

The Documentary in Action

by Patricia Thomson

A powerful thing happened in Casper, Wyoming, the week after Matthew Shepard was beaten by two gay-bashers and left for dead on a prairie fence. It centered on a documentary called *Licensed to Kill*, in which director Arthur Dong, who 20 years earlier had himself been a victim of anti-gay violence, enters the prison cells of convicted gay-bashers and quietly, effectively probes into the background, motivations, and psyche of these young men. Why did they do it? Where does their hate come from? Why do they feel their attacks were socially sanctioned?

Arthur Dong, who created the award-winning film *Licensed to Kill*, explores the relationships between Christian fundamentalist parents and their gay or lesbian children in *Family Fundamentals*. The story of the Bremner-Jester family, pictured here in 1965, is featured in the film.

PHOTO BY CHARLES SCHNEIDER PHOTOGRAPHY

Licensed



Arthur Dong's film *Licensed to Kill* takes a riveting journey into the minds of men whose contempt for homosexuals led them to murder. PHOTO BY ZAND GEE

to Kill

The crowd in Casper listened attentively as *Licensed to Kill* recounted large and small actions guided by hate. Many in the audience had come to town for a vigil in memory of Shepard, and one man after another stood up after the screening to tell his own story, demonstrating that Shepard was not an isolated case. "Every one of them had a similar experience; it was chilling,"

recalls Sara Dubik-Unruh of the Community Outreach for Prevention and Education (COPE), who had arranged the screening. "It took my breath away to realize how many people in our community have been devastated physically, emotionally, and spiritually by these types of attacks," she wrote to the filmmaker. "I felt honored and in awe of the men who shared their experiences at that showing." Dubik-Unruh now screens *Licensed to Kill* every semester at Casper College, joining the leagues of others who use the film and its study guide for education, sensitivity training, defense courses, and more—

teachers, gay activists, inner-city youth centers, social service agencies, probation officers, police departments, and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Licensed to Kill, which went on to win an Emmy nomination, awards from the Sundance and Berlin film festivals, and a PBS broadcast, would never have seen the light of day without funding from private foundations. In fact, nearly every penny that didn't

come out of the filmmaker's pocket was provided by foundations. Three major media funders—the Soros Documentary Fund, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting-backed National Asian American Telecommunications Association—gave the bulk of the production budget. But the rest came in small grants of \$2,000 to \$7,000 from foundations that were more interested in the message than the medium, including the Unitarian Universalist Funding Program, Horizons Foundation, The Zellerbach Family Fund, the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, and the Hugh M. Hefner Foundation.

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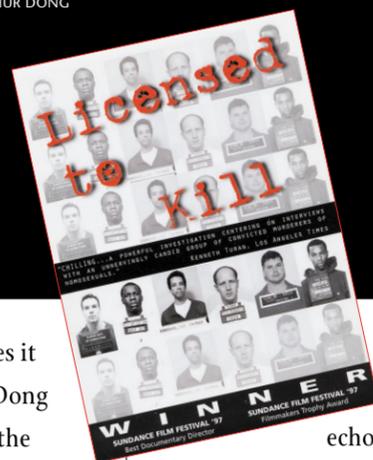
When it comes to funding film production, “It’s hard to feel you’re having an impact with small money,” says Ruby Lerner, president of Creative Capital Foundation, which provides grants to performing, visual, and media artists. But as former executive director of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF), Lerner knows that a little can go a long way in the documentary world. “We can’t offer that much money, because we’re small. But we know that \$5,000 has helped a lot of people get critical things done in the production process.”

Dong is one of those filmmakers who knows how to stretch a dollar. *Licensed to Kill* and his latest documentary, *Family Fundamentals*, each cost in the ballpark of \$130,000. That’s lunch money by Hollywood standards. More significantly, it’s far cheaper than documentaries used to be when film stock was the preferred format.



Corey Burley, one of the many perpetrators of hate crimes against gay men, interviewed in *Licensed to Kill*.

PHOTO BY ARTHUR DONG



Dong is careful to note that his budgets are lower even than most independent productions because he doesn’t hire a director, producer, editor, or cinematographer, but does it all himself. Even so, whether it’s a one-man-band like Dong or a small documentary team, a little bit of funding at the right moment can have a big impact.

Take Dong’s *Family Fundamentals*, a film about the conflicting values that divide Christian Fundamentalist parents and their gay or lesbian children. One of the film’s subjects, Brian Bennett, was about to head off to the California State Republican Convention. Bennett had once been chief of staff for United States Representative Bob Dornan, who was a surrogate father to Bennett despite the fact that the congressman was a conservative Republican and vocal opponent of homosexuality. When Bennett

came out of the closet, Dornan broke all ties. This convention presented Dong with the chance to film Bennett interacting with other Republicans as an open homosexual. “It was a one-time event. I had to go,” says Dong, but he needed \$5,000 to cover the shoot. That’s when the Theophilus Fund, a private donor-advised fund in San Francisco, stepped in, enabling Dong to capture this event.

Later, an offshoot of this fund called the Theophilus Foundation helped out at another critical moment. Dong was racing the clock to finish his film in time for the 2002 Sundance

Film Festival. *Family Fundamentals* had been accepted, but Dong still needed to complete the sound mix and pay for transfers, up-conversions and insurance. Theophilus quickly issued \$15,000 to cover those costs, and *Family Fundamentals* made it over the finish

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line, allowing the film to premiere at the country’s most important launchpad for documentary films.

“Fundraising is hard every step of the way,” says Creative Capital’s Lerner,

echoing the lament of countless filmmakers who can spend as many years chasing funds for a film as they do actually making it. “Unless you are lucky enough to get one of the big funders like the Independent Television Service (ITVS) or HBO, you’re going to be piecing things together,” she says. “Sometimes to get a larger entity even interested in a project, you need to show [a sample reel], which again means that up to that point, you’re going to be piecing together small money.”

On the positive side, says Lerner, smaller investments give foundations a certain flexibility. “You can make a \$5,000

investment very early on, then look at what that bought you and say, ‘Wow! This is really going somewhere. Here’s another \$5,000.’ Or at that point you might say, ‘Ugh, this is not turning out as exciting as I’d hoped.’ So before you’ve made a \$50,000 investment, you can assess your investment every step of the way.”

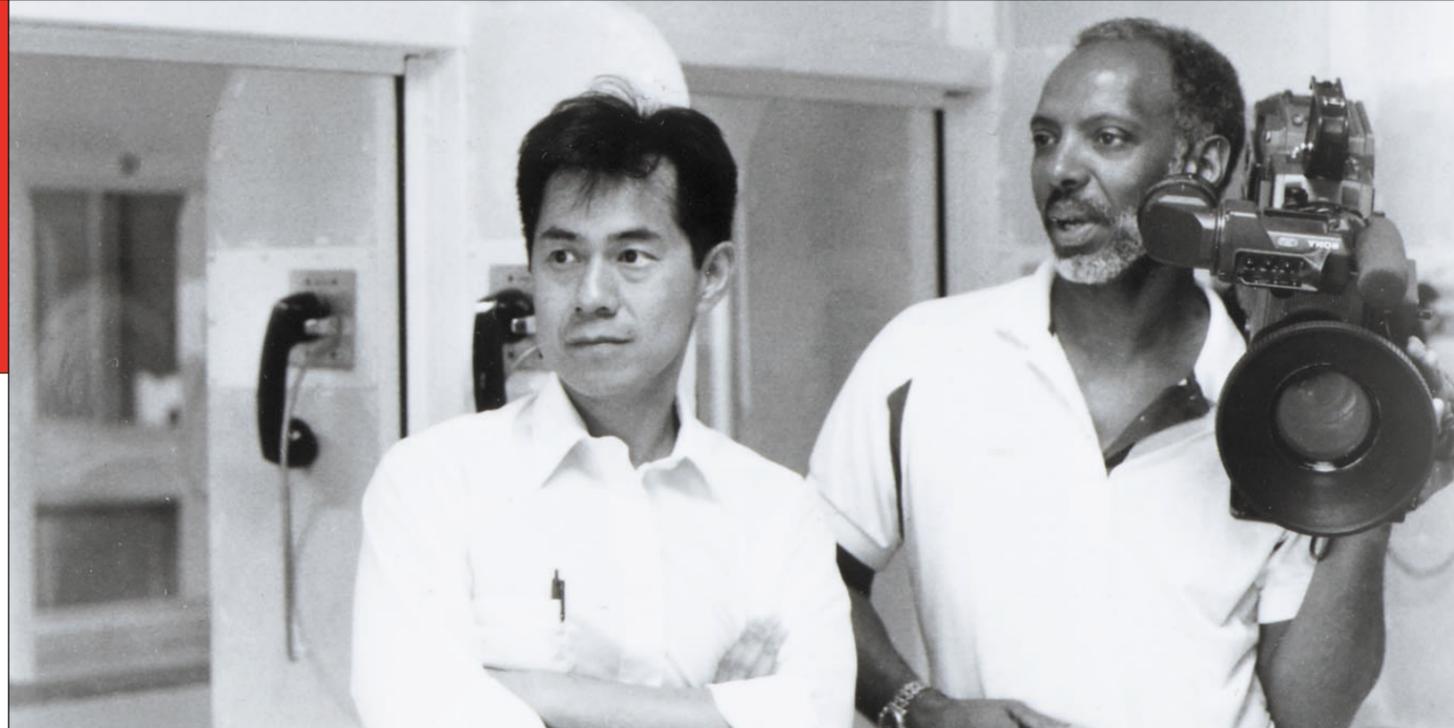
For filmmakers, small grants can be particularly effective in the early stages of a film. Seed money is precisely that—the seed that promotes future growth. Coming from a foundation with a vested interest in a topic, it provides a stamp of approval, a mark of credibility that can act as a magnet for other potential funders. (See Chapter 5.) For his part, Dong used seed money from the Lear Family Foundation (\$5,000) and the Soros Documentary Fund (\$15,000) to lay the all-important groundwork for *Family Fundamentals*: researching the Christian Right and assembling an advisory board of individuals from both the Fundamentalist movement and gay and lesbian organizations.

Evangelicals and Philip Yancey, an editor and columnist for *Christianity Today*, the leading Protestant magazine in America, among others. “Once I had them confirmed, I was able to approach possible subjects for the film. They didn’t know me from Adam, but they knew of the people on my panel. ‘Oh, you’ve got so-and-so. Well, I agree with his values, and his religion is my religion. So I guess you’re okay.’ That was well worth the work.”

This board of advisors played a critical role in obvious ways—information, access and balance. But just as important, it helped pave the way for the next stage of the film—its outreach.

Dong belongs to that special breed of documentary filmmakers who think of production and outreach together from the get-go. Outreach is not an afterthought, but operates on a parallel track throughout the film’s creation, and potential users are involved early on. (See also Chapter 7.)

For Dong, the benefits of this integrated approach crystallized with *Licensed to Kill*. During production he connected



“I spent over half a year forming my advisory panel,” says Dong. “It wasn’t an overnight thing or easy to reach some of these advisors, especially the more conservative ones, because why would they want to talk to me? I’m from PBS, right? ‘Mr. Liberal.’ So I nurtured the relationships—and it was worth doing.”

As a result, Dong was able to bring aboard individuals like Forest Montgomery from the National Association of

Filmmaker Arthur Dong (left) with director of photography Robert Shepard on location at Robertson Correctional Unit in Abilene, Texas.

PHOTO BY ANGIE ROSGA

with the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, an umbrella group with over 20 member organizations around the country. “I worked with the coalition as a whole, which meant working with all those local agencies,” Dong recalls. “That led me to have screenings in those cities where there’s an agency.” As a result, community screenings increased exponentially. “I learned how valuable that relationship was. So when I set out to compile my advisory panel for *Family Fundamentals*, I picked people who were connected with agencies as well,”

Susan and David Jester, whose lives are portrayed in the documentary *Family Fundamentals*.
PHOTO BY DAVID JESTER



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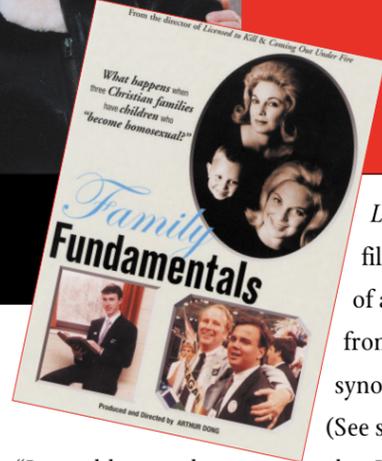
such as the National Association of Evangelicals, which has chapters throughout the United States.

Dong plans to involve his advisors and peer organizations in townhall forums around *Family Fundamentals*. “Venues will be safe and neutral spaces, such as libraries, museums, and public centers,” writes the filmmaker in his proposal. “People with different feelings about LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual] rights will be invited and welcomed, albeit with one important condition: that they are sincerely interested in civil dialogue and are open to the idea of working through differences to find common ground.”

For the Unitarians, Dong’s strategic alliances with organizations like the United Church of Christ, Soulforce, and People for the American Way, plus his strong board of advisors and their affiliations, made all the difference. “If Arthur had submitted this proposal on its own without the other connections, we probably wouldn’t have funded it,” says Program Director Hillary Goodrich. The organization’s nondenominational Fund for a Just Society normally provides grants to groups organizing for systemic change. “We usually fund small grassroots groups challenging an institution that could be, say, dumping toxins in

their backyard, or a group of waitresses in Nevada who are organizing against wearing three-inch heels as a condition of employment,” says Goodrich. Film is not normally on their plate, but the foundation awarded \$7,000 toward production of *Licensed to Kill*, and later came back with \$8,000 for editing, lab costs, and outreach for *Family Fundamentals*.

By the time of *Family Fundamentals*, Dong could more effectively support his case. In his application, he included something new: an in-depth evaluation of the impact of



Licensed to Kill. Surveying the film’s users, he collected dozens of anecdotes and testimonials from users, which he then synopsised for his grant proposal (See sidebar page 41.)

“I was able to evaluate what I did on *Licensed to Kill* and incorporate that as solid evidence—to show that I could do this again for *Family Fundamentals*. With *Licensed to Kill*, I didn’t have that type of evidence,” Dong says. “I got more sophisticated.”

Dong is not the only one. Many documentary filmmakers are becoming increasingly savvy about outreach—how to do it, when to begin, whom to partner with. But for outreach to happen, a film first has to be made. Foundations interested in social change can get in on the ground floor and support films that support their causes—even if they have limited funds. “You can’t just say that because it’s a film, it doesn’t have the potential to be incredibly valuable as part of an ongoing organizing strategy,” says Goodrich. “The films that we fund are few and far between, but we’ve been really gratified by the results.”

Licensed to Kill Evaluation

The following is filmmaker Arthur Dong’s evaluation of the impact of his documentary *Licensed to Kill*. This synopsis was included in his grant applications to foundations when he was raising money for his next film, *Family Fundamentals*.

Listed below are some notable examples of how *Licensed to Kill* is being used as an educational tool. They are included here as a sampling of the extensive network Dong has established.

- Hales Franciscan High School, a Catholic boys’ high school in Chicago with an all African American student population, uses the film in a required course for seniors called Social Justice. *Licensed to Kill* is shown to examine hate crimes related to sexual orientation and has succeeded in stimulating significant discussion among students.
- Olmstead County Courthouse in Preston, Minnesota, uses *Licensed to Kill* for in-house sensitivity training of probation officers and corrections officials in their three-county system. It has been successful in encouraging compassion and understanding toward gay victims and to shed light on the motivation of assailants who attack gay men.
- The Los Angeles Police Department uses *Licensed to Kill* to train homicide detectives. The film is also used to train officers and detectives in the hate crimes department of the LAPD.
- Community Outreach for Prevention and Education based in Casper, Wyoming, brought the film to town at the same time Matthew Shepard was attacked. Several days later it was showcased at the County Building, where a vigil for Shepard was held following his death. It is now used regularly in courses at Casper College and has been incorporated into a self-defense course for the gay community.
- The FBI Library in Quantico, Virginia, uses *Licensed to Kill* as a resource in their training academy as well as a reference for staff agents.
- The Brotherhood, a New York City community agency focused on serving inner-city youth, shows *Licensed to Kill* to audiences of 14 to 16-year-old boys to encourage them to re-examine dominant attitudes toward homosexuality and violence.
- The New Conservatory Theater in San Francisco used *Licensed to Kill* to develop several theater pieces about anti-gay violence. *The Other Side of the Closet*, a play geared toward young audiences, opened recently and will tour local schools.
- Santa Clara County, California uses *Licensed to Kill* in their staff development training at the Department of Social Services.

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— Ruby Lerner, president, Creative Capital Foundation

Arthur Dong Funding Sources

<i>Licensed to Kill</i>	
Soros Documentary Fund	\$ 50,000
The Rockefeller Foundation	35,000
NAATA	25,000
Unitarian Universalist Funding Program	7,000
Horizons Foundation	2,000
Zellerbach Family Fund	2,000
Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation	2,000
Hugh M. Hefner Foundation	6,000
Total	\$129,000
<i>Family Fundamentals</i> (as of January 2002)	
Guggenheim Foundation	\$ 33,000
Soros Documentary Fund—Seed Grant	15,000
Eastman Kodak/P.O.V. “In The Works” Grant	10,000
Theophilus Foundation	10,000
Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Grant	8,000
Paul Robeson Fund	8,000
Unitarian Universalist Funding Program	8,000
Columbia Foundation	5,000
Playboy Foundation	5,000
Lear Family Foundation	5,000
Theophilus Fund	5,000
California Arts Council Visual Arts Fellowship	5,000
Lewy Gay Values Fund	2,500
Gill Foundation—Challenge Grant	1,400
Private Donor	600
NAATA	Pending
Frameline	Pending
P.O.V. Completion Funds	Pending
Total	\$121,500