Female Filmmakers Lead NFMLA's 2026 NewNarratives Grant Awards

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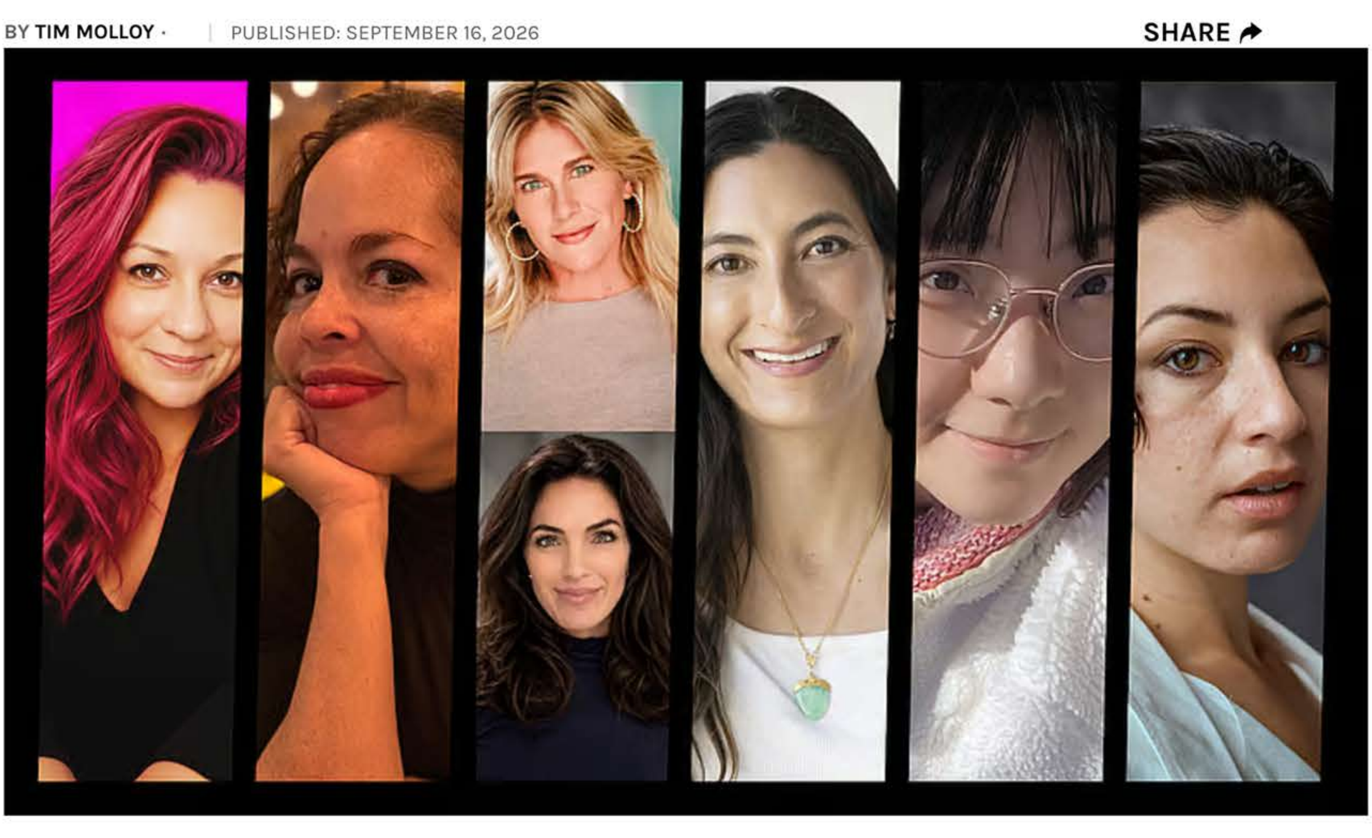

New Filmmakers Los Angeles announced the latest recipients of its prestigious NFMLA NewNarratives Grant Awards, with all six of this year's awards going to female filmmakers.

First launched in collaboration with Warner Bros. Discovery 150 in 2021, NewNarratives has evolved into one of NFMLA's primary artist development initiatives. The latest edition continues to receive support from the Rhulen Family Foundation, which honors the legacy of independent film producer Anthony Rhulen, known for championing independent films like *The Butterfly Effect*. Additionally, funding for climate awareness came from Athens Services and a new AI storytelling grant was sponsored by Absurd, which includes a three-month fellowship at the startup's headquarters in Culver City, California.

"At a time when the industry is at a pivotal moment, particularly concerning representation, we are proud to award these six grants to female storytellers," stated NFMLA co-founder and executive director Larry Laboe. "NFMLA, and specifically our NewNarratives program, takes pride in its inclusivity. This year's awardees not only showcase the immense power of female-driven stories but also highlight the diverse array of women who tell them, from international voices to queer storytellers and everything in between."

Details on the 2026 NFMLA NewNarratives grant winners is below, courtesy of our friends at NFMLA.

The 2026 NFMLA NewNarratives Grant Winners

NewNarratives Anthony Rhulen Grants ($5,000 each)

Claudia Forestieri received funding to support the development for her short narrative live-action film "Our Lady of Shame."

About the filmmaker: Forestieri serves as the writer, director, and producer of the film, a fresh comedy that explores Catholic guilt through a lens of magical realism. She began her storytelling journey as a journalist for Telemundo stations nationwide, where she garnered a GLAAD Media Award and five Emmys for her outstanding work.

In 2017, she was chosen for the HBOAccess Writing Fellowship, during which she penned the short film "Unimundo 45," which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2019. Following her contributions to *Good Trouble* and *Selena: The Series*, she created and executive produced *Gordita Chronicles*, a critically acclaimed HBO Max comedy inspired by her vibrant Miami upbringing. She is currently developing and directing new film and television projects that reflect her dedication to telling culturally specific stories with universal resonance.

About "Our Lady of Shame": After seven years of celibacy, a devout young woman decides it's finally time to have sex — but first she has to get past the opinionated Virgen de la Altagracia medallion hanging from her neck.

"The NFMLA grant gave me a much-needed lifeline when I needed it most — during the volatile, high-pressure last days of pre-production!" said Claudia Forestieri. "Besides the financial boost the award provided, knowing I had the backing of such an influential organization boosted my confidence and validated the strength of the story I'm bringing to the screen."

Daina Trout and Sharzad Kiadeh received funding to support the audience engagement and release strategy for their feature narrative live-action film *What Now?*

About the filmmakers: Daina Trout is an entrepreneur, actor, songwriter, and producer. As co-founder and former CEO of Health-Ade Kombucha, she spent 11 years building and leading the brand from startup to one of the most recognized names in beverage, before exiting the business in 2023 to pursue more creative dreams. Her years running a company, combined with her experience raising two sons, have given her a deep well of real-life experience to draw from as a performer and storyteller. She is especially drawn to characters and stories that feel honest, funny, and feminine. Most recently, Daina teamed up with her best friend and co-producer Sharzad Kiadeh to bring a true(ish) story to life in *What Now?*, a feature comedy they produced, financed, and starred in alongside Eliza Coupe, Rhys Darby, Beth Grant, and an ensemble cast. *What Now?* marks Daina's first feature film as both a producer and lead actress — and, if she has anything to say about it, not her last.

Sharzad Kiadeh is an actress, producer, and digital media pioneer who has spent more than 15 years building a career in entertainment. An early YouTube creator, she built a loyal audience through her candid, comedic approach to beauty, motherhood, and life, ultimately reaching millions of viewers across digital and television. Her work has included hosting, acting, producing, and creating original content for Bravo, The Design Network, Mixed Makeup, The Mom's View, Clevver Style, and BuzzFeed. A UCLA graduate, Sharzad also trained at The Groundlings in Hollywood and Second City Chicago.

Most recently, Sharzad created, executive produced, and stars in the *What Now?* The film marks her first leading role in a feature and the latest chapter in a career built around creating her own opportunities and telling stories that make women feel seen.

About *What Now?*: Two burnt-out moms head to a luxury wellness retreat, only to find out it's a cult they have to escape.

"We're so excited to receive the NewFilmmakers Los Angeles grant! This is our first movie, and this grant is helping us put on our world premiere in Beverly Hills," Daina Trout and Sharzad Kiadeh said in a joint statement. "This is a HUGE boost for us, and we're grateful that NFLMA is backing women taking risks, betting on themselves, and making features happen. The world isn't indy film maker friendly right now, so it's refreshing to have this tangible support. Cheers to all the winners – we're humbled and honored to be a part of this group."

Jessica Sanders received funding to support the post-production for her feature narrative live-action film *I Want to Feel Fun.*

About the filmmaker: Jessica Sanders genre-bending narrative films, documentaries, and commercials have racked up the industry's most prestigious awards — including winning the Sundance Special Jury Award for her groundbreaking feature documentary, *After Innocence*, and an Oscar nomination for her documentary short "Sing!" She just wrapped production on *I Want to Feel Fun*, her feature narrative debut. She won the Lynn Shelton Award for the project and is expanded from her acclaimed short film that premiered at the 2025 Tribeca Film Festival.

Her award-winning narrative short film, "End of the Line," with its ambitious VFX and large scale art builds premiered at Sundance and her martial arts action comedy "The Cocktail Party," premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival. She won the SXSW episodic award for her TV pilot *Embrace*, executive produced by Oscar-winner Mahershala Ali. She is a prolific and award-winning commercial director whose career launched when Steve Jobs saw her viral, Cannes Award-winning autobiographical short film about growing up in a filmmaking family and selected her to direct Apple's iPad launch campaign.

About *I Want to Feel Fun*: An improvised comedy set across Los Angeles' distinct neighborhoods, blending professional actors with everyday people, intersecting stories of love, longing and connection.

"NFMLA has screened many of my short films throughout the years, I'm honored to have their support on my narrative feature debut," Jessica Sanders said. "The community and resources they provide is so helpful for independent filmmakers, providing grants like this is incredibly helpful in making our art. Thank you!"

Paloma Esparza Rabinov received funding to support the post-production for her feature documentary live-action film *Disco de La Raza: A Chicano Story.*

About the filmmaker: Paloma Esparza Rabinov is a fourth-generation Angeleno of Mexican and Jewish descent whose work bridges performance, filmmaking, and community centered storytelling. A graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, Paloma is known for her role as Fidelia, opposite Rose Byrne on Apple TV's hit series, *Physical. Disco de la Raza: A Chicano Story* marks her directorial debut.

About *Disco de la Raza: A Chicano Story*: The film uncovers the vibrant queer subculture within the Mexican-American community in 1970s Los Angeles.

"NFMLA has been a huge supporter and welcoming community to me as both an actor and filmmaker and I am so honored to be working alongside them on my documentary directorial debut," Paloma Esparza Rabinov said.

NewNarratives Environmental Storytelling Grant, co-presented by Athens Services ($5,000)

Lu Ren received funding to support the post-production for her short documentary animated film *Why Is Climate Changing?*

About the filmmaker: Lu Ren is an MFA student majoring in Experimental Animation at Calarts. She possesses a strong background in environmental issues and climate change, having earned both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Beijing, China. Lu has produced several animated films that delve into themes surrounding the human condition, including anxiety and depression. Her work has been featured in prominent public exhibitions, such as the 2025 Art Nova 100 and the 2025 GAF Shanghai Illustration Art Festival.

About *Why Is Climate Changing?* This film features interviews with 22 individuals sharing their perspectives
on climate change. In light of the impending climate crisis, it provides a platform for reflection on humanity's influence in relation to climate change.

"I am deeply honored to receive the NewNarratives Environmental Awareness Grant Award Funding Provided by NewFilmmakers LA (NFMLA) and Athens Services," Lu Ren said. "My animated documentary short focuses on climate change, so this grant — which supports projects addressing environmental and climate issues—aligns perfectly with my creative work. This grant provides tremendous support for my project and has greatly boosted my confidence. As an organization for local Los Angeles filmmakers, NFMLA also provided me with great support while studying at California Institute of the Arts. Moving forward, I will continue to explore the realms of experimental animation and environmental storytelling; this grant also supports my future creative work."

NewNarratives Absurd AI Storytelling Grant ($10,000)

Angie Jones received funding to support the pre-production for her short narrative animated film *Space Chiken and Bacon theCat: Don't Go Home.*

About the filmmaker: Angie Jones is an animation director and CG animation leader with experience across feature film, television, commercials, and AAA games. Her credits span 18 feature films, more than 75 commercials, and 38 games, including *Avatar: The Way of Water, Pan's Labyrinth, Stuart Little 2, X-Men 2, Red Dead Redemption, Fortnite*, and *Valorant*. She has held senior creative and supervisory roles at Paramount Feature Animation, Nickelodeon Animation, The Mill, Digital Domain, and Rockstar San Diego, and has taught character animation at USC and iAnimate. Through her independent studio, Spicy Cricket Animation, she develops original animated IP and explores hybrid AI-assisted production methods that keep directing, performance, and storytelling at the center of the process.

About *Space Chiken & Bacon theCat: Don't Go Home*: After a garbled transmission warns, "Don't go home,"
Space Chiken and Bacon theCat, two galaxy-saving idiots running on expired popcorn and bad instincts, discover their ship's nav system has been hijacked and is broadcasting their location straight to Chancellor Static, a rogue droid hell-bent on hunting them down.

"Being selected for the NFMLA NewNarratives Grant provided meaningful validation for the work I'm creating as a filmmaker. My background is in animation, visual effects, and video games, and I'm now bringing that experience into independent filmmaking using both traditional and emerging production tools," Angie Jones said. "The grant will give me the resources to move the project from proof of concept to an ambitious finished short, while also increasing its visibility within the independent filmmaking community. This combination of creative validation, production support, and exposure is incredibly meaningful."

For additional details and a comprehensive list of NFMLA NewNarratives winners from all years, please visit
https://www.nfmla.org/history/

About NewFilmmakers Los Angeles (NFMLA): NFMLA is an L.A. based arts and culture non-profit organization in its eighteenth year. NFMLA champions emerging storytellers from around the globe and offers year-round programming including the NFMLA Monthly Film Festival, InFocus initiative, NewNarratives, Best of NFMLA Awards, Stage 5, DocuSlate Documentary Film Festival, STARZ #TakeThe Lead Writers' Intensive, CineSessions Student Mentorship program, and more.

Main image: (L-R) NFMLA NewNarratives Grant Awards recipients Angie Jones, Claudia Forestieri, Daina Trout (above), Sharzad Kiadeh (below), Jessica Sanders, Lu Ren, and Paloma Esparza Rabinov. Courtesy of NFMLA.

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