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## Katy Chevigny of Arts Engine: Women to Watch

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

Katy Chevigny, Executive Director of Arts Engine, a women-run film nonprofit for social issue films, did not set out to pursue film. She originally thought she would be an urban planner. But after she took a film class in college, she knew she wanted to work in film. It's now the ten-year anniversary of [Arts Engine](#), which she co-founded with Julia Pimsleur.

Eight of Arts Engine's award-winning documentaries from Big Mouth Films, including [Election Day](#), [Brother Born Again](#), [Deadline](#), and more—as well as highlights from the Media that Matters Film Festival—will be shown at The Paley Center in New York to commemorate the anniversary.

Katy did not set out to do documentary filmmaking in particular, but felt that it might be a way to get into filmmaking. “They’re [documentaries] smaller. You can film about people nearby. You can back your way into making a documentary film, which you really can’t do in fiction,” says Katy. “The budgets are lower; if you have good access and a good story, you can make a documentary.”

Katy also felt that documentary film seemed more do-able to her professionally: “For me, I could envision it happening. And it fit with my values ... If you’re going to be an independent filmmaker and struggle, you might as well make something that matters!”

Katy worked at several production companies for free early on. Later, both she and Julia worked at small film companies for men and were relied on heavily for a lot of work. She gained a lot of experience in those years, but she said, “I didn’t feel in synch with the creative vision of the men that I worked for. The idea with working with other women was really exciting.” Also, Katy was constantly working with different peer groups, there were different interests and styles, and a certain power balance with men.

Katy and Julia knew it was time to create something new. Starting their own business was not something they were sure they could do on their own, but *knew* they could do together. Katy is quick to point out that her business partner Julia is “the one with all the film credentials!” In 1997, they created Big Mouth Productions. *Innocent Until Proven Guilty* (1999) premiered in Berlin and was later shown on HBO.

Although there were a lot of people along the way that she considered helpers (like the two women from Paradise Productions who gave Katy and Julia free office space early on), she mourned the lack of female mentors. “There is so much you have to figure out on your own. There is so much self doubt; even now, but certainly when you’re starting out!” Things weren’t always “simpatico,” she says, but, she concludes, “I got pearls of wisdom from *all* my mentors,”

many of whom were men. Her first mentor was St. Clair Bourne, who executive produced *Innocent Until Proven Guilty* (1999).

Katy wants younger women to have mentors—and thinks of Arts Engine as a “sanctuary” for them, a place where they can explore and actually work on interesting films. During intern day, the interns have the opportunity to ask many questions.

In the past, Katy admits to sometimes having been overly cynical about her career choice. She feels that the job is not always rewarded (in society) and she learned that the hard way. It’s also very difficult to make a living at it—and there’s no business model for documentary film companies. “You always have to hobble together the money, there is never a revenue stream (with the exception of a few very famous documentary filmmakers).” Her colleague Kristen once pointed out to an intern, “You can’t be afraid to be poor!”

The majority of filmmakers are struggling to make ends meet, even reasonably successful documentary filmmakers like Katy. But she stays in it because the draw has always been the creative struggle for her, which she never tires of.

She feels young women can pursue documentary film with or without film school. But she encourages them to work on projects that they’re inspired by and develop and cultivate a marketable skill as a camera person, editor, sound person, or associate producer. “You’re more likely able (and willing) to stay in the field,” she added.

Katy also advises people to figure out what you want to do first. “If you want to be famous or make money, you’re probably in the wrong field!” A filmmaker also has to be willing to talk about issues that people don’t always want to hear about.

### **Media That Matters**

In the late 1990s, Arts Engine was among the first organization to realize that social justice issues could be brought online to connect people, provide a voice for the voiceless, and distribute independent media. The concept of “media” was being turned on its head. The landscape had changed. In Katy’s online column, *Upstream*, she describes it this way: “While the dotcom boom of the nineties had come and gone, in its place had emerged a shared feeling, especially in the nonprofit and public media sectors, that the web had the power to connect people ...”

It was in this atmosphere that she and Julia developed the Media That Matters Film Festival, one of the very first media festivals to stream video online in 2001, as well as Mediarights.org, a nationwide database of films. The online film festival had broad criteria for the kinds of films they wanted to show: issues that filmmakers cared deeply about—anything from anorexia to poverty.

But what made Media That Matters particularly innovative was its “take action links.” After viewing a short film clip (then clips were tailored to dial-up), viewers clicked on a link to learn more about the issue. It got people thinking about social justice issues in new ways. “Right when you’re filled with indignation you can then go to a petition or volunteer in your community,” says Katy. The festival wanted viewers to really “look at how media can make you feel differently and want to take action differently.”

Today, it’s an idea that we all take for granted. But Arts Engine was the first to do it.


*Photo of Arts Engine Founders, Katy Chevigny and Julia Pimsleur*

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