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SEASON 3, EPISODE 1: “Less Talking, More Doing”

ACT 1

Grace Lee: Hi everyone, it's September 2026 and this is Grace Lee, with Viewers Like Us. It's been a little less than a year since we recorded our last episode entitled “Now what?” Our previous season was about how our colleagues were grappling with the defunding of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and what that meant for the future of public media.

Right around that time, I was getting invited to various gatherings to discuss these same issues. But after a few of those meetings, I couldn't help but feel that there was way more talking than doing.

This is a time for experimentation. Time to build something new—not necessarily a whole system, but at least networks, connections and, frankly, new ideas of how to move forward. One thing we at Viewers Like Us did was to gather a small convening of filmmakers in Chicago and Los Angeles, of people whom we identified as doers, which also led to a raucous and energetic breakout session at Getting Real, a biannual conference run by the International Documentary Association in Los Angeles. More about that later.

Two people we've met along the way exemplify the kind of organizing and creative producing that we're excited about.

Yael Bridge is a filmmaker who was at our Chicago convening in February. At that meeting, many project ideas emerged, including one about how we combine the movement to save local journalism with documentary filmmakers, many of whom are veterans of public media.

Following the Chicago meeting, my co-executive producer, Joaquin Alvarado, started bootstrapping that idea with connections he had in California's Central Valley, and documentary producer Kristin Lesko is here to report back. Hope you enjoy the conversation.

ACT 2

Grace: Thank you both, Yael and Kristen, for joining us on Viewers Like Us. Let's just jump right in. I would love for you to both introduce yourselves.

Kristin: My name's Kristen Lesko. I'm an independent documentary filmmaker. I'm based in Visalia, California. I've been living here for almost a decade now.

Yael: My name is Yael Bridge (she/her). I'm from Philly but bounced around a lot. I work primarily as a producer and also director.

Grace: I always ask people what is your relationship to public media, or media in the public interest.

Yael: Well, [when] I grew up, we were only allowed to watch PBS. That was the rule. That was my education, really, exclusively, in terms of media content growing up. I just had my first project on PBS last year. It was a short that I produced with Eden Wurmfeld directing called *Classroom 4*, and then that was picked up by POV, which was a dream come true for us, and then that film ultimately got shortlisted, so we got to travel around with that. And then my film right now, called *Who Moves America*, which I directed and produced, is doing our festival run now and coming out in theaters and doing our impact run starting in the fall.

Grace: What is the subject of *Who Moves America*?

Yael: It's a feature documentary that follows UPS Teamsters during their last contract fight. I do a lot of work in labor, and organizing spaces, and this film follows different people all across the country who work at UPS, as they're gearing up for will they go on strike, how do they figure out how to work together and cross political divide, age, geography, class, all of those things because they're all under one contract. It really is also about coalition building and solidarity and democracy,

Grace: Kristin, what is your connection to public media?

Kristin: I've been connected to it from the very start of my career when I started working at Firelight Media with Stanley Nelson. I was on his doc, *A Place of Our Own*, and then *Emmett Till*, which was for American Experience and then *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, which was for American Masters.

When I moved to L.A., the first project I worked on there was for a CPB initiative called America at a Crossroads, which was during the Bush administration when they were trying to diversify their programming.

When I moved to Visalia, I found myself a little bit more isolated from all of those communities, but then started working with a filmmaker named Tim Tsai, and he and I started developing a project about Allensworth, which is a historically all Black community here in Tulare County, where I live.

As we built our team, we've added Daryl Jones, who's been working with us. We started applying for different grants, and I found myself back in that public media world. We got some funding from Black Public Media, as well as the Firelight William Greaves Research and Development Fund. So, it's been sprinkled throughout my career.

Grace: Great. We're going to get into that a little bit more as we continue. So, the last episode of Viewers Like Us, which was October 2025, ended with a provocation, not just to ourselves, but to our colleagues in the documentary field who are invested in or care about media in the public interest.

This was in the wake of the defunding of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and so many things that were collapsing in the industry, so many people being laid off. How did all of that land with you all?

Kristin: Personally, with the closing of CPB, knowing that this project that I'm working on right now had been funded by orgs that were supported by CPB, it was a big blow. I think it left myself and my filmmaking partners a little unsure of what was next. We spent a lot of time checking everybody's websites, seeing are they still offering the grants that they had before?

Cal Humanities was one we'd applied to, and they were no longer accepting applications. So we could see these funding sources drying up, and it definitely left us unsure... How will we keep this project moving forward?

Yael: That moment was really scary, and extremely frustrating. We've seen threats to public media being defunded but it seemed like somehow, we were always able to dodge it, and then this time it seemed much realer and didn't seem somehow that we were still equipped to do that fight for public media and that was really frustrating to see.

It felt fortuitous or something that I would have an ITVS film at the moment when things were crumbling. I felt really lucky—sounds kind of twisted, but that I got to be impacted directly, like not from the sidelines, but like, oh, this thing is impacting me. Because it was such an honor to get ITVS funding. There was no way my film was going to get funding otherwise. Netflix wasn't going to come in and make a union film. We just didn't know whether our funding was gonna disappear. It ended up being fine. I'm here in hindsight. But at the moment, it was really scary.

Grace: Kristin, I know that you are on the Fresno Public Radio board. What was the view from inside a local radio station?

Kristin: I think they were really nervous. Luckily for them, the percentage of their overall budget that they received from CPB wasn't high enough to destroy them if they lost that funding. But it was a real wake-up call for, how do we make up this percentage that we need to make up? How do we invigorate our listeners to step up and contribute?

They actually had record numbers of people who became sustaining members. It actually felt really inspiring. I think one of the things that was so powerful about the moment when CPB was at threat of being defunded and KVPR had these airways to be able to say to their listeners, "This is about to happen. We're looking for community support to keep this station going." And then the community really stepped into the void. So, I think because an institution like KVPR, or maybe NPR at large, has this audience right there listening, they were able to make it a moment that the community then stepped in to try to support.

Whereas as an independent filmmaker, I would leave my KVPR board meetings or I would turn off the radio station and I'd be thinking to myself, "Well, what am I going to do? Is Firelight Media gonna have another round of the William Greaves grant for us to apply to? Or will these funding sources still be there for my independent film?" It was very uncertain at that moment, and a lot scarier for me as an indie filmmaker

Grace:: Yael, do you have anything to add about that scary moment?

Yael: So, we saw productions and other filmmakers losing their funding directly, right, from the NEH, and they would get these letters: "You have to return this money." All of those people were like, "Well, fuck. What are we going to do? Then it felt like a lot of the conversation, like you were saying, Kristin, was going to institutions. It was like, "How do we save this institution?" I want to save the institution, I want to save the channel, I want to save the people there and their jobs. And also, "Where do I fit in?" And all of the people in the credits of the film—where are those people in this conversation? We were indirectly being considered in that these institutions are like, "We need this content, and we want to support independent filmmakers." But it felt secondary.

Grace: I think that's the context in which we found each other, right?

Yael: Yeah. Reaganomics.

Grace: All this conversation is happening here about the institutions and what do we do about that? And that's what led us to Chicago.

I wanted to shift a little bit, because this was the moment where Joaquin, Ken, and I, we didn't shutter the podcast. We went dark for a while out of frustration in the moment. We decided to create our own very small convening of independent doc filmmakers in this world. That's something we haven't been public about, but I guess we're being public about it now.

Grace: Yael, you actually came to a couple of meetings that we had in Chicago. I want to hear your perspective on that story, because I've never heard it, actually.

Yael: Where do you want me to start? I'm in a few different documentary groups. I used to be president of Documentary Producers Alliance (DPA), and I'm still on the board. So, all these different groups were talking. I was trying to go to as many as I could. "What are we doing?" Okay. Well, who's going to do the thing? And what is the thing?

So, I was really excited to go to Chicago, the place of my birth. It was a really great group of people, some of whom I knew and some I didn't. It just felt like there were a lot of different but overlapping experiences and skillsets.

Yael: It felt like there was momentum and an ability to really live in that experience together.

Grace: Yeah. They were all people whom I felt really cared and invested so much into the public media system, and also were continuing to make work that is community driven.

Yael: It was a different conversation because we were able to think really big. I think one of the problems with capitalism is the scarcity that we're all living under all the time. So, it's always paycheck to paycheck. It's always what's right in front of me right now, and can you carve out space, which is really hard to do. to give yourself the space to say, let's think [about] not just this film or how am I going to pay people this week, am I going to get to this cut, but, okay, if CPB is gone or PBS is gone: What does it look like?

Yael: What if we were not building new scaffolding, but building new structures? What should those structures be? What do we actually need to be sustainable and thriving?

Grace: Right. And I have to just shout out the MacArthur Foundation, and Lauren Pabst in particular, who saw the value of this conversation, and that's why we're able to have it.

So, what do you remember from the Chicago conversations that stick with you today?

Yael: I think one of the things that really struck me was our lack of a national film board. That's really a thing that I just keep bouncing around. What would it look like to have a national film board? You know, we can look at all these other countries that are able to do these things that we can't do, and why can't we do them? Just saying, "Oh, well, we can."

The other thing that really struck me was...I don't know our history. I don't know how ITVS was started. I don't know how PBS was started. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. We just need to know who were the people that fought for it before? What did they do? How were they convening? How long did it take? Where do we find hope for that? I just want to add somewhere that ITVS has funded us. The funding did not go away, and they have been fantastic. We were very worried and ITVS has taken great care of us.

Grace: Yeah. That's great to hear. I think there's a lot of work happening behind the scenes. I think these kinds of conversations are important to keep transparent and visible to people out there who may still feel like, "What the hell is happening?"

At the end of that Chicago meeting, we talked about how we share this information. We're not the only ones having this conversation. How do we share it with a broader audience? The first thing that came to mind was, we can do this at many other locales where doc filmmakers are meeting, but the first one that was coming up was Getting Real. And Getting Real is the biannual conference run by the International Documentary Association. It's in Los Angeles, and it's basically a place for documentary film workers to come together and grapple with the state of the field. almost like a brain trust for the documentary field.

After Chicago, we went back and decided to pitch to Getting Real, can we have a session where we continue to talk about one of these issues? Both of you were there. Kristin, you were one of the presenters at this breakout session. How did you come into Getting Real?

Kristin: Watching colleagues getting laid off, watching these institutions, these robust institutions having to contract, and I was really feeling this loss, this death almost, and really wanting to respect people's spaces. I hated the idea of emailing Black Public Media and saying, "Hey, what's going on?" Because I

just felt like, gosh, they're dealing with so much on their own. So, all of that being in my head and wondering how *Allensworth*, this feature doc that we're working on, is going to move forward, I randomly get a text from you, Grace, that's asking, am I still in the Central Valley? And it's like, "Yes, I'm still here. I'm still here working on this project." This journalism movement that had been going for a decade plus.

I had been witnessing it as a board member on KVPR, seeing the funding sources that this NPR station was getting, but always thinking to myself, "This funding isn't for me." This funding is like, "Here's X amount of money to place a journalist in this specific underserved community to report on this specific topic."

There's no way I can shoehorn my film into that. But as we started talking, I started to realize, oh, there are all these funding sources focused, yes, on local journalism, but I could see how this bridge could be made.

We started working with this organization called the Central Valley Journalism Collaborative, and they are working to sort of bundle funding certainly for journalism, and they had a planning grant, and one of the things that was proposed was that maybe we could move forward with this two-tier project, which we could develop a short film based on all the footage that we've captured for our *Allensworth* project that could be a kind of standalone piece. At the same time, develop this emerging filmmaker project, the CVJC Emerging Filmmaker Project, where we mentor some other filmmakers here in the Central Valley to develop climate-forward projects about this community, about this place. With the goal potentially for all these films—our short film on *Allensworth*, these other filmmakers' short films—to be screened publicly in different local journalism outlets and also at local universities.

Starting to build this grassroots connection between local journalism and indie filmmakers. It was suggested that I take this *Allensworth* project and bring it to IDA and kind of show it as an example of some of the work that we're trying to do locally to connect these two worlds.

Grace: Yael, you were in the audience. How did it all land with you what Kristin was proposing or showing?

Yael: It's just not anything that ever occurred to me. To be honest, we have our traditional funding models, and the way to think about breaking out of those is, at least to me, finding a new rich person, or can we do a really creative Kickstarter campaign or something. Not to be thinking about an entirely different revenue category. I'm still figuring out how that would work for the types of projects that I'm working on.

Grace: Yeah. It's really hard if you've been used to applying to the same grants your entire career to shift.

I love that you're doing that, Kristin. Not only that, it's also engaging your local community with the journalism students at the state universities around there. It's really exciting to hear about that.

Kristin: Something about this particular moment, seeing CPB dry up, not being sure how we're going to move this project forward. This idea to me felt very exciting to me and maybe also paving the way for other filmmakers who are coming behind us to see, oh, maybe there is a connection with this local nonprofit journalism outlet. Maybe there is a way that as a documentarian my things could be shown here. Or just reminding filmmakers that there are resources in their local newsrooms that they can connect with.

Grace: Yeah. After our session at Getting Real, there was a lot of interest. Since then, we've actually had two follow-up sessions. I'm hopeful that that will continue to grow.

Yael, you are an organizer. Also your films are about organizing and labor. I'm curious to hear more about your film and are you doing anything differently with the rollout of this film given the current climate?

Yael: So, the film is coming out, we're doing a week at IFC in September, and then we have around 30 cities booked now. We're partnering with different local unions and organizers in each of the cities. We're specifically focused on the film as a tool. We're at this point in which... we've been at this point where union density is the lowest it's been in U.S. history, but union popularity is the highest it's been in U.S. history, right? So, we're trying to capitalize on that moment, to use our screenings as much as we can to really help you figure out if you want to join a union.

If you are in a union, how can you strengthen your union? When we have the QR code, uh, for your film and normally it would take you to where you sign up for the newsletter, or whatever, ours just goes straight to an organizing page of those two categories: union member, union curious. We're working with Teamsters. I've made films about teachers unions before, so we have those pre-existing relationships and then in conversations with Starbucks organizers. It's a ton of work. We're filmmakers, so we're naturally organizers. I feel that so much in my bones.

Grace: Kristin, for *Allensworth* and your projects that you're now doing in this new model, what's happening with those? Where do you see them going in the next few months?

Kristin: My hope is that we're going to start talking about where these projects live, what their digital homes could be, and exploring whether or not that's what the collaboration is. Is that the collaboration between the local journalism outlets and the indie filmmakers? Obviously, the funding is coming from this Central Valley Journalism Collaborative and there is all this baked-in community behind it.

There's this film festival in the Central Valley called Big Tell, and it's supported by CMAC, our Community Media Access Collaborative. If we can now take these indie filmmakers, connect them potentially with local newsrooms, and then maybe find homes for them, it could be an interesting model to kind of see how indie filmmakers can, one, collaborate with the funding sources, but two, maybe find distribution or digital homes at different journalism outlets.

Grace: I feel like all of this is an experiment.

Kristin: I would say this work that we're doing right now, it's like we're paving the road, or building the plane as we fly it. So, we'll see how it unfolds. But I think engaging indie filmmakers and having these conversations is always where it starts.

Grace: To your point, Yael, I think that's how ITVS started. That's how all of these groups and networks have begun. Do you all have any parting thoughts or things you want to share

Kristin: I would just say I'm really grateful to be having these conversations. It's helping us try to experiment with what's possible as we move forward. because in the background we're still trying to get this feature doc funded and completed. So, I'm down for all this experimentation and community building and seeing where it goes

Yael: To echo that, I would thank you for creating these spaces to have these conversations, because I think so much of what we're lacking is sharing and transparency. I mean, certainly it's resources and a national film board and, and funding. But right below that is: Can we all figure out how to support each other together? Because Kristin, your project sounds amazing, and I want to see it, and I want everyone to get paid to work on it. How can I help? That's what we have to do. We don't get our films funded independently, and so figuring out what the structures [are] to be working in partnership.

Grace: That's really wonderful to hear. I appreciate you both. Let's see what happens. Let's keep going.

This podcast is executive produced by Joaquin Alvarado, Ken Ikeda, and me, Grace Lee.

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