

NFMLA Sundance Panelists: Alliances Crucial to Filmmaking in ‘a Very Dark Time’

BY TIM MOLLOY · | UPDATED: FEBRUARY 6, 2026

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Panelists at a NewFilmmakers Los Angeles event at the Sundance Film Festival stressed that in dark times, you have to create your own light.

Representing a wide range of entertainment industry experiences, the NFMLA panelists stressed that while problems abound, indie filmmaking is all about solving problems, usually through personal connections and partnerships.

In a panel entitled First Break to Lasting Impact —Building Pipelines in Film & Media, the panelists focused on seeking mentors and forging alliances to make up for losses in funding, industry trepidation, and the usual struggles that go along with moviemaking even in the best of times.

NFMLA Sundance Panelists on Resilience and Revolution



The NFMLA panel on First Break to Lasting Impact —Building Pipelines in Film & Media at Sundance 2026. NFMLA

The panel, which you can watch [here](#) or above, was led by moderator Sola Fasehun, founder of the Diversity and Inclusion Film Festival. She asked one of the key questions of the moment when she asked about how to push on despite industry retreats on inclusion initiatives.

“I don’t think it’s any surprise to anyone here that it’s been a really tough few years. We have seen so much rollback. We have lost funding, lost partners, because of the fear around this administration. And it is tragic, quite frankly,” said panelist Kylie Eaton, executive director of the Alliance of Women Directors.

But she added: “We have the spirit to keep moving on.”

Noting that it’s “a very dark time right now,” she took the opportunity to highlight recent successes, including an [AWD Rising Director Fellowship program that included filmmaker Jessica Liu](#). Liu wanted Randall Park for her dark comedy short “Better Life,” and support from AWD helped make it happen.

“We were able to make that connection, and he became her mentor. He signed on to the film. They made the [proof of concept](#). He signed on to the feature as a producer, and he starred in it. And they wrapped production in September. They got the California tax incentive,” Eaton noted.



(L-R) NFMLA panelists Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz, an NFMLA alumni filmmaker and ambassador; Jessica Just, actor-producer and CEO and co-founder of Creating Creators; Alexandra Blaney, co-CEO and creative director of Shine Global; and Kylie Eaton, filmmaker and executive director of the Alliance of Women Directors. NFMLA

Liu’s film is an example of how a filmmaker can team up with fellow creatives to succeed without government or studio help.

“When the studios are cutting back on things, when the government is taking away money from arts programming, go within your own organizations, go within your own communities, and figure out: ‘What can we do?’” Eaton said.

Eaton also expressed hope for an “indie film revolution,” which she believes could come from major media consolidations that leave filmmakers no better option than to develop projects themselves.

Fellow panelist Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz, an [NFMLA](#) alumni filmmaker and ambassador whose recent films include [“When Big People Lie,”](#) which premiered at the elite Telluride Film Festival, noted that the Liu and Park partnership is an example of packaging, an integral part of bringing a film together.

The panelists noted that you don’t need to wait for agents to package a film — it can be done through alliances.

Fernández-Ruiz also stressed that creatives need to keep working, whatever the obstacles, while they wait for projects to come together.

“A filmmaker needs to be making films. That is the job of the filmmaker. If a director is not directing, what are they doing? They’re getting rusty,” he said.



NFMLA co-founder and executive director Larry Laboe introduces the panel. NFMLA

He paraphrased the ABC/Always Be Closing line from Glengarry Glen Ross: “always be directing.”

Panelist Jessica Just chimed in to bring it back to the ABC abbreviation: “Always Be Creating.”

Just is an actor-producer and the CEO and co-founder of [Creating Creators](#), a fast-growing business that helps young people attain the skills they need to achieve 21st century skills and make industry connections. She noted that industry professional can teach for an organization like hers to sustain themselves while pursuing their own projects.

Just also noted that working with young people, she sees that they rarely think about TV networks or other old-school vestiges of the entertainment industry. For them, it’s all about creating online videos for their peers, quickly, and sharing them on YouTube or other platforms. With AI, it’s becoming easier than ever for them to produce quick-turnaround stories.

But she has a major piece of advice for the students, and all modern-day creators.

“The one thing I want to emphasize to all of us here and also to our students, is to not lose their humanity in the process,” she said. “Because what I do find our kids doing is, because they haven’t had real-life conversations enough, and experiences in person with people, they stay quiet. They are not sure how to critically think about what the AI tells them.”



(L-R) Alexandra Blaney, co-CEO and creative director of Shine Global; Sola Fasehun, founder of the Diversity and Inclusion Film Festival; Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz, director and NFMLA alumni filmmaker and ambassador; NFMLA co-founder and executive director Larry Laboe; Jessica Just, actor and CEO and co-founder of Creating Creators; and Kylie Eaton, filmmaker and executive director of the Alliance of Women Directors. NFMLA

She noted that one way to remember your humanity is through events like the one hosted by NFMLA: “You do that by being in person, showing up, talking to each other, and having these conversations,” she said.

Panelist Alexandra Blaney also works with, and for, young people as the co-CEO and creative director of [Shine Global](#). The nonprofit film production company seeks to improve children’s lives through powerful storytelling. Shine Global develops and produces films while uplifting filmmakers telling valuable stories for young people.

Blaney said one of the most important parts of her job is distribution — making sure films stay in front of audiences, even after years have passed. Sometimes a film will hit a roadblock like being purged from a major streaming platform, and she tries to stay in touch with filmmakers constantly to look for new opportunities to get their stories told.

“Every day you have to tell your partners when there are opportunities to share the film, keep in touch with them,” she said.

Shine Global also supports filmmakers with its Resilience Awards, which includes cash prizes for filmmakers. (One went to Fernández-Ruiz.)

Blaney’s goal is “bringing a love of movies to change the world,” she said. And there’s one way to do that:

“Making sure that you surround yourself with amazing, good people,” she said.

Main image: (L-R) Sola Fasehun, founder of the Diversity and Inclusion Film Festival; director Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz, an NFMLA alumni filmmaker and ambassador; Jessica Just, actor-producer and CEO and co-founder of Creating Creators; Kylie Eaton, filmmaker and executive director of the Alliance of Women Directors; and Alexandra Blaney, co-CEO and creative director of Shine Global, NFMLA