


# FIFTH ANNUAL ALTITUDE AWARDS

*June 7th, 2026*



Women  
In Media



## ABOUT THE ALTITUDE AWARDS



Now in its fifth year, the 2026 Altitude Awards celebrate exceptional women and gender non-conforming cinematographers, gaffers, and camera operators. Since launching, the awards have helped recipients elevate their careers through increased industry recognition, access to new equipment, and expanded professional opportunities.

Six semi-finalists, five winners, and one emerging filmmaker will earn not only recognition—but also career-changing prizes and industry credibility.

Generous awards of equipment and services, provided by our incredible vendor partners are more than just gifts. Access to professional-grade gear can open doors to new jobs, justify higher kit fees, and strengthen leverage when negotiating crew rates. The impact is immediate, practical, and career-changing.

Our distinguished panel of judges approaches every submission with exceptional care, bringing years of expertise, passion, and artistry to their evaluations. Their thoughtful commentary and insightful feedback become lasting assets for participants long after the awards ceremony ends. Savvy winners often photograph their award show slides—featuring their reels alongside judges' remarks. They proudly share the images with prospective clients, collaborators, and audiences across social media, transforming recognition into powerful momentum for their careers.

That kind of recognition from respected industry professionals carries tremendous weight. Beyond elevating visibility, it instills credibility—empowering our winners to walk into interviews with confidence, seize new opportunities, and negotiate from a position of genuine strength. Few things inspire us more than hearing about the incredible milestones our winners go on to achieve, and we take immense pride in knowing we've played even a small role in their continued success.



## 2024 1<sup>ST</sup> PLACE ALTITUDE AWARDS WINNER

*The Altitude Awards have given me the chance to shadow judge Fernando Argüelles, ASC AEC, and go on a lens test with judge Alicia Robbins, ASC. As a newcomer to Los Angeles, these opportunities helped increase my visibility within the industry and led to valuable conversations and connections. The prizes of The Angénieux lens and Nanlux lights were especially transformative, giving me the tools and confidence to elevate my work.*

**~ DANIELA MILEYKOVSKY**

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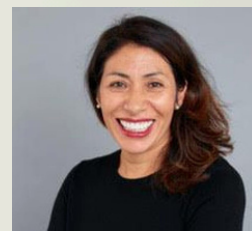
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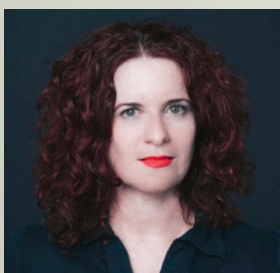


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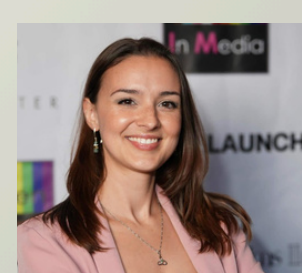
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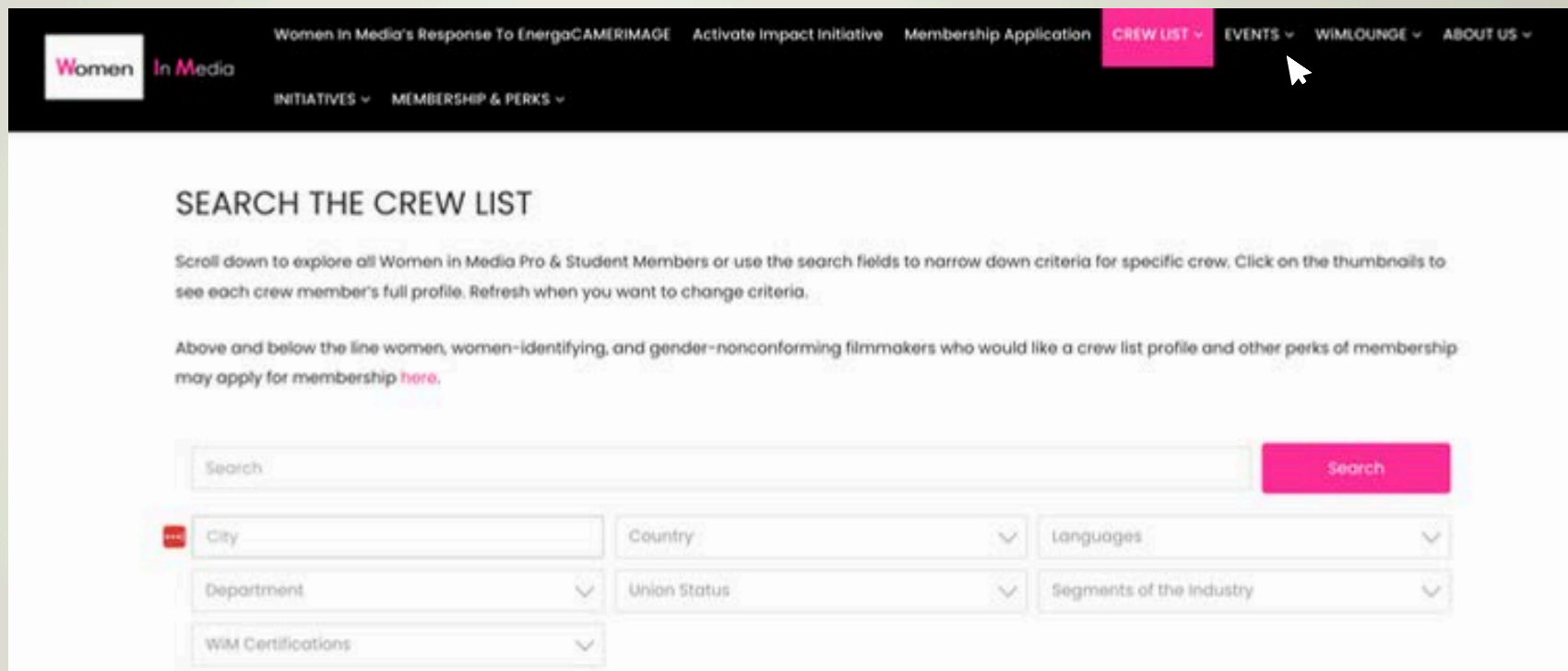
# HEAD JUDGE: IDIT DVIR

Idit Dvir - Head Judge FILM FACULTY, HOWARD UNIVERSITY Idit Dvir earned her MFA in Cinematography at the American Film Institute (AFI) in Los Angeles where she was the recipient of the 2005 Hollywood Foreign Press Association Scholarship. She interned under Kramer Morgenthau, ASC on the blockbuster FRACTURE and shot DISFIGURED for writer/director Glenn Gers. Dvir is an associate Professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she has taught filmmaking since 2007. She returned to AFI to teach the second-year Cinematography Fellows during the 2011-12 academic year. She has also taught several screenwriting workshops for Women in Media, was a mentor for the development process for WiM's CAMERAderie Initiative, and she headed up Women in Media's Developing Filmmaker Fellowship Program.

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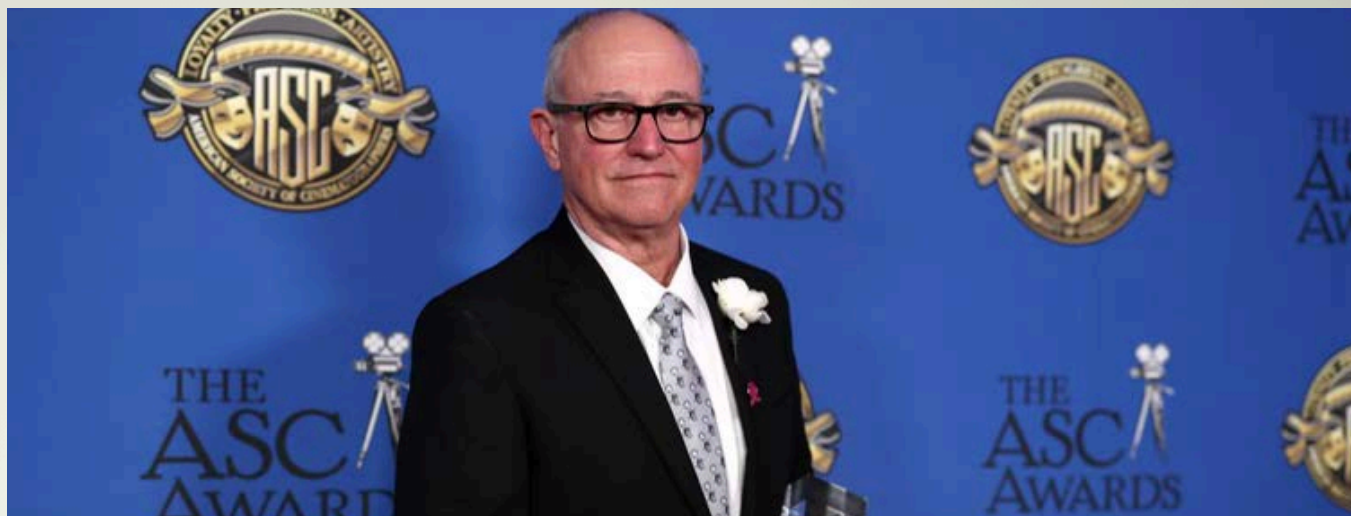
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## JUDGE: ALAN CASO, ASC

Alan Caso, ASC CINEMATOGRAPHER: SIX FEET UNDER, THE ROOKIE, AMERICAN GOTHIC, WHY WOMEN KILL Alan Caso, ASC learned the basic principles of light, color and composition from his father who was a photographer for the United States Air Force, a graphic artist and lithographer. Alan studied painting at Massachusetts College of Art and transferred to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, when his interest shifted to film. During this time, Caso also avidly pursued photography, learning the fine skills of black and white photography and darkroom techniques. After graduation, he moved to Los Angeles and found a niche in the Industry as a gaffer. He switched over permanently to camera operating in the late 1970's - early 1980's while additionally mastering the Steadicam, becoming one of the few operators in the 80's who performed both A Camera and Steadicam.

Caso's first feature, 84 CHARLIE MOPIC, was shot in 1988. He has subsequently compiled over 60 narrative credits for cinema and television screens. He won the ASC Outstanding Achievement Award in 1997 for the miniseries, George Wallace, and additionally received an Emmy nomination. His cinema credits range from Muppet movies to John Frankenheimer's stark drama, REINDEER GAMES.



**OTTO  
NEMENZ**

**Congratulations to all the participants of the Altitude Awards. Your passion, creativity, and dedication to Cinematography are already shaping the future of Filmmaking. Keep dreaming big, keep pushing your craft, and never stop telling stories through your lens.**

# JUDGE: ANA M. AMORTEGUI, ADFC

Ana M. Amortegui, ADFC, is a Colombian-born director of photography currently shooting the Showtime series *The Chi*. Her recent feature *Undercard*, starring Wanda Sykes in her first dramatic role, is currently in distribution.

Amortegui's work spans television, documentary, digital series, and commercial projects. Her television credits include *The Cleaning Lady*, *Quantum Leap*, *Resident Alien*, *Black Lightning*, and *Into the Dark*. She has also photographed feature documentaries such as *Heal* and *Imagining Zootopia*, and directed commercials for Disney and the United Nations. She lensed the web series *Gente-fied*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2017.



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Before pursuing cinematography, Amortegui earned a degree in electrical engineering while working as a professional dancer. She later became a sought-after choreographer for several Colombian television productions, where she developed a fascination with the creative work happening behind the camera, ultimately leading her to transition into cinematography.



She graduated from the Art Institute of California in 2010 and was selected for Film Independent's Project: Involve program in 2009. Amortegui also received scholarships from Panavision and ARRI to study at the Maine Media Workshops and was named to ICG Magazine's "Generation Next" list in 2020.

# JUDGE: FERNANDO ARGÜELLES, ASC, AEC

Fernando Argüelles, ASC, AEC is a renowned cinematographer whose journey began in Madrid, Spain, where he studied visual storytelling at Complutense University. He later earned a Master of Fine Arts in Cinematography from the American Film Institute, Los Angeles. A respected member of both the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) and the Spanish Society of Cinematographers (AEC), Argüelles also belongs to the International Cinematographers Guild, the Television Academy, and the Society of Camera Operators, among other professional organizations.



With an impressive body of work spanning film and television, Argüelles has brought his distinctive visual style to acclaimed productions such as *Prison Break*, *SWAMP THING*, *Hemlock Grove*, *Fear the Walking Dead*, *The Ditchdigger's Daughters*, and *The Princess Switch*, among others. He is currently lensing the final season of *The Chi*.

Passionate about nurturing the next generation of filmmakers, Argüelles serves as Co-Chair of the ASC Vision Mentorship Program, which promotes diversity and inclusion in the industry. He is also a dedicated educator, regularly leading webinars, master classes, and teaching engagements around the world.



## CONGRATULATIONS

Celebrating the 2026 Altitude Awards Finalists





## JUDGE: GEORGE MOORADIAN, ASC

**George Mooradian, ASC** is an Emmy Award-winning cinematographer known for his work across television and feature films, with a career spanning several decades. A member of the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC), the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the Television Academy, Mooradian has earned a reputation for crafting polished, performance-driven visuals in both multi-camera and single-camera productions.

He won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Cinematography for a Multi-Camera Series for *Country Comfort*, and has received nine Emmy nominations over his career. His television credits include notable series such as *The Upshaws*, *According to Jim*, *The Exes*, *The Soul Man*, *Rel*, and *The Carmichael Show*, as well as work on *American Horror Story: Hotel*.

In addition to episodic television, Mooradian has photographed feature films including *Retroactive* and *Crazy as Hell*. Beyond his cinematography, Mooradian serves in leadership roles within the Television Academy and remains an active mentor and educator in the filmmaking community.



# CONGRATULATIONS TO THE WINNERS OF THE 2026 ALTITUDE AWARDS!

We are pleased to celebrate all participants whose exceptional dedication, creativity, and craftsmanship continues to elevate the art of the moving image

**SHOTDECK**

# JUDGE: JAY HOLBEN

Holben is an associate member of the ASC and serves as co-chair of the ASC's Motion Imaging Technology Council. He directed and produced the ASC's industry technology demonstration film *The Mission*, part of the Standard Evaluation Material (StEM) 2.0 project—an initiative supported by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Amazon Studios, Disney, Sony, Warner Bros., and other major studios. Most recently, he completed the ASC StEM3 project and the short film *Warped: Cyber City*.



Jay Holben is an award-winning independent director and producer whose work spans feature films, television series, documentaries, short films, and commercials. His feature credits include *Before the Dawn*, *Of Fortune and Gold*, and *The Invoking 2*. As a documentary filmmaker, he has created projects for clients such as General Motors, HBO, NRG, Nelson Racing Engines, and the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC).

In addition to his directing and producing work, Holben is a contributing technical editor for *American Cinematographer* magazine. He is the author of six books on the craft and technology of filmmaking, including *A Shot in the Dark*, *Behind the Lens*, *The Cine Lens Manual*, *American Cinematographer's Shot Craft*, *Lessons from American Cinematographer*, and *The Director's Guide to Everything*.

# JUDGE: JESSE M. FELDMAN

Jesse M. Feldman has been celebrated with an ASC Award nomination for his work on AMC's Interview With The Vampire. He is also known for his extensive credits in the world of Ryan Murphy, including American Horror Story and American Crime Story, as well as Peacock's MacGruber and Showtime's The Chi. Feldman also boasts over 100 credits as a camera operator, including The Mandalorian, Ahsoka, and Pose. Beyond his work on set, he is a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community, and is the inventor of the award-winning camera support system, Ergorig.



Feldman completed his formal study of cinematography at the USC School of Cinematic Arts, and has served as an eight time mentor in SOC and ICG's mentorship programs. While currently based in LA, Feldman has traveled extensively around the world, and has also lived in Morocco and Colombia.

# CONGRATULATIONS

TO THE

# 2026 ALTITUDE AWARDS

# FINALISTS AND SEMI-FINALISTS

# ARRI



# JUDGE: JOHANNA COELHO, AFC

Johanna Coelho is a TV and film cinematographer. Most recently, she served as the sole DP for HBO MAX's hit show, The Pitt Season 1 and 2. Previously, she lensed seasons 2 and 4 of The Rookie on ABC. She has worked on a variety of content from narrative to documentary to reality TV with other renowned companies such as Netflix, Oxygen Network, Hello Sunshine, Scout Productions, and COSM. Her recent feature film Séance premiered at the Newport Beach Film Festival, while her other recent feature film, All Happy Families, premiered at the Chicago Film Festival, followed by a theatrical release across the US.

She was featured in Variety in 2018 as one of the Up Next generation of filmmakers. In 2025, she received the ECA Distinguished Filmmaker Award.



Johanna was born and raised in France. Having always been passionate about creating and experimenting with meaningful images since a very young age, her drive for visual language has led her to be one of the youngest cinematographers to ever shoot network television. Seeking to enrich her European approach with the American perspective, she moved to Los Angeles in 2011, where she studied cinematography at the prestigious American Film Institute.

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# JUDGE: DR. RACHEL RAIMIST, PHD

Dr. Rachel Raimist is a trailblazing director whose work centers on smart women, messy families and the energy of adolescence. She has brought her distinctive voice to series including *Elsbeth*, *Bel-Air*, *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, and *Wu-Tang: An American Saga*, among others.

At the Directors Guild of America (DGA), Raimist made history as the first woman appointed Co-Chair of the Special Projects Committee and as the first Co-Chair of the Disability Committee. A passionate advocate for equity and representation, Raimist has served on the Latino Committee and the Women's Steering Committee leadership teams, where she co-founded the annual Women's Day at the DGA and leads initiatives spotlighting groundbreaking, diverse directors.



Raimist mentors for Sundance, African Creative Television, AFI's DWW+, Tyler Perry Studios and the Latino Film Institute's Youth Cinema Project. She serves on the Advisory Board of the Holle Center for Storytelling at the University of Alabama and on the Industry Advisory Board of Kōawa Studios at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. Raimist has taught at numerous colleges and universities, including NYU, RIT, Temple, Syracuse, Cal State Los Angeles, San Jose State, Columbia College Chicago, the University of Alabama, Macalester College, Carleton College and others. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Media Arts & Culture at Occidental College, where she teaches screenwriting and production.



# *Congratulations*

## to the winners of the

## 2026 Altitude Awards

and all participants for their outstanding craft  
and artistic excellence.

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# FROM SHORTS TO FEATURES: A NEW CAMERADERIE INITIATIVE



CHECK OUT THE  
SEVEN 10 MINUTE  
CAMERADERIE SHORTS  
AND BTS SIZZLE REELS

To put it mildly, the past few years have presented challenges for the US film industry. Women In Media Executive director, Tema Staig, couldn't sit idly by and watch the shrinking of the creative economy. In 2025, she came up with one of her crazy, ambitious plans (sometimes they do come true!) What if we expanded the wildly successful CAMERAderie Shorts to CAMERAderie Features? We could film a bundle of three high production value feature films as part of a lab, very much like we did for the first two rounds of CAMERAderie. With the help of her producing partner, Neobe Velis, and WiM Treasurer, producer, Allison Vanore, the CAMERAderie Features Business plan was born.

## WHAT CAMERADERIE FEATURES IS:

- Independently produced feature films of at least 90 minutes
- Total production costs between \$1,000,000 - \$5,000,000 (per project)
- Three buckets of funding
  - Grants (administered by WiM)
  - Fiscal sponsorship (administered through WiM, run by participants)
  - Equity participation (filmmakers must come to the table with some financing secured)
- Creative HOD's must be WiM Pro members
- 70% of the crew must be WiM members
- Production & Post Production will take place in California
- A Lab with high level mentorship and continuing education
- Minimal company moves
- Under 15 speaking roles
- Eligible for California tax credits



Many independent films are soooooo close to getting greenlit, but they need "first-in money", or gap funding to get them across the finish line. We would aim to grant that partial funding to the right projects, as well as usher them through a process that ensures success from prep and production, through post, deliverables, and distribution. Below is a condensed overview of the proposed program.

## WHAT CAMERADERIE FEATURES IS NOT:

- A full grant to make a movie
- Full development of an unfinished script
- A production company (you will need an LLC and production team)



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# JESSE AVERNA, ACE

## CULTIVATING EMOTIONAL EDITS

By Tara Sanders Brooks & Tema L. Staig

Women In Media Advisory Board member, [Jesse Averna](#), ACE has cut for film and television, live action and animation. His work on *Sesame Street* landed him five Emmy wins. Most recently, Averna's work on *The Bad Guys 2* has garnered him an American Cinema Editors Eddie nomination.

Women in Media was able to speak with Averna about his career and inspiration as an editor:

### What drew you to pursuing filmmaking as a career?

I've always been obsessed with movies and TV. As a kid from the 80's and 90's, I don't think that's unique. During high school, though, I was introduced to editing via two VHS decks connected to each other. That opened the ability for me to make my own content. I would spend weekends shooting and editing short skits and music videos with my friends. We'd bring those videos to different get-togethers and parties. I think it was hearing those audiences laugh and 'ooh' and 'ahh' that became the thing I was chasing. The material and the audiences have changed, but I'm still that kid.

### How did you figure out you wanted to be an editor?

Filmmakers like Michel Gondry, Spike Jones, Chris Cunningham, and David Fincher were very influential to me during those developmental years. Their music videos were like magic tricks. I wanted to crack them and make my own. Even at School of Visual Arts film school, most of my work was experimental— I was trying to make magic tricks on screen.

In features, editors like Jill Bilcock, Thelma Schoonmaker, Carol Littleton, and Sally Menke were making movies that used editing in an emotionally cultivating way that captivated me. Jill's use of montage in *Moulin Rouge* was dizzying. You never lost the narrative, but you felt swept up in the protagonist's emotion. Thelma's use of freeze frames and losing continuity broke the rules to great effect. Carol crafted a believable, emotional performance for *ET* that made me more attached to him than to most human performances. Sally's editing for emotional effect made me hold my breath even when it was simply two people talking at a diner.

For me, it was always in the edit room that I felt the film was being made and I wanted to craft story the way these artists were able to. Beyond their incredible craftsmanship, I was attracted to their rule bending and breaking that would hit emotionally.

### Did you have any early mentors who helped you along the way?

My first true mentor was John Tierney. He was a legendary editor on *Sesame Street*. I had worked for John on a couple of different projects at Creative Bubble Post House. He recommended me to edit alongside him on *Sesame Street*. He would check in and pick up the phone whenever I needed him. I owe him a lot for that. He passed away a number of years ago, but I still think of him often when I'm editing.



### What is the best advice you have received as a filmmaker?

Carol Littleton once gave me the advice to aim to have six months of savings. It wasn't easy, at all, but I took her advice and worked hard to get as close as I could to that number. Because of that, I was able to take risks and opportunities I otherwise wouldn't have been able to.

### What is the advice you have to give to young up and coming filmmakers?

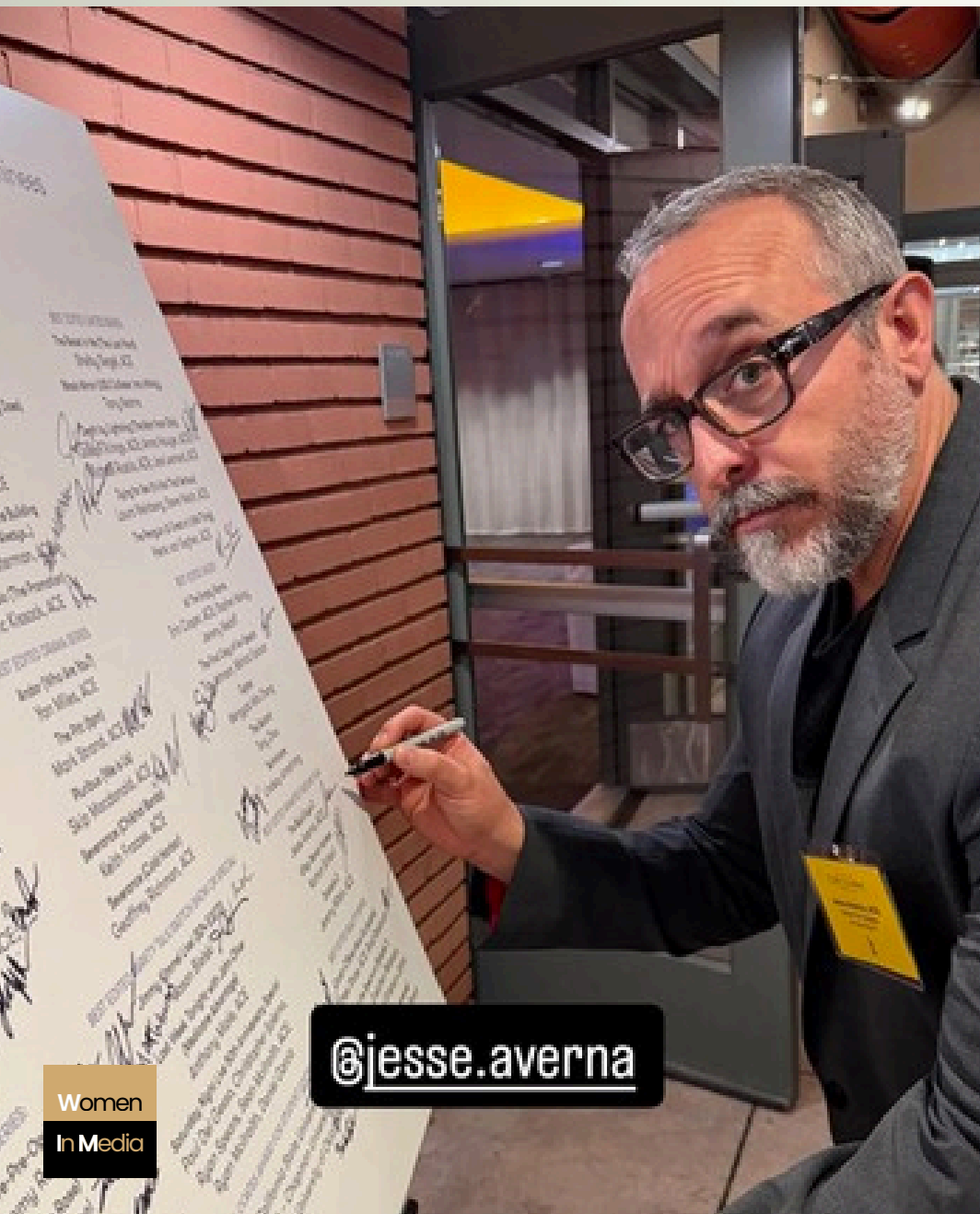
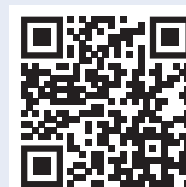
Whatever you do, make kindness your method. Film and series are hard jobs. They're pressure cookers. Teams want to work with people who are kind and reliable. Talent is great, hard work is a must, but I believe the most important and memorable thing on a project is how you treat your team and coworkers, especially when it gets crunchy.



# SIGMA

Sigma congratulates the honorees and winners of the Women in Media 2026 Altitude Awards.

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## What's next for you?

I'm currently working on an animated series at Sony Pictures Animation. It's awesome. I'm super excited for people to see it.

## Congratulations on your ACE nomination for *The Bad Guys 2*. Can you talk about your process of working on animation?

Thank you. Animation editing is the most fulfilling editing I've been fortunate to be a part of. In animation, we build the film before a frame is 'shot'. Years are spent crafting story and characters in storyboard animatics. Editorial is the place where ideas are tried and the story is cracked. Editing also functions as a hub of production. As scenes grow and change throughout the process, they filter through edit and out to the different departments and back to edit.

## How do you manage to stay so busy?

I want to make sure to mention that it's a tough time to be in the film industry. There are so many talented people out of work that deserve to be working. I've been fortunate, lucky, to remain busy. I think people can feel like the fact that they might not be busy reflects on their abilities or personality, but I don't think that's true. We went from strikes, to covid, to streaming, etc. We need people to be able to get back to work. I remain hopeful, but it's been a lot.

## How do you balance your busy worklife with family?

In terms of work/life balance, I try my hardest to not bring work home with me. When I'm with the kids, they are 100% my priority.

# AMY WARD

## HOW AMY WARD FOUND HER VOICE: FROM DAYTIME DRAMAS TO ANIMATION

By Tara Sanders Brooks & Tema L. Staig

You have heard *Women In Media* member Amy Ward's music before. The songwriter has had songs in over one hundred television shows and films. A singer and producer as well as writer, Ward has performed at large venues such as Madison Square Garden and Kauffman Stadium. Her most recent work includes music in the upcoming film *Viral*, directed by Blair Underwood, and *A Tooth Fairy Tale*, directed by Michael Johnson and available on streaming platforms.

### How did you discover your interest in music and film/tv?

My introduction to music for film and television happened unexpectedly right after my time at Berklee College of Music. I attended an alumni event in New York City and performed. Barbara Jordan, my former Berklee professor, approached me afterward and asked for a demo. The very next day, she called to say she had a placement opportunity on CBS's "Young and the Restless" for one of my tracks, "People Can You Feel It". That song also aired on "One Life to Live" and "All My Children". That moment was a turning point. It sparked my interest in music that would be paired with tv, film, ads, and video games, also known as "sync". It opened the door to learning how to write music for picture.

### Your music was used in fourteen episodes of *General Hospital*. Tell us about the sound the show aimed to create and what that process was like for you.

Most of the placements were for restaurant and bar scenes, so the goal was to create music that felt natural to those environments—ambient, laid-back, and contemporary. The key was to support the tone of the scene without distracting from the dialogue, so everything had to sit in that sweet spot: present enough to add atmosphere, but subtle enough to let the story lead. From a writing and production standpoint, it really sharpened my ability to create mood and texture in a more understated way, which is a big part of successful sync writing.



### Did you have any early mentors who helped you along the way?

During my time studying songwriting at Berklee College of Music, I was fortunate to be surrounded by incredible mentors, particularly John Aldrich in the Songwriting Department, as well as fellow students. They helped shape my foundation as a writer, vocalist, and producer.

### What's the best advice that you've received as a songwriter and composer?

One piece of advice I received early on from John, has stayed with me throughout my career: "50% of something is better than nothing." It's a reminder that progress in career opportunities matters more than, say, the perfect contract. If you turn down a contract because it's not as favorable as you'd like, you may be turning down an opportunity that might lead to something better. In songwriting and composing—especially in the fast-paced world of sync—being open to opportunities and continuing to create is essential.

### You are also an accomplished performer. What translates from live performance to songwriting?

Live performance absolutely informs my writing. Performing the National Anthem for the NY Knicks at Madison Square Garden taught me, in real time, what connects with an audience. I'm always thinking about emotional impact and how a song will translate beyond the recording. What makes people feel something, what lyrics land, and what melodies stay with them teaches you what unites the audience to the performance.

It's similar to an actor stepping behind the camera. Having that perspective gives you a deeper understanding of the full picture. As a performer, you learn how to deliver a moment; as a songwriter and composer, you learn how to create it. Those roles are very connected, and developing one skill makes the other stronger.

## You've written for television, film, and now, an animated film. Do you approach these mediums in different ways?

With film and television, the story always comes first. You're not just writing a song you love—you're writing something that serves a specific scene, emotion, or character arc. That means paying close attention to tone, pacing, lyrics, and even production choices so everything supports what's happening on screen.

For sync, I often start by thinking about the short descriptive visual and musical summary that I receive from production, known as a "brief". What is the mood, who is the audience, and where might this live in a scene? From there, I build the song around a clear emotional direction, keeping the structure flexible so it can be easily edited for picture. Clarity in the lyric and a strong, immediate tone are really important.

With animation, there's often an added layer of storytelling, and sometimes a bit more creative freedom in tone or style. You have more input. I got to see the early stages of the animation before I started writing. I get a script - which isn't common for soap operas, by contrast. But at the core, it always comes back to the same goal—enhancing the story and making the moment feel more impactful.

## What is your favorite kind of project to write for?

I've always felt a strong connection to children's stories and films. There's something really special about creating music that becomes part of how kids experience emotion, imagination, and storytelling. As a parent of two girls, that connection has deepened even more. It's made me even more passionate about writing for animated films and Disney-style projects. Being able to contribute to stories that inspire, uplift, and stay with young audiences is incredibly meaningful to me.

## How do you approach something like your latest animated film, *A Tooth Fairy Tale*?

I'm especially proud of "Take Flight" from *A Tooth Fairy Tale*. The song is about perseverance and not giving up on yourself. Life has peaks and valleys! While I was writing "Take Flight", I was dealing with vertigo and inner ear issues, which made it difficult to look at a screen for extended periods, but I refused to give in. That experience pushed me to trust my instincts even more and focus on the heart of the song. I truly believe adversity can strengthen your creative voice.

When I sent the demo to the production team and they came back with no notes/changes - it was such a rewarding moment. It let me know I had captured exactly what they were looking for. The song was a GRAMMY® contender in two categories—Song Written for Visual Media and Song of the Year. It was also recognized as a contender by the Society of Composers & Lyricists for Outstanding Original Song for a Dramatic or Documentary Visual Media Production. It was incredibly meaningful to see the song resonate on that level, especially as part of a project that I felt so personally connected to.

## What is the best advice you can give to young female and non-binary musicians looking to pursue a career in film?

Own your voice and don't wait for permission to use it. The film and TV industry needs diverse perspectives, and your unique point of view is your greatest strength. Focus on building your craft, but also on building relationships. This is a collaborative industry, and the connections you make matter.

Don't be afraid to take up space, ask questions, and advocate for yourself. There may be moments where you're the only one in the room who looks or thinks like you—that's not a weakness, it's an advantage. And most importantly, stay consistent. Opportunities often come from simply showing up, delivering, and being someone people trust to work with again.



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# JOHANNA COELHO, AFC

## STORYTELLING, LEADERSHIP, AND TRUSTING YOUR EYE

By Tara Sanders Brooks and Tema L. Staig

Johanna Coelho has led a versatile path as a cinematographer, shooting narrative, documentary, and reality. A graduate of AFI, she has gleaned wisdom from the best of the best and has brought that into her exceptional work on hit shows such as *The Rookie* and *The Pitt*. Coelho was named an Up Next Filmmaker by *Variety* in 2018.

### What drew you to pursuing cinematography as a career?

I've always been curious about every craft and career. One week I wanted to be a doctor, one week I wanted to make wedding dresses! I didn't like the idea of having to choose only one job, as I wanted to explore all of them.

When I was a teenager, I started to casually make small films with friends and I realized I could learn about anything behind the camera. Choosing this career would let me explore many jobs, cultures, and people. I wouldn't have to choose. I also truly love collaborating with people and telling stories, so I completely fell in love with cinematography. Every story needs its own visual language and accomplishing that requires rules that the creative team agrees to. On *The Pitt*, to fit into the realistic documentary feeling, we decided to have no wild walls, despite shooting on sound stage. We wanted to constrain our camera moves and angles that could only be accomplished in a real location.

### Did you have any early mentors who helped you along the way?

It's important to have someone who you look up to guide you. I still keep in touch with: Bill Dill, ASC and Stephen Lighthill, ASC. Bill taught me how to handle situations where you feel that you are losing control over the craft. Sometimes on set you are pressured with a lot of questions that make you lose track of what you originally were trying to achieve. I use his advice to step away, take a breath, and come back in with fresh eyes and a clear mind. Stephen was really good about pushing a visual language for tone, feelings, and taking a position on the story telling.

My ASC vision mentor was Mark Irwin, ASC in 2020. He was very present for specific questions about visual effects and stunts when I was alternating DP on Season 4 of *The Rookie*. I could bounce ideas off of him, and he would give me his perspective and advice.

### What is your best nugget of advice from your time at AFI?

You work with a lot of people in a short amount of time, which teaches you to adapt fast to different personalities and sensibilities. Don't take things personally. If there is a conflict, it's very hard to create a cohesive vision. Sometimes it's important to be the bigger person. Staying professional is key.

Take your time at school to experiment with visuals. The testing phase in prep is when you learn what will work or not. You don't want to do it "on the day".

### What is the best advice you can give to young female and non-binary filmmakers looking to pursue a career in film?

The number of times I didn't trust my guts and my eyes was always a mistake. Through hard work and experience, I gained a level of confidence that pushed me even further in my creativity. While shooting my first film at AFI I felt distracted by everyone's ideas instead of mine, and it led to a movie without visual coherence. I was so disappointed in myself for not creating what I had in mind, that I put a lot of pressure on myself for my next film at AFI, the 16mm MOS project. I finally was able to execute what I had envisioned, which truly empowered me and gave me confidence for future productions.

Embrace every kind of project. The path is rough! Do not narrow yourself to one type of project only. Say yes to many things as long as they are safe. You will grow your network to be much bigger, which will be helpful in the future.

**You have worked in reality, documentary, and narrative. How do these compliment each other, and can you speak to the challenges of going from one to another?**

Each of these cinematography categories have their own approach



ECA red carpet



ECA Awards

Reality helps you develop your instincts, work with a limited location for lighting and keep your eyes on everything at all times. I worked as a camera operator on the shows *Starting Strong* and *Dating Around S2*. I had to listen to what was said and be ready to adjust my framing to capture important moments.

Documentary teaches you to improvise, make meaningful framing compositions in a limited time while staying grounded to the story you're telling. I shot a documentary on a tattoo artist (unreleased) who was going through cancer. When we shot in the hospital for his treatments, we used very different framings than the ones of him in his natural environment in the world.

Narrative really lets you explore perspective even more, as well as elevate your visual storytelling and lighting approach. The Pitt is a perfect example of that, creating a precise visual language in a 360 lighting environment that immerses you inside the story while following the perspective of characters.

In a way, each category teaches you something that you will need to excel in another. You'll be able to create better work at a faster pace and embrace the story in unique ways.

### **What did you learn from *The Rookie* that you've been able to take to *The Pitt*?**

My TV debut on *The Rookie* taught me a lot about shooting efficiently while fighting for a cinematic look, as well as managing a bigger team and handling politics on set. Creating the visuals of a project is only a portion of a cinematographer's job. Leadership, adapting and problem solving are key requirements to make everything work within the time required.

Working on *The Rookie* taught me to develop a strong approach to shooting and lighting with multiple cameras, as well as working with stunts and special effects. For example, we shot a scene in Season 4 where Nolan, Bailey and Lopez are walking towards a house that suddenly explodes in front of them. The effect was mostly practical and there was a lot of prep and communication between the special effects, the stunts and the camera department. The timing needed to be right for the explosion. We only had one take and 4 cameras (+ some GoPros, unused in the edit) to capture the moment, and we needed to set up at a safe distance. I learned how to plan for difficult shots and capture them under pressure.

I also learned how to shoot fast, finding the right balance between elevating the visuals while making the right concessions. I got the opportunity to collaborate with different directors on the same project, forcing myself to constantly adapt while maintaining good visual guidance. I took all of these insights with me to *The Pitt*, and it made me a better cinematographer.

### **What is the project you are most proud of and why?**

I think *The Pitt* is my most proud project because of how exciting the collaborations and the visual storytelling on it have been. Thinking of how to fully immerse the audience and give them the feeling of perspective was a challenge.

We had to work closely with different departments to share tight spaces and allow us to get as close as we could to our characters. It was challenging to do a full show with the handheld look, and I was afraid it would take the audience out of the story if the handheld was too intense. Thankfully we used the ZeeGee rig to do our long and challenging moves on our A camera, which allows us to keep the handheld feel while not feeling the camera operator's steps. We also created some 3D printed tools to help us control the light in the 360 environment, such as magnetic diffusion frames that can go on and off really easily on the ceiling lights, as well as magnetic diffusion cups on the cans. We also made custom onboard lights on the camera mattebox (left and right side) that are bi color and that we can fully control during a shot, which helped us give an eyelight or fill in faces a bit when needed.

### **Altitude Award winner Aymae Sulick has worked as camera operator with you on *The Pitt*. Tell us about how she came to work on your crew and your collaboration.**

Aymae and I had heard about each other for a while, but we never had the chance to meet until a couple of months before I interviewed for *The Pitt*. After a Rare Breeds camera event, we connected for coffee and I'm glad we did. When *The Pitt* came along, I thought immediately about working with Aymae. She was always highly recommended for her professionalism and amazing attitude on set. In addition, I loved that her work was so diverse (narrative, Documentary, Reality) and we needed someone exactly like her for the B camera position. Aymae is a key part of our show and we are very lucky to have her.



### **What do you look for in a crew member when hiring? What are the top traits?**

I try to get personal referrals from colleagues when I am looking to hire someone new. That's often the best way to get feedback to see if it will be a good fit.

I always look for people who are excited to be a part of the project, work together as a team and who are respectful. I believe working on set is an ongoing learning experience. Therefore, curiosity and desire for growth are as important as technical abilities. The film industry hours are long, and a crew spends a lot of time together. It's important to work with people who make the work day more enjoyable while being professional.

I appreciate autonomy. A crew member should be able to anticipate their job under the guidelines they have been given, and this initiative helps support the department greatly.

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# SARAH WHELDEN

## MUSICALITY OF LIGHT

By Tara Sanders Brooks & Tema L. Staig

*Sarah Whelden's cinematography aims to capture the emotional tonalities that fall beyond the limited scope of human language, serving story above all else. Sarah's work has been screened at major festivals worldwide. She was named a 2025 Rising Star of Cinematography by American Cinematographer and the ASC, and took First Place at Women in Media's Altitude Awards in the same year. Highlights of 2026 include premiering her single-take thriller THE PLAN at Slamdance Film Festival, along with three films at SXSW, including the coming-of-age story THEIR TOWN. Her magical-realism relationship drama MAGIC HOUR hit theaters nationwide in May of '26, and SCREAMS FROM THE TOWER, a high school buddy comedy, hit major streaming platforms in April.*

### What brought you to cinematography?

Cinematography is this perfect little mix of things my brain is naturally drawn towards. I found photography when I was 10 years old and fell in love with the ability to control the way we see the world. I loved the art form, but found it too lonely and isolating. Music gave me the collaboration that photography lacked. I dabbled in singing, guitar, and music production, but what really kept me going was the pressure of performance. I loved it, yet realized after college that music didn't provide viable career opportunities.

My foray into the film industry began with editing, which in itself is rhythmic and visual. I was able to hone my storytelling sensibilities, but needed something a bit more collaborative and stimulating. I started working in camera and eventually found cinematography to be a perfect fit.

### How did your artistic expression as a musician translate to cinematography?

I found myself connected to the musicality of light and camera movement. In my one-take film THE PLAN, I tapped into my musical roots, balancing structure and improvisation with the dance I fell into with the actors.

The control of choosing a frame and the huge collaboration of making a film are directly related to everything I loved about making music. But something that separates cinematography for me is getting to sit with directors and dig into their brains. It is an incredibly vulnerable and connective process that I value deeply.

### Do you listen to music for inspiration when you prep a film?

I can listen to a song a thousand times without giving much consideration to the lyrics. I'm far more interested in the feelings evoked by the melody, rhythms, and overall soundscape. As a visual artist, I'm always trying to push my work beyond the emotional limitations of language, and feel music is such a great place to look for inspiration in this regard.

I love asking directors to send me the playlists they have been listening to while working on a film. Sometimes these are playlists they made to embody the film intentionally, sometimes these are a bit less directly related - but I find that this can put me into their shoes and help me understand a film very quickly.

### How has working as an editor informed your work as a cinematographer?

My job as a commercial editor was to cut excess and help directors craft 30 to 90 second stories. As I transitioned into camera, I found myself always thinking in these terms - do we really need this? Do we have anything to cut to?

Over time I started shooting more branded work, with smaller crews, reacting in the moment. I was forced to trust these instincts and think on my feet in a new way.

When I shot my first narrative feature in 2016, I was surprisingly comfortable thinking through the story, and developing visual motifs. But I quickly realized that long-form storytelling is a wildly different experience that requires immense patience with the camera.

Each format has taught me something different, and the range of those experiences shows up every time I approach a project.

### Did you have any early mentors who helped you along the way? Can you also speak to your Vision Mentorship with Polly Morgan? What did you glean from her?



Until the ASC Vision Mentorship, I never had a proper cinematography mentor. The start of my career coincided with the dawn of digital cameras, and thus I was able to start shooting before I was truly ready. That said, I had a host of gaffers, grips, camera assistants, editors, producers, and directors who were incredibly gracious with their time, and patient with me as I was coming up.

The Vision Mentorship was a major shift for me. I finally had access to a cinematographer working at the top of the field, Polly Morgan, ASC, whose work I both admire and see so much of myself in. Just being accepted was in and of itself an enormous confidence boost, and ultimately led to jumping full throttle into narrative filmmaking and moving to LA.

What struck me most about Polly was how much she was able to juggle at any given time. Yet despite being one of the busiest cinematographers working today, she never lost sight of what was most important - her family. I had the opportunity to shadow her on a commercial, and every day right at wrap, she was out the door and on her way home. My version of this has become walking on the beach before sunset anytime I can.

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### **How did winning the Altitude Award affect your career?**

I moved to LA in 2022. I met tons of people that year, trying to go to every event I could and build a community for myself. I remember finding out about WIM and the Altitude Awards at Cine Gear that year, and seeing so many DPs I looked up to holding awards. In 2023 I submitted my application and portfolio, went to the awards, and didn't place, but was again inspired by all the incredible winners. I was determined to apply again and hopefully place as a semi-finalist, but when 2024 rolled around I didn't feel like my portfolio had grown enough. By 2025 I had a refreshed application with a lot of new work. I submitted again, and to my immense surprise, I took first place!

The achievement alone meant the absolute world to me. It was a glimpse into my growth over three years in LA, and getting to read the feedback from all of the esteemed judges and DPs I admire was unreal. The support from WIM, Tema, and all of the brand sponsors has given me a ton of momentum over this past year.

### **How did being named a Rising Star of Cinematography affect your career?**

Funny enough, I found out that I was selected as one of American Cinematographer's Rising Stars of Cinematography on the same day I found out I won the Altitude Awards. Truly a day I will never forget. It can be hard to quantify these things, but they add up. I received so many messages from folks in the days and weeks following the release of the AC edition that announced my place, some of whom I hadn't heard from in many years.

What really blows my mind is that you don't apply to be a Rising Star - they find you. Being seen by the best cinematographers in the world, and selected among seven peers I deeply respect, tells me that I'm on the right track. It helps me to quiet the doubts and to push forward.

### **What project are you most proud of and why?**

I can't possibly pick one project I'm most proud of. Even the less successful ones helped get me here. That said, THE PLAN, a true one-take thriller with a shoestring budget that I shot, helped produce, and received story-by credit for, just won Best Feature at the Lower East Side Film Festival and I truly could not be more proud.

### **What is the best advice you can give to young female and non-binary filmmakers looking to pursue a career in film?**

In a world full of advice - I encourage newer (not necessarily younger) filmmakers to not take every piece of advice they hear to heart. As creatives, our brand is our individuality, and when you overload yourself with advice on how to do something, you can easily lose your identity as an artist. I think this is especially important for women, trans, and non-binary folks. Our voices and visions have been minimized for so long, and thus have so much still to add to the cultural zeitgeist.



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