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## Deadline: Filmmaker Explores the Death Penalty

By: [Kathleen J. King](#) ( [View Profile](#))

What if you held the power of life or death in your own hands? What if you were a documentary filmmaker—and could film it? Katy Chevigny, Executive Director and co-founder of [Arts Engine](#), had the rare opportunity to do just that.

In 2003, Katy Chevigny co-directed with Kristen Johnson the dramatic events behind Illinois' pro-death penalty Governor George Ryan's unusual decision to grant clemency to 167 people on Death Row. The film, *Deadline* (2004), showed the events leading up to Governor Ryan's decision, deemed a highly unusual move for any governor in U.S. history. Both Katy and Kristen Johnson have a history of making socially-conscious films, including *Innocent Until Proven Guilty* (1999), a short documentary that looks at the U.S. criminal justice system through the eyes of a young black public defender in Washington, DC.

Katy had already been working on a film about the 1972 landmark Supreme Court decision, *Furman v. Georgia* (which deemed the death penalty violated both the Eighth Amendment's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment and the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law) when she heard of the news of Governor Ryan's clemency hearings for prisoners, many of whom had been wrongfully convicted. Undergraduate journalism students at Northwestern University unearthed evidence proving that a man on death row, Anthony Porter, was wrongfully convicted and shortly afterward, several others followed. Further evidence showed that the Illinois criminal justice system had probably executed several innocent people and might execute more in the future.

In Katy's words, "This wasn't the movie we were making!" But the clemency hearings were open to the public and once Katy realized she could get all of it on tape, she decided she had to be there, even just for the sake of documenting it. Every inmate's lawyer took just thirty minutes to plead their client's life, while the prosecutors tried to prove the inmate's guilt. As the drama unfolded, Katy knew she'd made the right decision to come to Illinois.

Her decision proved fruitful, too. In 2004, *Deadline* premiered at Sundance, where it was serendipitously picked up by NBC, which presented the film on the nightly television show *Dateline*. Robert Wright, then chairman and chief executive of NBC Universal, was the one who pursued the film after his wife saw it and told him she loved it.

According to Katy, it's rare that broadcast networks buy documentaries. But as news units continue to get cut, more has fallen to documentarians to "fill the void." *Deadline* was Big Mouth Production's sixth film. Big Mouth's documentaries cover such topics as transracial adoption, diversity and tolerance in America, alternative healing, and more recently, the award-winning film [Election Day](#), which tells the incredible stories of voters around the U.S. who are determined to make their vote count.

### *Deadline*

and several other films from the 1990s up until today will be shown as part of Arts Engine's ten-year anniversary.


Related Story: [Katy Chevigny of Arts Engine: Women to Watch](#)

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