and [Resources](#).

[Listen to a podcast interview](#) by Ann McQueen with Fledgling Fund Founder and President Diana Barrett, and Executive Director Sheila Leddy.



**Animating
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[The Fledgling Fund](#), a private foundation launched in 2005, seeks to “inspire a better world” by supporting the work of documentary filmmakers and building the evolving field of social issue documentary film and media. It believes in the power of film to engage communities in timely issues, and focuses its grantmaking on supporting filmmakers’ outreach and engagement efforts, helping them build awareness, strengthen movements, inform decisions, and even impact policy. While all the films it supports address issues of social justice, Fledgling’s grantmaking is less about a particular cause than about the strategy the filmmaker will follow to prompt change. Fledgling also actively shares its knowledge, experience, and lessons learned to help grantees build the capacity to educate and engage, and to track and share the impact of social issue documentary film.

Founder Diana Barrett, formerly a professor at the Harvard Business School and School of Public Health, carried the strengths of her previous careers with her as she developed the family philanthropy. Nominally New York-based, Fledgling is a lean, virtual organization with just three staff members that forgoes overhead in favor of additional grants. Since inception, nearly \$12 million has been distributed to more than 330 creative media projects from an endowment of around \$15 million.



ORIGIN STORY

Fledgling Fund founder Diana Barrett established the foundation to “inspire a better world” by supporting documentary filmmakers and their social change goals. To date, nearly \$12 million has been awarded to creative media projects. Six films that Fledgling has been involved with have won Academy Awards¹, thirteen have Emmys², while countless others have been nominated for Oscars and Emmys and screened at major film festivals. But more to the point, films from Fledgling’s portfolio have changed hearts, minds, laws, and policies.



▶ Diana Barrett
Founder

Both Fledgling’s mission and management philosophy are rooted in Harvard University where founder Diana Barrett received an MBA and doctorate before spending more than 20 years as a professor and consultant working on complex problems such as global poverty and health care. But after the World Trade Center fell, she knew that teaching about transforming systems wasn’t enough; she needed a more direct hand in making change.

Barrett began by supporting *Born into Brothels*, Fledgling’s first Academy Award winner. The film’s success in raising funds for a Calcutta boarding school showed Diana the power of documentary; she was hooked on film. But her scan of the field, including conversations with filmmakers, distributors, investors, and philanthropists, soon prompted the realization that production funding was beyond her capacity. It became clear, too, that while she was attracted to an engaging story about a crucial issue, her interest wasn’t in the film itself but rather on the film’s ability to elevate the issue in the public eye, create dialogue, and inspire change.

Launched in 2005, The Fledgling Fund soon focused its work through two funding programs: helping filmmakers design and execute outreach and engagement strategies to maximize the impact of their message, and strengthening the rapidly evolving field of social issue documentary film and media.

While Fledgling focuses narrowly on creating positive social change, it is less prescriptive about particular issues. Barrett, her staff, and advisors sometimes struggle with this, but for now they concentrate on broadly well told, engaging stories that celebrate equality, support democracy and civic engagement, protect the environment, advocate for economic justice, improve education, encourage health and health system reform, promote global human rights, empower women and girls, and advance justice reform. The power of the grantees' films, rather than the grantmakers' issue or personal agenda, takes the lead. It's a flexible entrepreneurial approach that serves The Fledgling Fund well.

Gasland

Shown on HBO in 2010 and nominated for an Oscar, *Gasland* tells the story of the disastrous effects that fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, has on the water, air, land, and the health of people across the country. Fledgling helped filmmaker Josh Fox develop a plan to engage target audiences and inspire direct local action in the most affected regions of the country.



Private Violence

Private Violence is a feature-length documentary and audience engagement campaign about domestic abuse as told through the stories of two survivors. Filmmaker Cynthia Hill reframes the narrative from “why don’t you just leave?” to an exploration of how social norms and the criminal justice system block a woman’s escape from violence. It premiered at Sundance in 2014.



[Lioness](#)

Lioness, which received Fledgling’s support for post-production and outreach, tells the story of a group of female Army support soldiers who were sent into battle in Iraq without adequate combat training. When they returned, because women were technically excluded from combat and therefore couldn’t have served on the “front lines,” they were denied the same health benefits as their male counterparts. Filmmakers Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers released their documentary in 2008 through PBS broadcasts, screenings, and conferences to a core audience of soldiers, veterans and their service organizations, military families, and military health care providers. As consciousness of the issue entered the mainstream, there were screenings for high-level military and political figures. By 2010, the documentary had contributed to the passage of critical legislation improving women veterans’ access to healthcare and expanding the definition of combat to broaden access to disability benefits for all veterans.



As the number of grants has grown over the past decade—to date, over 330 media projects have received support—the Fledgling portfolio has begun to take shape and impact specific issues and the field of documentary film.

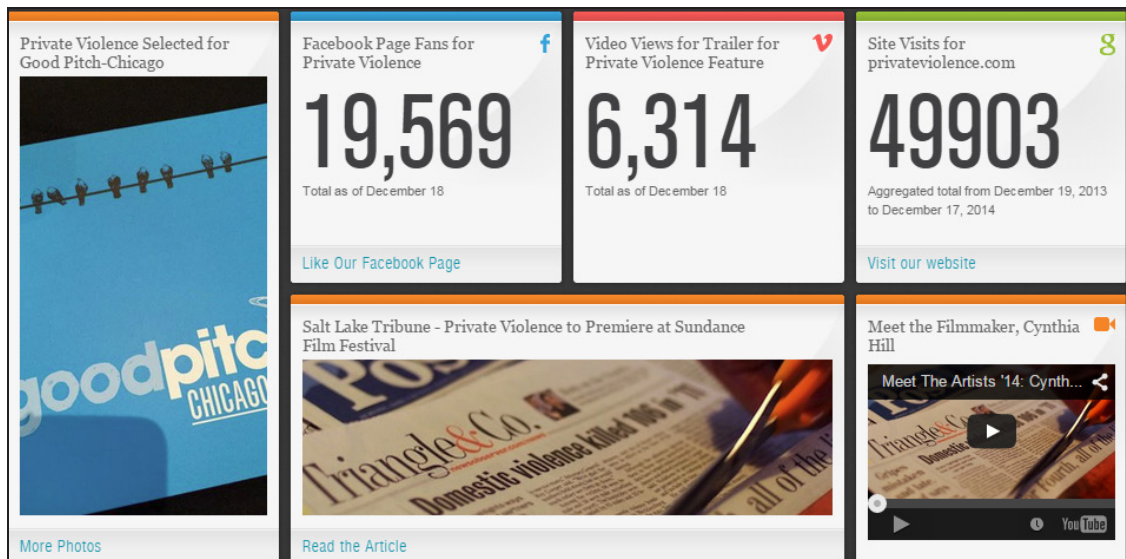


BUILDING THE FIELD

The Fledgling Fund is committed to building the field of social documentary by helping filmmakers expand and deepen their capacity to educate, engage, and to track and share the impact of their projects. It accomplishes this in a number of ways in addition to its grantmaking.

Fledgling was an early investor in [Sparkwise](#), an open source data aggregator and visualization tool that supports real-time tracking and impact analysis of nonprofits and social change movements through customized “dashboards.” Its impetus for this approach was to tell the story of the impact of social documentary films in a more dynamic way and with greater reach than static descriptions and case studies.

Each Sparkwise Dashboard, required of all grantees and embedded in Fledgling’s website, is designed by the filmmaker based on their film’s specific goals. No two boards are alike, though all mix quantitative and qualitative information. This may include a trailer with a count of its views, a map of screenings, links to non-profit partners addressing the film’s issues, Twitter feeds, video clips of a panel discussion, and stories of how the film has affected people or policy. Fledgling offers grantees tutorials and technical assistance on how to use and maximize the tool to best meet their needs and information and communication goals.



▶ Excerpt from Private Violence film dashboard. Click to experience the full page.

Another resource, the online [Provider Directory](#), is a frequently updated list of people and organizations that have worked with and been recommended by grantees. Currently at about 60 entries, the directory facilitates connections to help with campaign development, curriculum, distribution, communication, grant writing, and legislative strategies. To benefit filmmakers, presenters, and other funders, The Fledgling Fund also publishes working papers and case studies to disseminate what it has learned about grantmaking and how its grantees engage core audiences to cultivate change.

Finally, the Fledgling Fund advances the field by engaging other philanthropies in the work of social issue film. These partnerships take various forms depending on shared goals. Recent funding from the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation supported three Fledgling projects—[Cafeteria Man](#), [American Promise](#), and [Inocente](#)—that address its interest in youth and helped each filmmaker plan local Atlanta engagement initiatives. Fledgling’s partnership with another foundation helped that funder remain anonymous while it made its first investments in social documentaries. Support from the Ford Foundation helped Fledgling increase the number of its early planning grants.

One of the fund’s most ambitious projects, the Fledgling Engagement Lab, was launched in 2014 with support from the Ford Foundation and the Dobkin Family Foundation. The Lab is an intensive 18-month program that brings together filmmakers to plan and implement strategic outreach and engagement campaigns. The program began with an intensive residency in May 2014 for representatives from eight films: [Private Violence](#), [15 to Life](#), [The C Word](#), [Food Chains](#), [Nine to Ninety](#), [Radical Grace](#), [The Return](#), and [Seed: The Untold Story](#). Participants continue to collaborate and share lessons learned as they navigate their challenging campaigns.

Grantmaking: Straightforward & Lean

Fledgling's grants process is straightforward. Potential applicants are asked to consider their work against clearly articulated funding criteria. Does their film tell an important, timely story? Is production underway? While exceptions are always possible, Fledgling rarely considers work that is in development or early production. Does the project have strategic partners and, if so, how will it advance their movement? Does the filmmaker have a target audience and ideas about how to reach and engage them? Does the film's issue meet one of Fledgling's broad interest areas?



Once each year, an online Letter of Inquiry form is open to documentarians around the world (applicants in other countries must have a fiscal sponsor in the United States before receiving funding). About a month after the LOI deadline, applicants learn the status of their preliminary request; those invited forward have another month or so to submit additional application materials and links to their film samples. Three months later awards ranging from \$5,000 to \$30,000 are made.

In 2014, Fledgling invested in 19 film projects. Of these, six had received one or two earlier grants; the length of Fledgling's relationships often mirror the time filmmakers require to deepen their outreach and engagement work.

Fledgling's "fieldbuilding" grants—five in 2014—follow a different path. Applications, by invitation only, are made on a rolling basis to programs, conferences, and festivals that advance the social issue documentary field. This may mean connecting films to nonprofit leaders and community audiences or building the capacity of emerging filmmakers of color or organizing screenings and discussions for overlooked audiences. Recent grantees include [AFI DOCS](#), an internationally recognized documentary film festival; [Ambulante](#), a Mexico-based festival that has expanded into California; and [Reel Power](#), a collaboration of filmmakers, leaders, and organizations working to address climate change.

Moving from as many as 400 applications per cycle to about 20 or 24 awards would seem to be an overwhelming burden for a three-person operation that's scattered across the country. Executive Director Sheila Leddy is in Boston, Emily Verellen, Director of Programs and Communications, works from Los Angeles, while President Diana Barrett moves between New York, Florida, and the next film festival. There's no CFO, no grants manager, no receptionist. But there are many benefits to a small, dispersed staff, not the least of which is a widely dispersed web of connections.

Weekly video conferencing, frequent staff rendezvous at film festivals, and outsourcing makes it work. [Foundation Source](#) handles back office tasks and provides infrastructure, including a customized online application system that gives Foundation staff and advisors easy access to all application materials no matter where they sit. Foundation Source also assures that Fledgling is in full compliance with tax and reporting requirements, and cuts the checks. "It was a classic 'make or buy' business decision," Barrett says. Buying services rather than hiring staff to fill office space held the most value and keeps the focus on films and their issues.



RISK AND REWARD



Sheila Leddy
Executive Director

Social issue documentaries exist, Sheila Leddy says, “in an unpredictable space.” In the past ten years, social media and online engagement strategies have exploded. Distribution models are changing rapidly; today, many filmmakers are repurposing their work to fit new outlets such as the *New York Times* [Op-Docs](#) video channel. Happily for the documentarians, new funders are entering the arena. Production support for film and media advancing social justice comes from the [Sundance Documentary Fund](#), the Ford Foundation initiative [JustFilms](#), and [Impact Partners](#), among many others, while an increasing number of family and private foundations come to film through their interest in specific issues such as youth, aging, or equality.

In the midst of this shifting landscape, Barrett’s embrace of a lean management model, ensuring that more money can go into the work of connecting films to audiences, combined with her commitment to ongoing learning about the field of documentary filmmaking, are the Fledgling Fund’s buffer against the inherent risk of a rapidly evolving field. The design of the organization is similarly targeted to accomplishing the foundation’s goal of strengthening movements and supporting social change.

The Fledgling Fund has found an important niche. Social change, it knows, doesn’t happen easily or quickly. But over the last 10 years, as its mission, processes and procedures have become increasingly well established, Barrett and her team have become ever more savvy about judging where the issue lives in the public consciousness and if, when, or how a Fledgling investment can help increase audience engagement and move that issue forward in a productive way.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Six of The Fledgling Fund's grant recipients that have received an Academy Award for Best Documentary: *Inocente* (2013); *Saving Face* (2012); *Music by Prudence* (2010); *The Cove* (2009); *Freeheld* (2007); and, *Born into Brothels* (2004).

(2) News and Documentary Emmy Awards have gone to a number of Fledgling Fund grantees: *The Invisible War* (2014, Outstanding Investigative Journalism and Best Documentary); *The Crash Reel* (2014, Outstanding Informational Programming); *Outlawed in Pakistan* (2014, Outstanding Research); *Detropia* (2014, Outstanding Editing); *The Interrupters* (2013, Outstanding Informational Programming); *The Loving Story* (2013, Outstanding Historical Programming); *Saving Face* (2013, Best Documentary and Outstanding Editing); *Split Estate* (2010, Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Craft: Research); *Freedom Riders* (2011, Outstanding Picture Editing, Outstanding Writing, and Exceptional Merit in Nonfiction Programming); *Gasland* (2011, Outstanding Directing for Nonfiction Programming); *Good Fortune* (2011, Outstanding Business and Economic Reporting); *Made in L.A.* (2008, Outstanding Continuous Coverage of a News Story); and, *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007, Outstanding Non-Fiction Special).

All photos courtesy of the [Fledgling Fund website](#). Used with permission.

ANN MCQUEEN



Principal at [McQueen Philanthropic](#), an advisory service for foundations and individuals, Ann McQueen has nearly 20 years experience in philanthropy. Formerly, McQueen served on the board of Grantmakers in the Arts and led the Boston Foundation's arts grantmaking, developed a fellowship program to celebrate individual artists, and led a series of seminal research projects into the fiscal health of the cultural sector. She is a member of the boards of Boston Natural Areas Network, which preserves and advocates for urban open space, and Associated Grant Makers, a forum for New England foundations and their nonprofit partners.

Launched in 1999, Animating Democracy is a core program of Americans for the Arts. Animating Democracy works to inspire, inform, promote, and connect arts as a contributor to community, civic, and social change. Over the last decade, Animating Democracy has supported, through regranting, a wide range of arts organizations doing compelling civic engagement work, implemented national research, and developed field resources and publications. Animating Democracy is frequently called upon to serve as program adviser, researcher, and funding/research partner. In all of our work, Animating Democracy brings to bear Americans for the Arts' unique strengths in research, policy, professional development, visibility, and advocacy.



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