

Preserving History, Promoting Heritage

Vision Maker Media supports Native American storytelling through film

BY JULIE JACOBS



▲ France Blythe-Lewis is president and CEO of Vision Maker Media.

▼ Her father, Frank Blythe, was its founding executive director.



WITH NEARLY HALF A CENTURY of history, it's fulfilling for an organization to be recognized as the best at what it does.

"One thing that I really appreciate hearing is that they say that there is no other organization like Vision Maker Media [VMM]," says Francene Blythe-Lewis, VMM's president and CEO, about the feedback she receives from Native American emerging filmmakers who participate in the organization's various programs and, as a result, are exposed to what she describes as "the viability of making media." And not just any media, but media made by and about Native Americans for public broadcasting with the aim to engage and educate audiences about Indigenous culture and heritage.

Funded in great part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with additional support from private donors and foundations, VMM was established as a film archive dedicated to curating and conserving Native American stories. Over the past nearly 50 years, VMM has evolved to become a national leader in and premier source for also creating and distributing

content that addresses Native issues and shatters stereotypes depicted in mainstream film and primetime television — an important objective given that just .4% of characters in such media are Native, according to the 2018 report, "Reclaiming Native Truth: A Project to Dispel America's Myths and Misconceptions." Blythe-Lewis's father, Frank Blythe, led VMM as its founding executive director until his retirement in 2006. He previously had launched American Indian Radio on Satellite as a way to bring news and information to Native communities where there was no cable TV, and also convened Native broadcasters, journalists, independent filmmakers and producers for the first Native media conferences that led to various initiatives, all supported by Public Broadcasting and other government funders.

VMM, conceived in 1976 as the Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium (NAPBC), hired Blythe to curate Native programming for public television. Under his leadership, the NAPBC began producing its own shows to bring Native experiences to American audiences, and in 1993 started a



program to train Native producers how to create content that meets public broadcasting standards. That program, the Public Media Fund, continues to this day and is one of several offered by VMM.

"My dad really was a big visionary," says Blythe-Lewis, later noting that "he wanted to put a different spin and bring a positive light and a contemporary light" to Native American stories.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VISION MAKER MEDIA



VMM films have been seen annually by upward of 3 million Americans on such Public Broadcasting series as “Independent Lens,” “POV” and “American Masters.”

Content Generation

All VMM programs are national, serving filmmakers in the lower 48 states and Alaska and providing mentorship, training, professional development and funding. The

organization works with producers of various genres, including documentary, performance, animation and more. And on its wish list are films that not only “explore issues of universal interest from a unique Native American perspective” and “view the history of Native Americans through contemporary stories,” but also have a sense of humor.

Humor is a big survival skill in

Native culture that has helped communities adapt, cope and deal with and heal from trauma, explains Blythe-Lewis. “We just share and talk and laugh a lot. That’s how our stories are. They have a humorous aspect to them, and we wanted to highlight that more because that’s not well-known about Native people.”

Through its Public Media Fund, VMM offers independent produc-

▲ Filmmakers create a scene from “Seeds,” a dramatic short by Morningstar Angeline.

Full STEAM Ahead



▲ Cast members from “She Cried That Day” by Amanda Erickson.

ers a licensing agreement to create a long or short documentary for PBS distribution on local stations as well as such platforms and series as WORLD Channel, PBS Digital Shorts and “American Experience,” to name a few. While a certain number of the program’s funded films are dedicated for PBS television broadcasting, all Public Media Fund films are saved and shared with the public through VMM’s own archives, American Archives for Public Broadcasting, Library of Congress and PBS Learning Media. VMM’s Native Youth Media Project, in partnership with Native Youth programs and organizations, works with young, aspiring Native filmmakers ages 13 to 21.

VMM contributes funds toward the creation of short-format videos on topics ranging from science, health and the environment to art, history and education. The project’s partners coordinate the necessary training, equipment and transportation, as well as the subsequent engagement of the Native youth with their communities to show and talk about their work. The

program enables the Native youth to take their storytelling talent “and transform it into a structure ... for media to grab audience attention,” Blythe-Lewis says.

Filmmakers keep the rights to their content and can also learn about distribution if VMM chooses to acquire it. Some 1,000 Native youth have participated since the project’s inception in 2020.

Another VMM program, the Creative Shorts Fellowship, helps bring together emerging Native filmmakers 21 and over with industry professionals who mentor them in the production of a short film. Filmmakers can

find their own mentor or mentors can apply to the program and be paired with a filmmaker. VMM pays an honorarium to the mentor, and, as with the Native Youth Media Project, enters into a licensing agreement with the filmmaker if VMM opts to acquire the finished product.

“We want the emerging filmmaker to have the experience of the full scale of what it is when you make a film,” notes Blythe-Lewis.

VMM’s newest program, begun in early 2023, is the Law and Race Initiative. Supported by the Mellon Foundation, the program is a partnership of VMM, the Department of History and College of Law at University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Institute for Policy, Politics, Law and History. It seeks short documentaries about Indigenous legal history from experienced filmmakers who will collaborate with the partners’ advisers and academic experts. The docs, owned by the filmmakers, will also be used for educational purposes by law schools nationwide.

Audience Reaction

Blythe-Lewis, from the Diné, Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota and Eastern Band Cherokee nations, took the reins at VMM in 2020 after advancing her career in the arts at such prestigious institutions as the National Museum of the American Indian, National Geographic and the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation. The challenge for VMM, she says, is to nurture the creativity of artists while following Indigenous protocols. With more than 500 Native American tribes in the United States, each of which has its own nuances, pace, style and rhythm in telling stories, that objective can be daunting but, she stresses, it also promotes the beauty of their diversity.

Audiences really enjoy VMM-produced content, Blythe-Lewis notes, pointing out as one example the reception the organization received when it moved its film festival online during the COVID-19 pandemic. “We reached audiences around the world,” she remembers, adding that viewers commented “they had no idea of the history and cultures and experiences of Native people in today’s modern society and that the stories were phenomenal because they were not the conventional story formats of Hollywood.”

Considering society’s struggles with acceptance, the reaction is much appreciated. “I think [audiences have responded] because we don’t add a different perspective, we contribute to a story to make it a whole,” offers Blythe-Lewis. “So we contribute to American history. Our history contributes to American history to make it a whole. Our Indigenous science contributes to Western science to create a whole. And I think without Native and Indigenous stories, then world history is missing a big component.” ■