



INTERVIEWS

Interview: Julie Goldman on the Motto That Means Something in the Documentary World



JULY 1, 2016 8:09 AM
by **STEPHEN SAITO**



When Dan Krauss was preparing his debut feature **“The Kill Team”** a few years ago, he was at a Sundance Fellows brunch chatting up the producer Mette Hoffman Meyer (“Taxi to the Dark Side,” “Control Room”) about the film, which required a sensitive touch. The story of Adam Winfield, a whistleblower in the U.S. Army who found himself accused of murder after becoming disillusioned

with the actions of his squad in Afghanistan, was growing in scope considerably and as Krauss described what he was working on to Meyer, she stopped him mid-sentence, grabbed him by the arm, and led him across the room to meet Julie Goldman.

“Julie is the rare producer who brings both a powerful understanding of the business side of filmmaking and a profound instinct for storytelling,” says Krauss, who was showing Goldman his footage before he knew it. “She’s passionately invested not only in the films she’s producing, but in the filmmakers themselves. She cherishes her relationships with directors and we directors return that feeling 100 fold. She’s very unassuming in person, but if you look at her filmography you see the architecture of contemporary documentary cinema.”

Though she has often stayed out of the limelight, you can feel an earth mother-like radiance in Goldman’s presence – calm, fiercely intelligent and measured in her words, qualities you can easily picture soothing the nerves of filmmakers who, not unreasonably, might believe their phones are being tapped or have spent a decade rolling the cameras without knowing whether they’ll have the right pieces to complete a compelling movie. It is also likely why she seems remarkably unfazed in the midst of a month in which she will have four high-profile films in theaters – Josh Kriegman and Elyse Steinberg’s “**Weiner**,” Morgan Neville’s “**The Music of Strangers**,” Roger Ross Williams’ “**Life, Animated**” and Ivy Meeropol’s “Indian Point” – while five others continue to travel the festival circuit.

“This is the year of don’t stop,” says Goldman, pouring herself a glass of water during a break between a business meeting she had just before this interview in Los Angeles and a trip to Walt Disney Studios, where she and Williams will present an emotional screening of “Life, Animated” to a group of animators who will see how their work helped enable the young, autistic Owen Suskind to express himself. “We have a lot of films in motion at all times because you kind of have to to keep a company afloat. Somehow these all decided to finish at the same time. It never happens, so it’s been insane... in all good ways.”

Although Goldman may not have anticipated such a busy summer, accommodating such varied projects on different timelines with different needs was why she founded the New York-based production company Motto Pictures, which she runs with Chris Clements, in the first place. After working as a Senior Vice President of Original Production at Wellspring, she saw an opportunity for a more dynamic approach to documentary filmmaking, pairing the infrastructure that she learned from being part of a distributor with the considerable network of filmmakers at all levels of production that she had built over the years to gravitate between shepherding projects from start to finish as a producer to helping out filmmakers in a pinch as an executive producer. With a staff of just five that also includes Carolyn Hepburn, Sean Lyness and Marissa Ericson, Motto has been involved in over

30 features since its founding in 2009, a collection of films as distinguished by their quality as their diversity, ranging from “Buck,” Cindy Meehl’s quietly moving portrait of horse whisperer Buck Brannaman, and “Art & Craft,” Sam Cullman and Jennifer Grausman’s mischievous tale of art forger Mark Landis, to the socially conscious “[The Great Invisible](#),” Margaret Brown’s deeply empathetic look at all the parties affected by the BP oil spill, and “A Place at the Table,” Kristi Jacobson and Lori Silverbush’s investigation of the millions who go hungry in the U.S.

Naturally, such an eclectic slate requires a chameleonic sensibility and skillset and Goldman says her role is never the same from film to film, coming onto projects at different times during the process, though the intent is consistent.

“What we really want is to be able to say [to filmmakers is], ‘Focus on the creative. Don’t think about logistics, don’t think about raising money,’” says Goldman. “Of course, there’s the give and take with that, but [we try to do] as much of that as possible, and I think for seasoned filmmakers, it’s really a relief.”

Take, for example, one of Goldman’s more recent films, “Life, Animated.” After working with Williams on his feature debut “[God Loves Uganda](#),” Goldman had been waiting to hear from the director about what his next project would be. Little did she know that after Williams had a lunch with his old friend Ron Suskind, with the *Wall Street Journal* reporter telling the director he was finally writing a book his son Owen and the remarkable turnaround he experienced after watching Disney films, she’d have to mobilize quickly in order to make the film about the major transitional year in the young man’s life in which he was leaving the nest. This entailed immediately picking up the option to Suskind’s book before others found out he was writing it and securing all the right collaborators for the project, lining up the film’s editor David Teague nine months out while he was working on another film, and calling cinematographer Tom Bergmann when he was vacationing with his family in Cape Cod, which happened to be where the Suskinds live.

“We had to do this shoot in Cape Cod, and we needed somebody to go, and I was like, “Do you have your camera?” recalls Goldman, whose nimbleness was necessary considering Owen was just about to graduate from high school. “I think we shipped [Tom] his camera and he just went off and shot it.”

“I wouldn’t be the filmmaker I am today if it wasn’t for the brilliant and supportive Julie,” says Williams, who looks genuinely perplexed when considering what would happen if he hadn’t met her, running his fingers through his hair as if to unscramble his brain. “She’s the best producer in the business, and I am so lucky that I have a Julie in my life that enables me to direct and to do what I do.”

That sentiment was shared by every filmmaker who's worked with Goldman that I contacted for this story, including Alison Klayman, who met the producer just after she began running a Kickstarter campaign for "[Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry](#)," her urgent and unflinching profile of the Chinese-born artist as he battled censorship in his homeland. Goldman had seen Klayman on "The Colbert Report" talking about Ai's arrest in 2011 and subsequently ran into her at Good Pitch, the Britdoc-sponsored summit in New York bringing together documentary filmmakers with foundations, philanthropists and policy makers, leading her to ask about the film she was making. While Goldman didn't officially become an executive producer on "Never Sorry" until much later, she and Klayman would converse for months after the event, giving advice on everything from different edits of the film to potential sources of financing and festival and distribution strategy.

"As a first-time feature filmmaker with a subject who was suddenly in the international spotlight, it was a stressful time where I had to help represent Ai Weiwei in the media while also working to finish my film that was three years in the making," says Klayman. "I was looking for strong supporters who wouldn't also try to take over the film or push it in a different direction. I asked Julie if she would become an EP on the film because she basically took that role on anyway."

Klayman adds, "[Julie] is a tenacious advocate for filmmakers. She knows how to negotiate for filmmakers and always encourages me not to settle for anything less than fair. She is good at handling crises and making me feel calm about it in the process, and pushing me creatively while leaving room for me to fulfill my own vision for a film."

It isn't surprising then to learn that Goldman has maintained ongoing collaborations with many of the filmmakers she's worked with before, whether it's working again with Klayman on her next feature as well as "[The 100 Years Show](#)," her recent short on Cuban-American painter Carmen Herrera, or reuniting with "Best of Enemies" director Morgan Neville on "The Music of Strangers," his thrilling globetrotting showcase of Yo-Yo Ma's international music troupe the Silk Road Ensemble. (Goldman takes pride in serving as the professional matchmaker between the director and his right-hand producer Caitrin Rogers just before making the Oscar-winning "20 Feet from Stardom"). However, Motto Pictures has been just as mindful of cultivating and nurturing new talent, which Goldman admits "is funny because I try to always say, 'We should avoid first-time filmmakers,' but then somehow you can't help it."

For instance, Goldman couldn't resist taking a call from Deborah Esquenazi, who was making her feature debut after a career in radio journalism with "Southwest of Salem," a devastating chronicle of four lesbians in San Antonio railroaded by the justice system in a molestation case because of their sexual orientation. The two had met at the Sundance Producing Summit and Esquenazi wanted to

show Goldman the film. With a berth at the Tribeca Film Festival looming, Goldman really liked what she saw, but suggested to Esquenazi that a few weeks with a seasoned editor with fresh eyes might make a difference and got on the phone immediately with Toby Shimin, who worked with Goldman on “Buck” and “Indian Point.” The polish helped the film become one of the buzzier titles of the New York fest and went on to pick up an Outstanding Documentary Jury Award recently at Frameline.

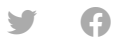
Likewise, Goldman’s jaw dropped when she first laid eyes on footage from Josh Kriegman and Elyse Steinberg’s “Weiner,” which had unfettered access to the disgraced politician’s 2013 ill-fated New York City mayoral campaign, thanks to Kriegman’s former gig as his Chief of Staff while he was serving in the House of Representatives. While Steinberg had made a film before (“The Trial of Saddam Hussein”), Kriegman hadn’t and shaping the explosive film, which Goldman says was always “audacious,” and finding the appropriate way to present it to the world was a delicate process.

“It was a tense experience making that film, because it had to be done right, and it was their first experience doing that,” says Goldman. “Also, it was very quiet, so nobody knew about it. A lot of times when we’re making films, we don’t talk about them – we can’t talk about them – so [the question became], how would you then let the cat out of the bag with this film?”

A frenzied premiere at Sundance would answer that, with the speculation that swirled about whether the filmmakers toned down scenes involving Weiner’s wife and longtime Hillary Clinton aide Huma Abedin quickly dismissed en route to winning the festival’s Grand Jury Prize for Documentary. Both wildly entertaining and sharply insightful in its vivisection of a modern political campaign, “Weiner” is the kind of film that comes around once a decade, but one that’s still emblematic of the type Goldman makes, no matter the subject – vital, intelligent stories told without the dry affectation usually associated with nonfiction filmmaking. Individually, you can sense the energy and enthusiasm involved in each production yet collectively, it is evident from Goldman’s pick of projects – ranging from Nicole Lucas Haimes’ “Chicken People,” about competitive chicken groomers, to Kristi Jacobson’s largely harrowing embed in a supermax prison, “Solitary” – that it’s important to keep things lively at Motto.

“We have a good time when we’re making films. If we’re not laughing, even as stressed out as we get, it’s just not worth it,” says Goldman. “It’s hard to make ‘Solitary’ upbeat, but you try to find humor in all of the people in the film – they have natural humor – and it’s great for us to be able to work on films about issues that we really care about, make them as cinematic and as gripping as they can be for an audience, and then do films that you can have your friend’s kids go to.”

Motto plans to keep things interesting for quite some time, with Goldman teasing a new collaboration with “Life Itself” and “Hoop Dreams” director Steve James and a fourth film with “Manhunt” director Greg Barker and producer John Battsek that are already on the docket. And since distribution has long been as important as development to Motto, tailoring social action campaigns or finding the right audience for their films to make the most impact, the work is never done. Then again, Goldman would appear to think the job is its own reward. When I ask if she plans to take a vacation after the incredibly busy summer she’s had so far, the answer is immediate – “August. Cape Cod,” she says, a grin rapidly materializing shortly thereafter, realizing she won’t be too far from her “Life, Animated” family. “Maybe I can hang out with Owen.”

Share this:

TAGS [A Place at the Table](#) [Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry](#) [Alison Klayman](#) [Art & Craft](#) [Buck Brannaman](#) [Caitrin Rogers](#) [Carmen Herrera](#) [Carolyn Hepburn](#) [Chicken People](#) [Chris Clements](#) [Dan Krauss](#) [Deborah Esquenazi](#) [documentaries](#) [Elyse Steinberg](#) [Greg Barker](#) [Indian Point](#) [Ivy Meeropol](#) [Jennifer Grausman](#) [John Battsek](#) [Josh Kriegman](#) [Julie Goldman](#) [Kristi Jacobson](#) [Lori Silverbush](#) [Margaret Brown](#) [Marissa Ericson](#) [Mette Hoffman Meyer](#) [Motto Pictures](#) [Nicole Lucas Haines](#) [Owen Suskind](#) [Roger Ross Williams](#) [Ron Suskind](#) [Sam Cullman](#) [Sean Lyness](#) [Southwest of Salem](#) [Steve James](#) [The 100 Years Show](#) [The Great Invisible](#) [The Kill Team](#) [The Moveable Fest](#) [The Music of Strangers](#) [Toby Shimin](#) [Weiner](#)

**PREVIOUS STORY**

Interview: Ashley Bell & Mickey Keating on Having a Bloody Ball in "Carnage Park"

**NEXT STORY**

Interview: Alex Gibney & Eric Chien on Counting Down to "Zero Days"

Stephen Saito

Stephen Saito is an L.A.-based writer whose work has been published in The L.A. Times, Premiere, and IFC.com.



COMMENTS

Leave a Reply

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

