



HOW DID THEY FUND IT?

CASE STUDY 01

Brooklyn Castle

AN ANALYSIS OF PROJECT FUNDING FOR THE LIFECYCLE OF A FILM

Award-winning filmmaker Katie Dellamaggiore shares details about running her production company, Rescued Media, and the resources that made her directorial debut a reality.

CASE STUDY INCLUDES:

- Filmmaker Narrative
- Action Items for Filmmakers & Organizations
- Resource Map: Analysis of Project Support
- About the Film: Synopsis & Relevant Statistics

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FILMMAKER CASE STUDY

Brooklyn Castle

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photo: Katie Dellamaggiore

Narrative Overview

This case study outlines a path for navigating the process of financing, producing, and distributing an independent, feature-length documentary film from the perspective of the film's director/producer Katie Dellamaggiore, an Emmy-nominated filmmaker making her directorial debut. Since *Brooklyn Castle* was produced by Rescued Media, a film and television company run by Dellamaggiore and her partner Nelson Dellamaggiore, the couple were heavily involved with all of the day-to-day aspects of running a small business. And like any business, they had to be good accountants, owners, and bosses, and perhaps most importantly, do their best to navigate challenging financial terrain and operate with a vision for longer-term sustainability, beyond that of a single project.

Research & Development

One substantial obstacle for the project entailed raising capital funds to support the film at an early phase of development, a common challenge for independent filmmakers at any stage of their career. In order to fund the film's early stages of research and development, Dellamaggiore and her partner, producer and editor Nelson Dellamaggiore, invested approximately \$40,000 of their personal funds through credit card financing and sweat equity, as the team contributed to the project in the form of free labor. After Dellamaggiore calculated a director's fee of \$60,000, based on the total time she worked on the film, the additional expenses incurred in lost wages brought the team's total initial investment to an estimated \$100,000.

Due to the limited options available to artists during early-phase project investment, it is increasingly common for documentary professionals to use credit and work without compensation to finance the initial stages of a film's development and production. While this strategy was necessary to get her film off the ground, Dellamaggiore cautioned that this can pose additional challenges later on for documentary creators; interest can accrue well before film-related revenue can be generated, resulting in long-lasting credit card debt and an accumulation of lost wages that are likely to remain unrecovered. It is critical, Dellamaggiore noted, for documentary professionals to fairly assess the value of their time as an investment and include

their salary as a fixed line item in a film's budget, even though documentary artists are not often compensated for their work until later in the process. More details on this will be explained in the distribution section of this case study.

In addition to covering film-related expenses at this early stage, documentary professionals often need to offset the upfront costs of independent projects by taking on salaried, contract, or freelance work to cover day-to-day expenses. Dellamaggiore, for example, worked as a television producer much of the time she directed *Brooklyn Castle*, and it served as her main source of income during this period. Although taking on contract work while balancing an independent project is not ideal, it is often necessary to make ends meet.

Production & Post-Production

During the production phase of *Brooklyn Castle*, a substantial amount of time was spent researching and submitting applications for grants, professional development programs, and other opportunities. Dellamaggiore recognized the importance of investing time into these activities in order to support the production and distribution phase of the project, rather than moving forward unilaterally and continuing to invest personal savings and sweat equity. Her time was well spent, as she was successful in securing support from a range of

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KNOW YOUR WORTH

When calculating rates for your work, be sure to account for all the work that goes into your business, such as overhead expenses, retirement savings, health insurance expenses, paid time off, and taxes. Using a [freelance rate calculator](#) can help you determine a fair rate based on these variables.

organizations, such as [Chicken & Egg](#), [Doc Society](#) and [The Fledgling Fund](#) (see full list of secured resources on page 6), which further increased the project's viability and indicated it was worth continuing.

In addition to the valuable financial contributions that came with some of the received support, each of the secured opportunities came with a significant amount of non-monetary support, such as mentorship and professional development, which proved to be equally valuable. For example, Chicken & Egg provided Dellamaggiore with financial resources and a wealth of network- and career-building opportunities, from offering workshops to making critical industry connections. In addition, Chicken & Egg offers pitch training sessions to grantees attending Independent Film Week, which she was able to utilize ([read more about her experience here](#)). And through her participation in Doc Society's [Good Pitch](#), a day-long networking event that brings together documentary filmmakers and community leaders in support of social justice films, Dellamaggiore was able to put the film on the radar of broadcasters and film festival programmers. This proved integral to the development of the film's engagement campaign and securing national broadcast on American Documentary's POV series, television's longest-running showcase for independent nonfiction films. These professional development opportunities have proven to be powerful investments in both her project and overall career, as she was able to continue leveraging connections and resources from these organizations in support of current and future projects. However, even with grants, supporters, investment, and distribution, Dellamaggiore noted that it can still be a long and challenging road to fully recoup personal investments.

As she approached post-production, in order to complete the film and prepare it for release, Dellamaggiore's production company, Rescued Media, partnered with a single investor who supplied \$120,000 through their investment company Indelible Marks. A producer and colleague Pete Menzies invested another \$5,000 towards completion of the film. Together, the three entities worked out a structure for reimbursement of these expenses, in which each entity split the return on investments in the film's post-production stage at proportionate rates until the respective amounts were fully repaid—with Rescued Media receiving 24 percent; Indelible Marks 73 percent; and Menzies 3 percent.

Professional development opportunities have proven to be powerful investments in both her project and overall career, as she was able to continue leveraging connections and resources from these organizations in support of current and future projects.

CRITICAL RESOURCES

Participation in these programs were critical to the film's production and bolstered additional resources:

- **Chicken & Egg Pictures:** [Egg]celerator Lab*
- **American Documentary's** POV Series*
- **Independent Filmmaker Project***
- **Doc Society:** Good Pitch

Projects supported by the National Endowment for the Arts are marked with an asterisk. Full list of resources according to project phase is featured on page 6.


It is also worthwhile to note that during this time, Dellamaggiore became a first-time mother, which inadvertently posed additional economic challenges. Because she was not entitled to benefits that often accompany a traditional full-time job, she was unable to take paid maternity leave and had to pay out-of-pocket for medical expenses. Touring *Brooklyn Castle* at film festivals with a newborn added another complex layer of personal and financial challenges to navigate. She advises freelancers to routinely set aside personal savings far in advance to mitigate stress and financial hardship during the early years of child-rearing. For example, freelancers can account for "paid" time off and maternity leave with considerable advance planning and considerations (read more in [this article](#)).

Impact & Distribution

Dellamaggiore worked with the sales agent Cinetic Media to attain domestic distribution through a company called the Producer's Distribution Agency, who retained many of the film's rights for a ten-year period. The Producers Distribution Agency secured a single investor to support \$500,000 of press, publicity, and distribution costs to release the film in theaters. This support had a significant impact on the film's visibility upon its release in 2012. The film played for 20 weeks in theaters, and earned \$219,407 in box office ticket sales. Dellamaggiore worked closely with an entertainment lawyer to negotiate the terms of her distribution agreement. She strongly recommends filmmakers to retain their own legal counsel while reviewing a distribution agreement, and to be sure to include payment for their own work in such contracts.

In addition to commercial film distribution, *Brooklyn Castle* continued to reach audiences following its release through targeted community screenings across the country. To engage a widespread audience, Dellamaggiore partnered with a range of cross-sector entities, which enabled the film to be used effectively in raising awareness about the importance of after-school programs. National partnerships with the Af-

terschool Alliance and the United States Chess Federation helped develop audiences for the film through hosting screenings at local network affiliates across the nation. Furthermore, at a time when funding for after-school programs was under scrutiny, Dellamaggiore forged a partnership with the New York City Council to screen the film at City Hall for Department of Education staff and policymakers, demonstrating the power and value of preserving funding for after-school programming. The film's 2012 release proved to have a demonstrable impact; in 2013, the New York City Council restored funding for after-school programs in the city's budget, with Mayor de Blasio making the announcement at a press conference held outside of *Brooklyn Castle*'s central location, Brooklyn's I.S. 318.



Documentary creators are often the last to benefit from a film's generated revenue, and are often compensated for their initial investments towards the end of project's lifecycle, rather than earlier in the process.

Dellamaggiore hired an outreach director while finishing post-production on *Brooklyn Castle* through a grant from [The Fledgling Fund's Outreach and Engagement Fund](#). The outreach director's role proved instrumental in building audiences for the film upon its release and resulted in more than 100 high-impact screenings nationwide. Dellamaggiore emphasized it was critical to have a hired professional onboard to manage these screenings, which required a considerable amount of time and coordination, especially if a filmmaker is making the rounds at film festivals. When documentary creators take on a film's outreach and impact campaign themselves, it can pose additional challenges for artists, from funding travel costs to maintaining a sustainable work-life balance.

Beyond film festivals and theaters, *Brooklyn Castle*'s national broadcast through [American Documentary's award-winning PBS series POV](#) offered further opportunities for both widespread distribution and targeted impact on educational audiences. Once the film was released via Netflix and other digital platforms, which can sometimes mark the end of a community engagement campaign for a film, POV managed continued relationships with educators and community organizations by organizing a [national outreach campaign](#) for *Brooklyn Castle*, targeting youth, educators, and policymakers through community screenings and public events. POV also created [free curriculum guides, lesson plans, and toolkits](#) for educators to use alongside screenings of the film.

INVESTMENT STRATEGY

The contractual financial structure of investment and return for *Brooklyn Castle* came in a "waterfall", in which tiers of investors and distributors receive funds generated by the film's release

first—often to repay initial investments in the film—followed by payment to the production crew, and lastly to the filmmakers themselves. In this situation, documentary creators are often the last to benefit from a film's generated revenue, and are often compensated for their initial investments towards the end of project's lifecycle, rather than earlier in the process.

Unfortunately, often times the "waterfall" financial structure for independent makers does not effectively account for the filmmaker's time or personal investments until the very end of the recoupment process, if at all. Even with the film's success and impact, it is important for readers to know that more than seven years since the release of *Brooklyn Castle*, despite winning awards at film festivals, attaining distribution on Netflix and in theaters across the country, and being nominated for an Emmy, the film is still approximately \$100,000 short of paying off these personal investments. Because this is an increasingly common situation for independent filmmakers, the [Documentary Producer's Alliance](#) has released new [guidelines for investors and filmmakers](#) to help standardize fair recoupment and profits for all parties in the distribution waterfall.

Revenue from the international sales of *Brooklyn Castle*, as well as selling the fictional remake rights of the story to Scott Rudin Productions (\$100,000 to date), helped repay such personal investments. The international sales, managed by Gunpowder & Sky (formerly FilmBuff), netted \$39,538 for the filmmakers and allowed Dellamaggiore to begin paying down expenses such as the \$40,000 of credit card debt incurred during initial stages of the film's development, and reimbursement of the support from Indelible Marks. As of late 2019, Indelible Marks was still owed approximately \$50,000 of their investment.

Currently, the most significant revenue from the film came from those rights which they retained, such as the remake rights and the foreign sales mentioned above. While Dellamaggiore's distribution agreement with Indelible Marks included the repayment of her deferred fee (\$60,000) for working on the film, she still has yet to recoup at the time of this case study (January 2020). First, she has to finish repaying 115 percent of the \$500,000 of financial support from the single investor who worked with the Producer Distribution Agency, as well as the company's own 10 percent non-deferred distribution fee. In each agreement, the goal is to move to a profit-sharing model once all investments are repaid.

DID YOU KNOW?

Documentary filmmakers reported the following based on their most recent film:

42%
did not generate any revenue.

22%
generated enough revenue to cover unpaid production costs and make a profit.

Source: [Center for Media & Social Impact: State of the Documentary Field Report \[2018\]](#)

Action Items

FOR FILMMAKERS

MAKE YOUR OWN RESOURCE MAP

Research prospective opportunities for support (pitch sessions, filmmaker labs, professional development programs, artist residencies, grant funding) that can provide you with valuable resources. Outline a calendar of deadlines that correspond to each phase of your project, ensuring you'll be better prepared to apply for these opportunities.

KNOW YOUR CASH FLOW

Estimate cash flow for yourself and your project. Regularly set aside personal income from additional revenue streams, and calculate rates for any freelance work to include overhead expenses for your business and the cost of unpaid activities (such as paid leave and benefits) to strengthen your financial position and prepare for last minute economic challenges. If investing your own time and money, mentally prepare for a slow road to recoupment.

BUILD AUDIENCE

Cultivate post-festival audiences with a multitiered release and distribution strategy. Start early in post-production to identify a range of potential industry and community partners and get a sense of budgeting needs. Make informed decisions; use available resources such as curated articles and case studies from [Sundance Institute's Creative Distribution Initiative](#).

DON'T NEGOTIATE ALONE

Navigate investment structures and distribution agreements with advice from industry mentors, independent filmmaker networks, entertainment lawyers, and other representatives. Be aware of your ability to negotiate and receive recoupment opportunities within these agreements, such as the repayment of deferred fees.

PARTICIPATE IN SELF-ADVOCACY

Stay current with best practices and networks in the field that contribute to career sustainability for independent filmmakers. Your role is important in helping raise the line for higher standards in the field!

EXPLORE EQUITABLE INVESTMENT STRUCTURES

Get familiar with investment structures and fair-recoupment best practices through available resources. For example, the [Documentary Producer's Alliance](#) has a specific committee working to develop resources, such as guidelines for fair recoupment and sample waterfall agreements, that introduce greater transparency around the nature of investment financing, stabilize and standardize the nature of deals and the deal-making process, and advocate for terms that are mutually beneficial to investors and filmmakers alike.

FOR ORGANIZATIONS

STRENGTHEN CAREER PIPELINES

Professional development and mentorship opportunities can make a lasting impact on a filmmaker's career and often improve their ability to secure project partners, funding support, and distribution partners. What resources currently exist in your area (or nationally) that provide such support? How are you connecting individuals to these resources in a meaningful way? What could be improved to increase successful outcomes for participants?

INVEST IN LOCAL FILMMAKERS

Is there a coordinated effort to assess the needs of your local or regional filmmaking community? If so, how are you responding to these needs and tapping into the wider conversation of sustainability for independent filmmakers and artists? If not, what resources and partners can you find to assist in such strategies?

ALIGN REGIONAL RESOURCES

What opportunities exist to strategically coordinate with regional initiatives, state entities, and local cultural institutions or film offices and align pipelines to critical resources, such as industry networks, fair compensation, equitable opportunities, and affordable policies (healthcare, state-backed family leave) to support the needs of your local filmmakers?

CONTRIBUTE TO FINANCIAL STABILITY

Independent filmmakers rely on salaried, contract, or freelance work to cover day-to-day expenses while working on an independent project. Can your organization play a role in connecting filmmakers with new funding sources, steady contract jobs, or paid opportunities with fair compensation? Is there potential for your organization to offer early project funding to alleviate cash flow challenges during development and production phases?

CONNECT THE DOTS

What role can you play in strengthening cross-sector relationships for your constituents? Is there a way to strategically coordinate with regional initiatives, state entities, and local cultural institutions or film offices to play a role in supplying the necessary resources, such as industry networks, steady work, and affordable healthcare, to support your local documentary filmmakers?

ADVOCATE FOR BEST PRACTICES

What local or national policies have positive or negative impact on the livelihood of independent filmmakers? What types of coalitions exist (or are needed) to reform this system, advocate for independent filmmakers' rights, and raise awareness for the cost of filmmaking?

STORIES FOR CHANGE

A recent survey of documentary professionals uncovered that 58% of respondents describes themselves as social issue filmmakers, with a high level of interest to pursue opportunities for branded documentary content sponsored by a non-profit. Forging new partnerships or matchmaking initiatives could be valuable resources for independent filmmakers.

Source: [Center for Media & Social Impact: State of the Documentary Field Report \(2018\)](#)

Project Resource Map

USE THIS RESOURCE MAP TO ANALYZE PROJECT SUPPORT RECEIVED DURING EACH PHASE OF THE PROJECT.

DEVELOPMENT	PRODUCTION	DISTRIBUTION
<p>INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY ASSOCIATION Served as fiscal sponsor for <i>Brooklyn Castle</i>.</p>		
	<p>INDELIBLE MARKS Rescued Media partnered with investor Indelible Marks to support editing and post-production.</p> <p>CHICKEN & EGG PICTURES Provided financial support as well as network- and career-building opportunities.</p>	<p>Split reimbursement with Rescued Media on investments in post-production before moving to profit-sharing model for incoming revenue.</p> <p>Continues to leverage peer and industry networks in support of future projects.</p> <p>THE FLEDGLING FUND Financial support allowed for the hire of an outreach director in post-production. Supported community-based screenings in collaboration with campaign partners in education, chess, afterschool programs, and related fields.</p> <p>NEDA NOBARI FOUNDATION Grant supported community-based screenings in collaboration with campaign partners in education, chess, afterschool programs, and related fields.</p> <p>INDEPENDENT FILMMAKER PROJECT Spotlight on Documentaries program offered opportunities to pitch the film and meet with industry leaders.</p> <p>DOC SOCIETY The Good Pitch program offered financial support and opportunities to network for film's distribution and outreach campaign.</p> <p>PRODUCERS DISTRIBUTION AGENCY (PDA) Secured outside investor to support PR campaign, and provided an alternative domestic theatrical distribution model.</p> <p>POV/AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY National public broadcast and American Graduate outreach campaign targeted youth, educators, and policymakers in community events nationwide. Created free curriculum guides for educators to use alongside screenings.</p> <p>GUNPOWDER & SKY (FILMBUFF) Secured domestic digital platform deals with Netflix, Amazon, and iTunes. Managed international sales of the film.</p>

Film Synopsis

Brooklyn Castle tells the stories of five members of the chess team at a below-the-poverty-line inner city junior high school that has won more national championships than any other in the country. The film follows the challenges these kids face in their personal lives as well as on the chessboard, and is as much about the sting of their losses as it is about the anticipation of their victories.

[▶ View Film Trailer](#) [🌐 View Official Website](#)

Statistical Overview

PRODUCTION BUDGET

\$350,000

TIMELINE

5.5 Total Years

1.5 Years
Research &
Development

2.5 Years
Production & Post

1.5 Years
Impact &
Distribution

SCREENINGS + IMPACT CAMPAIGNS

100+
Community and
Education-based
Screenings

30+
Film Festival
Screenings

115+
Theatrical
Screenings

BROADCAST

POV on PBS, **VGTV** Norway, **SBS** Australia

SELECTED AWARDS & HIGHLIGHTS

News And Documentary Emmy® Nominee For Outstanding Continuing Coverage Of A News Story – Long Form (2014)

NAACP Image Awards Nominee For Outstanding Documentary (2013)

Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival Top 10 Audience Favourites (2012)

South By Southwest (SXSW) Film Documentary Spotlight Audience Award (2012)

Brooklyn Film Festival Best New Director Award (2012)

Newport Beach Film Festival Audience Award (2012)

PRIMARY TEAM

Director/Producer: Katie Dellamaggiore

Producer/Editor: Nelson Dellamaggiore

Producer/Cinematographer: Brian Schulz

Co-Executive Producer: Neal Flaherty and Le CASTLE Film Works

Executive Producers: Geoff Gibson, Robert McLellan, Julie Parker Benello, Wendy Ettinger, Judith Helfand

Consulting Editor for Chicken & Egg Pictures: Mary Manhardt

Outreach Director: Kali Holloway

Marketing: BOND Strategy and Influence

DISTRIBUTORS

Domestic/Theatrical: Cinetic Media/Production Distribution Agency

International: Gunpowder & Sky (formerly Film Buff)

Digital Streaming/SVOD: iTunes, Netflix, Amazon, Movies on Demand, Sundance Doc Club

Other Notable High Impact Screenings: American Federation of Teachers, NY City Council, NY Department of Education, Wallace Foundation, America's Promise Alliance, SXSW EDU, Google, National Ad Council, Teach for America, Scholastic, Afterschool Alliance Annual Convening on Capitol Hill, The Royal Bank of Canada, CPB American Graduate, Talking Transition Tent NYC (for Mayoral Transition), Silicon Valley Foundation, The College Board, Harvard Graduate School of Education and BOOST (Best Out Of School Time) Collaborative conference.

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Learn more about grant opportunities and additional resources at [arts.gov](https://www.arts.gov)