

---

**DOC**  
**Institute's**  
**Breakthrough**  
**20 Year**  
**Research**  
**Report**

# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>	Breakthrough Awards	27
		Key Learnings And Impact	28
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>5</b>	Business Objectives	29
		Business Development & Financing	30
		Finding An Executive Producer	31
		Key Learnings And Impact	32
<b>SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY FOR THIS REPORT</b>	<b>6</b>	Hot Docs Forum Experience	33
		Comparable Training Programs	34
		The Pandemic Effect	36
		Giving Back & Getting Our Films Seen	37
<b>KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>6</b>	Advisor/Mentors	38
<b>SECTION 01: DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>SECTION 04: CELEBRATING BREAKTHROUGH SUCCESS STORIES: CASE STUDIES</b>	<b>39</b>
Timeline	8	2006 Gail Maurice	40
Program Leaders	10	2018 Yasmine Mathurin	41
Key Changes To Program	12	2014 Louie Palu	42
		2009 Sheona McDonald	43
<b>SECTION 02: PARTICIPANT DATA</b>	<b>14</b>	2015 Shasha Nakhai	44
Demographics	15	2015 Hugh Gibson	45
Diversity	16	2013 Robinder Uppal & Marc Serpa Francoeur	46
Current Work Status	17	2019 Maya Annik Bedward	47
Financial Stability & Reality Check	18	2011 Munire Armstrong	48
Business Practices And Cash Flow	18	2012 Jules Arita Koostachin	49
Awards, Accolades And Other Recognition	19	2011 Eamon O'Connor	50
Barriers And Current Challenges	20	<b>KEY LEARNINGS AND PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS</b>	<b>51</b>
Key Learnings And Impact On Future Programs	21	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>SECTION 03: PROGRAM EVALUATION</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>ALL PARTICIPANTS BY YEAR</b>	<b>54</b>
Networking Opportunities	23	<b>REPORT CREDITS</b>	<b>55</b>
Pitch Training	25		
Key Learnings And Impact On Future Programs	26		

---

**Funding for this study was provided by Ontario Creates**

*DISCLAIMER Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Ontario Creates or the Government of Ontario. The Government of Ontario and its agencies are in no way bound by the recommendations contained in this document.*

# INTRODUCTION

The DOC Institute's pioneering "Breakthrough" Mentorship program commenced two decades ago, at a time when only a handful of professional development initiatives catered to documentary filmmakers. Its profound impact on the Canadian documentary industry is evident, with a roster of participants that reads like a who's who of the documentary production world. Conceived by the DOC Institute, our flagship program, considered ahead of its time, is now replicated and offered by various chapters of the DOC organization.

Lalita Krishna is a prolific documentary filmmaker who is also the former Co Chair of DOC Ontario which runs the DOC Institute. Lalita is credited with giving shape and direction to the Breakthrough program.



As documentary filmmakers we work in isolation. I thought I was the only one navigating the system one doc at a time until I realized most of my colleagues were operating the same way. We had many experienced filmmakers on the DOC Ontario (then Toronto) board, and I felt we could find a way to share our collective knowledge and resources to help newer filmmakers. Just being able to talk through your project and get feedback is a big help, not to speak of the more intricate business side of documentary filmmaking.

"In the early 2000s, when I joined the DOC Toronto Board (now Ontario's DOC Institute), funding limitations meant the board members had to run all the programs. Many members expressed the need for practical guidance in the documentary industry, insights not typically taught in film school. I could relate to this, I was fortunate that the first documentary I produced and directed got selected to screen at Hot Docs which immediately gave me access to a lot of decision-makers and executive producers, but even with that, I found it overwhelming. I recognized the potential to facilitate connections. I transformed an existing market access program (funded by Ontario Creates – formerly OMDC) into a structured lab with weekly meetings, pitch sessions, and story development

workshops, I invited commissioners, distributors, festival programmers, and senior producers. The enthusiastic response underscored the industry's appetite for meeting new talent. The Breakthrough program, born out of this, garnered positive feedback, attracting sponsors and funders. Witnessing participants improve their confidence, pitching skills, and the supportive camaraderie within cohorts was immensely rewarding for me."



"Additionally, by proactively reaching out to filmmakers from diverse backgrounds, we set a key priority for Breakthrough. Our foresight in this aspect, I believe, was ahead of its time. The program has evolved over the years, ensuring its longevity and success by responding to annual surveys and feedback. Our adaptability to both filmmaker needs and changes in the industry, sets us apart. I believe that when programs get 'lazy' and do the same thing year after year, a fatigue factor sets in. We constantly strive to think ahead, refresh, and reboot to remain relevant."

"The insights gathered will guide further improvements, ensuring the program meets the evolving needs of future generations of documentary filmmakers."

## Factors Which Have Contributed To The Success Of The Breakthrough Program

### **Stable programme funding**

The Breakthrough program has received yearly funding through the Industry Development Initiative of Ontario Creates. This has enabled the DOC Institute to create a dependable program year after year for 20 years. Many programs get off to a good start but are dropped because funding priorities change and program objectives are no longer supported. So many professional development programs have a short time span.

### **Professional Leaders**

For many participants especially in the early years, this was the first exposure to a program delivered by professionals who worked full-time in documentary production. This is an important factor as the experienced producers understand the needs of the industry and can address gaps in knowledge.

### **Focus on Diversity**

Breakthrough set diversity as a key priority from its inception. This meant considerable outreach to underserved communities outside DOC Ontario's membership base which benefitted as a result.

### **Focus on Networking**

The importance of networking emerged as a very important aspect of Breakthrough. The participants developed industry contacts through the program which led to meaningful partnerships.

### **Timely Response to Changes in the Industry**

The Breakthrough program was, and continues to be agile and alert to shifts in the industry. The curriculum is constantly updated to address the current trends and insights.

### **Meaningful Mentorship**

The DOC organization has a strong membership base of experienced members who are generous with their time and willing to share their knowledge. The Breakthrough program selects appropriate mentors each year based on the skillsets required.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Unlocking Potential - A Comprehensive Analysis of Doc Institute's Breakthrough Mentorship Program

Incorporated in 1990 by a visionary group of documentary filmmakers, DOC Ontario is the founding chapter of the Documentary Organization of Canada (DOC), championing the voices of non-fiction artists and fortifying the documentary community. DOC Institute, the programming arm of DOC Ontario, is a steadfast resource for filmmakers, embodying a commitment to celebrate, advocate, and strengthen the documentary landscape across the nation.

A cornerstone initiative of the DOC Institute is its flagship 'Breakthrough' Mentorship Program, launched two decades ago as a pioneering endeavor in an era when few professional development programs catered to documentary filmmakers. The program has had a significant impact on the Canadian documentary industry, boasting an alumni roster of award-winning filmmakers who have gone on to put Canadian documentaries on the world map. Acknowledging its transformative influence, other DOC chapters have embraced and replicated this visionary program.

In mid-2023, we undertook a comprehensive research report, combining participant feedback and quantitative/qualitative data to illuminate the program's profound impact on filmmakers. The findings not only provide insight into the Breakthrough program but also offer valuable lessons for any organization offering professional development training.

## Elevating Breakthrough

The data and insights derived from this research will shape the future of the Breakthrough program. Respondents emphasize the importance of business skills, the role of program leaders, and the need for practical advice from mentors. To foster networking and collaboration, alumni meetings and post-program follow-ups are recommended.

While acknowledging the benefits of virtual training, a balanced approach, combining in-person and virtual sessions, is proposed. Additionally, a community-building initiative and expansion beyond Ontario, possibly through international partnerships, are highlighted. To unlock its full potential, we recommend widespread marketing and public celebration of alumni achievements. By strategically elevating the profile of Breakthrough alumni on local and international platforms, we can amplify the program's impact and attract broader support.

Participants' testimonials underscore the Breakthrough Program's transformative role in shaping documentary careers and influencing the Canadian documentary landscape. To ensure its continued success, it is imperative to champion training initiatives that inspire industry-ready producers and filmmakers from diverse backgrounds.

In conclusion, the Breakthrough program's impact extends beyond its reputation within the DOC community. This research study serves as a catalyst for amplifying the program's reach and ensuring its continued success. By implementing the recommended strategies, we can celebrate the achievements of Breakthrough alumni, foster ongoing support, and inspire the next generation of documentary filmmakers across diverse communities.

# SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY FOR THIS REPORT

- A database of all participants with contact information collated.
- A comprehensive list of program leaders, commissioners, funders, advisors, mentors and presenters compiled
- Research was conducted through a written survey, one-on-one interviews and email questions.
- Survey was sent to 124 participants via email and follow up via email and phone.
- Research Survey Questions
- Important to note that from the early years of the program. 34.6% (43 individuals) either had dead emails, or chose not to respond to our numerous email requests.
- In depth interviews were conducted with 12 Breakthrough participants for 11 Case studies, 6 Production Advisor/Mentors, 5 Commissioning Editors, 4 funding partners, 4 Lead Mentors/ Program Facilitator/Leaders

**63%, (78)** of the 124 Breakthrough participants from 2005-2023 responded to the comprehensive on-line research survey.  
**3.2% (4)** officially declined for personal reasons.



It helped to be a part of a focused space where I could share the idea for my first feature length film and get constructive feedback on its pitch, development, trailer, and general direction. It was helpful to see the feedback that others in the program received and to build a small network of people who were happy to help each other out and stay connected for opportunities.

**Mariam Zaidi, 2022**

# KEY FINDINGS

**91%**

of respondents rate their experience/business results relative to the objectives of the mentorship program as being good to excellent.

**87.2%**

indicated the program helped them advance their film/TV and media production goals.

**85.9%**

of respondents rated the Breakthrough program good, very good or excellent.

**80%**

of the respondents have received recognition for their work. (awards/ industry fellowships etc)

**38.2%**

of the respondents were able to secure development funding after training (Q#25)

**35.9%**

of the respondents were able to secure production funding for a project they pitched during their fellowship (Q#26)

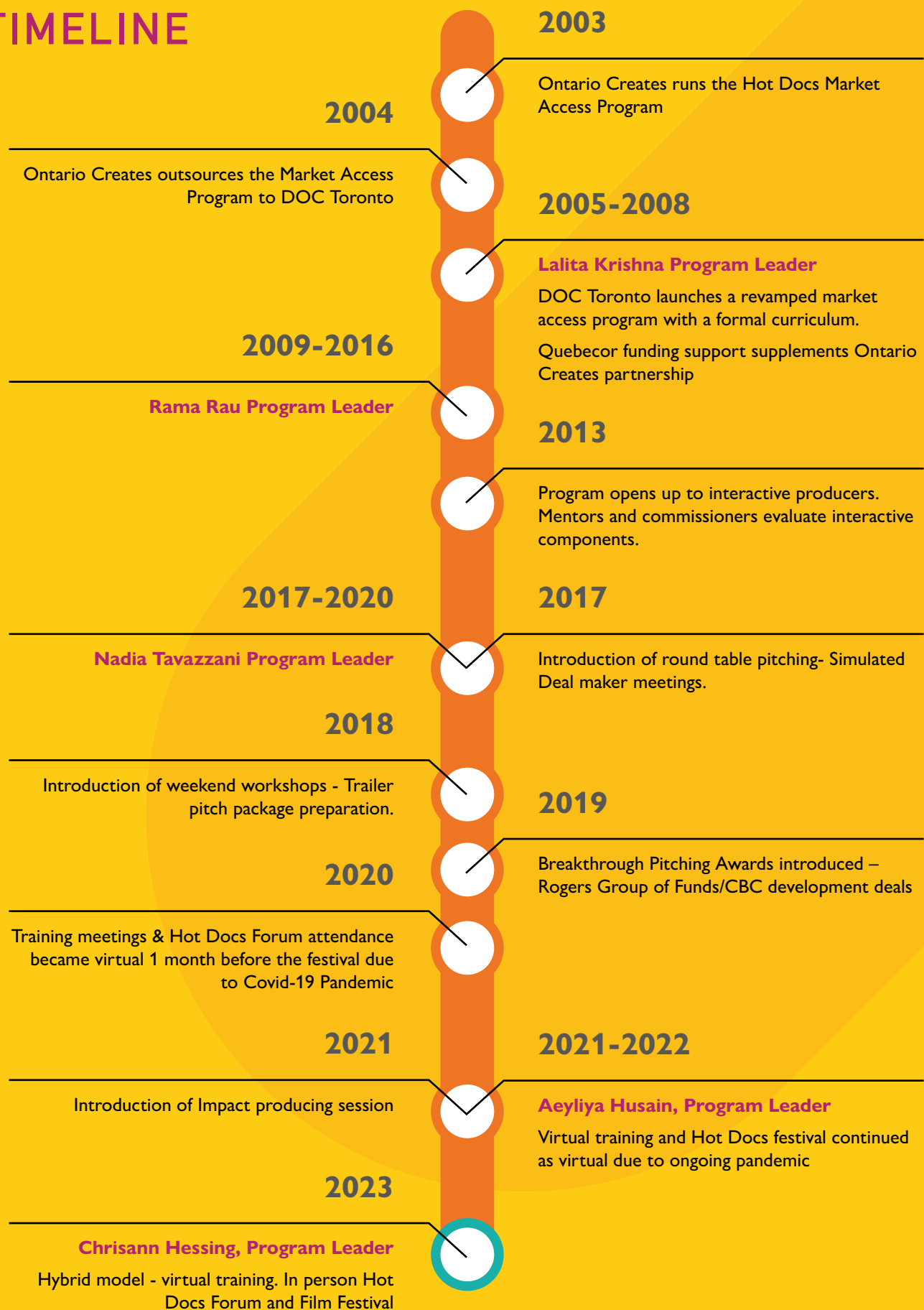
**34.2%**

sought and worked with an Executive Producer (Q#29)

---

# Section 01: Development of the Program

# TIMELINE







*It was a model that was developed at the agency and then outsourced for delivery to DOC in about 2003. OMDC was one of the biggest funders of theatrical docs in the country, so we wanted to help producers. We need to make sure it is a win-win for everybody.*

**James Weyman, former Manager, Industry Development, Ontario Creates**

**Jennifer Shah** was working in the Hot Docs partnerships program when Hot Docs was approached to participate. *“The program was so ahead of its time, and I became the person from Hot Docs, who championed the program. Hot Docs was on board right from the beginning.”*



*I applied 4 times to the program before I was accepted. I was fortunate to get in on my fifth attempt.*

**Colin Scheyen, 2019**



*DOC Institute was already on the cutting edge of professional development training. I think what the Quebecor fund initiative did was really leverage what DOC Institute already had. There was just this movement to the industry of taking professional development training to the next level. The extra funding I provided just took those initiatives that people were already doing, made them stable so that all the members of DOC could benefit from that training. Now that the organization didn't need to struggle to fundraise for it.*

*I think the diversity model that we created seems to have inspired a more integrated and embedded approach and a front and center commitment to professional development and just undoing the exclusionary practices the territorial nepotistic and microaggressions that existed.*

*And this is the main message I want to get across, is that diversity impacts the industry, not just for the diverse, new network of contacts and talent. But non-diverse, Caucasian producers benefit from it in two ways, you get access to a larger talent network, and all this insight, but you connect, your projects become better, and it's easier to sell them because you're being inspired by all the people you're meeting and it just opens up the networks.*

**Derek Luis, former Sun TV, Quebecor Executive**

# PROGRAM LEADERS

## Lalita Krishna

– developed the curriculum and ran the program for 4 years.



Lalita Krishna is a critically acclaimed documentary filmmaker whose films have screened on all major networks, and won awards at major film festivals around the world. Lalita is also the winner of the 2021 Hot Docs Don Haig award, the 2013 Crystal Award for mentorship given by WIFT (Women in Film and Television), the Trailblazer (2012) award given by the Reel World Film Festival and the Dream Catcher award from the Hope and Dreams Festival NJ, for using her craft to better humanity. *I think that every filmmaker with a burning desire to tell a story, should go through a program like this. You learn very quickly what works and what doesn't and if you take the feedback and are prepared to make changes, your chances of success are greater. And you do become a better filmmaker.*

## Rama Rau

– former Breakthrough leader for 8 years



Multi-Award winning filmmaker Rama Rau has been called one of Canada's Top Ten Women Filmmakers, and was nominated for Best Director at the Canadian Screen Awards for *Honey Bee* in 2018. She started her career in documentary and currently writes and directs feature films and episodic television like *Diggstown And Murdoch Mysteries*. Her most recent doc *Coven* premiered at the Hot Docs Film Festival in 2023 to sold out audiences. She is currently in development on a TV series and a new feature film. *The diversity helped enrich the program because it brought in such different pitches. In the eight years that I led, I didn't want to discourage anyone, but I used to give very honest critiques about their pitches. I was always known as the 'tough mom'. Hot Docs is a very real festival, and the program guest advisors are real funders, so you better pull up your socks here... I always felt so proud of everyone and that's why I came back for so many years. It was voluntary, and just amazing to be part of such a program, where I could give back because I had gotten so much out of The DOC Institute.*

## Nadia Tavazinni

– Producer, Production manager & former Breakthrough leader for 4 years.



With almost 20 years of production experience, Nadia Tavazinni started as an Assistant Producer for Triptych Media and has since earned 20+ credits as a Producer, Associate Producer, Production Supervisor, Manager and Business Affairs Consultant. Since 2011, Nadia has worked almost exclusively in documentary and enjoys helping filmmakers navigate the funding landscape and administrative side of filmmaking. Her most recent credits include *Into the Weeds*, *The Colour of Ink*, *Summit 72* and *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*. *One strength, I think is really bringing people together who are at the same stage in their projects. The exposure you get to guest mentors, and getting that feedback is valuable. You don't get that anywhere else, as far as I can tell in a friendly way, without putting your project out there and submitting it. It's this ability to get all that insight from the industry first, whether it's established producers, or the funders, the programmers and the commissioning editors who we brought in. I can't think of any other program that I know of that does that other than film schools.*

## Aeyliya Husain

– Producer and former Breakthrough leader



Aeyliya Husain is an award-winning documentary filmmaker whose work focuses on issues of representation, women, and photography. Her films have screened at San Francisco Docfest; Glasgow Short Film Festival and São Paulo Film Festival and have been broadcast on CBC, BBC, RSI (Swiss Public TV) and France 4. She is currently directing a feature documentary, *An Unfinished Journey* for CBC, Arte France and ERT. *I brought in more of the business side into the program, because I thought that was something that was needed. We filled in some of the gaps, like some of the 'how to' for funding, the different funding models out there, and we also did a session on budgeting and on impact producing, which is also really important.*

## Chrisann Hessing

– Program Leader, 2023



Chrisann Hessing is a documentary filmmaker and impact producer based in Toronto. She has produced award-winning short films that have screened at Hot Docs, RIDM, Global Impact Film Festival and the London Asian Film Festival. Her doc *Turning Tables*, won Best Short Documentary at the 43rd American Indian Film Festival, and has screened in over 30 film festivals. She recently completed her first feature-length film, *We Will Be Brave*. *The program's format I think is really good. It's still good and it works and that was evident from the level of how the pitches changed over time. It's amazing to see the progress over time.*



I've always loved Breakthrough, I genuinely believe it is a brilliant program because it understands that in the process of learning about not only how to pitch your project, but what your project means to you. It's an opportunity to really identify new talent as well as projects, and that is what was great about it.

**Lea Marin, former NFB producer**



# KEY CHANGES TO PROGRAM – GOALS AND DESIRED OUTCOMES

## 2005 - Formal Curriculum Goals

- Build creative and business skills of participants
- Pitching practice to boost confidence
- Introduce industry professionals to participants

**2013 - Introduction of Interactive elements to the curriculum.** DOC Institute responded to the growth of interactive digital media through a major outreach to encourage new media documentary projects to apply to the Breakthrough program. Business plans and marketing are also added as an additional component.

## KEY GOALS

- Demystify new technologies
- Provide access to more funding opportunities
- Business and marketing skills development.



We realized while in the program that somebody's actually willing to pay us to do this stuff. The Breakthrough program directly led us to working on projects with other filmmakers: We did the interactive for League of Exotic Dancers and Queer Story, right out of grad school.

**Lost Time Media**

**2017 - Round Table Pitching.** Decision makers and Senior level Producers/Production advisors sit at designated tables while participants rotate and pitch them within a limited time slot.

## KEY GOALS

- Build confidence in pitching
- Participants learn to focus only on relevant information

## 2018 - Trailer And Pitch Package Workshop.

Based on survey results and feedback from guest facilitators it was clear that more time was needed for focussed feedback on the creation of Demo reels and pitch packages.

## KEY GOALS

- Stronger demo reels and pitch packages resulting from professional guidance and feedback.

## 2019 - Rogers Pitch Prize And CBC Development Deal.

The Breakthrough program caught the eye of funders and commissioners. Participants had to compete for two development cash awards and a development license with the CBC.

**Modifications To Program:** The curriculum was slightly modified with an eye to the final pitch with more emphasis on the pitch documents and formal pitching structure.

*I really appreciate that the Breakthrough program works with filmmakers and helps them hone their skills and develops their projects to make sure they are market ready. These are important skills that they don't teach you at film school. The Rogers Group Of Funds supports programs like Breakthrough because we get to meet new talent from diverse backgrounds. It's a window into the future of documentaries in Canada. Over the years I've heard many pitches and I'm consistently impressed by the calibre and range of projects that come through the Breakthrough program.*

**Robin Mirsky Daniels, Executive Director, Rogers Group of Funds.**

*The Breakthrough program is so useful for CBC Docs, as it provides the opportunity to meet new filmmakers and find potential new projects that we can support through development. We ultimately want to bring fascinating documentaries to our audience and build relationships with the talented storytellers.*

**Sandra Kleinfeld, Senior Director, Documentary, CBC Television and documentary Channel**

**2020-2023 Impact of Covid.** In 2020 the Breakthrough program had already commenced when the pandemic hit in March. The cohort had completed their weekend trailer workshop and proposal and business skills workshops and even did one live session with production advisors before the lockdown. DOC Institute immediately switched to virtual program delivery which continued for the next three years as well.

**2021 - Impact Producing Session.** Many social issues documentaries have an impact campaign and new funding opportunities have opened up.

**KEY GOAL**

- Stronger proposals outlining the documentary's impact campaign: goals and strategies.



In my year the cohort has really stuck together and we still keep in touch, and that is probably one of the strongest things that I've seen come out.

**Chrisann Hessing, 2020**

*Ontario Creates' Industry development program is devoted to all professional development, and that's the only program that is designed to support not-for-profits exclusively. It's really designed to do two things - to help build capacity in the industry, and to provide support for what we would say are business development initiatives.*

*The Breakthrough program, has been part of this program for many, many years with a focus on the producers and on the documentary side. It really is kind of a perfect fit because it's creating an opportunity for producers to build those kinds of industry connections... It helps to find financing for a project that in many cases is almost at the point of getting made. I would say that it has been the business focus, the actual results that are tied into the metrics that we have, not for just this program, but for our overall mandate. And that's been a real plus for Breakthrough.*

**Erin Creasey, Director of Industry Development, Ontario Creates**

---

# Section 02: Participant Data

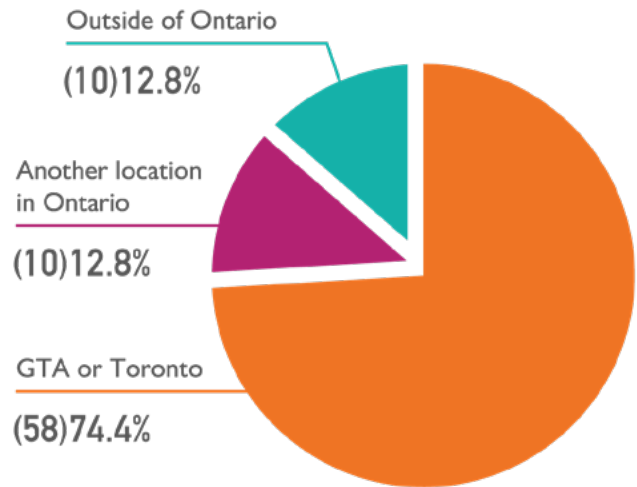
# DEMOGRAPHICS

**Location:** 74.4% live in the GTA, 12.8% live elsewhere in Ontario, 12.8% live outside the province of Ontario

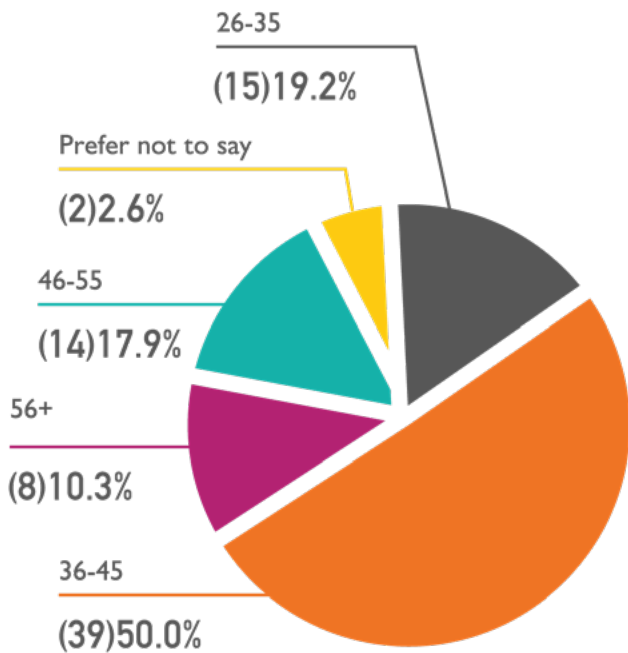
**Gender:** 55.1% responses were from women, 37.2% men, 1.3% non-binary 6.4% preferred not to say

**Age:** The greatest number of respondents (50%) are now in the 36-45 age range. The next largest group of respondents are aged 46-55 (17.9%), matched by 26-35 year olds (19.2%). The 56+ age response was 10.3% and 2.6% did not disclose their age range.

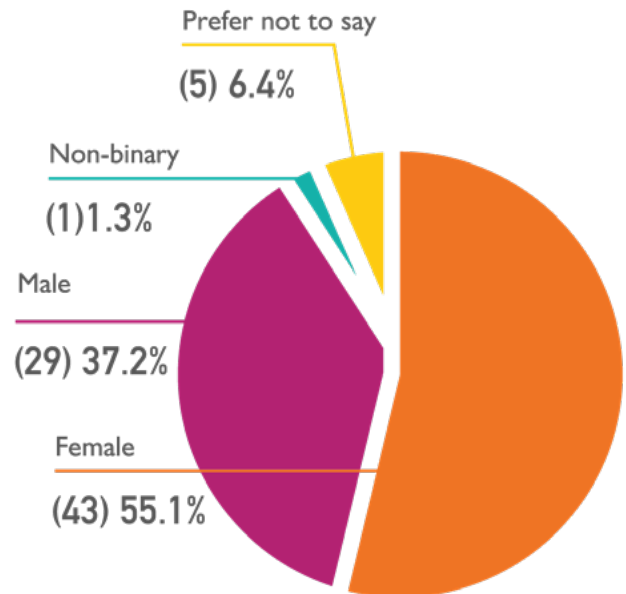
What town or city is your current home/work base?



Your age range.



Please check all that apply.



*I think the selections have been pretty solid. You know, like I said, I really haven't met anybody in the program who I didn't think was going to be able to make a career out of it. As you know, it all relies on us getting financing. So that's maybe why people fall out of the program, because they don't get financed, they get discouraged, or they get work that pays and sort of give up on that. But I think overall, over the nine years that I've been involved, it's always been really interesting projects and good talent. I think they've been pretty good.*

**Ed Barreveld, Producer, Advisor/Mentor**

# DIVERSITY

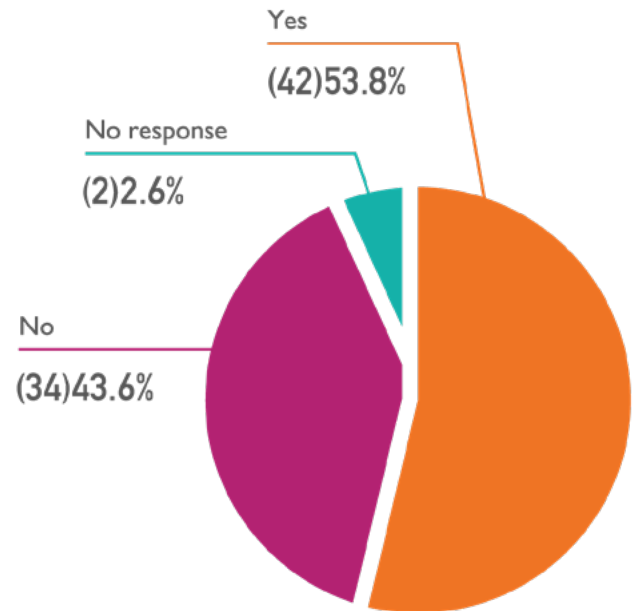


I usually walk out of Breakthrough meetings with a couple of great films that are GREAT FILMS, and they happen to be new voices. They happen to be new filmmakers. They happen to be diverse filmmakers, and that is how it should be.

**Jordana Ross, CBC Production Executive, documentary Channel**

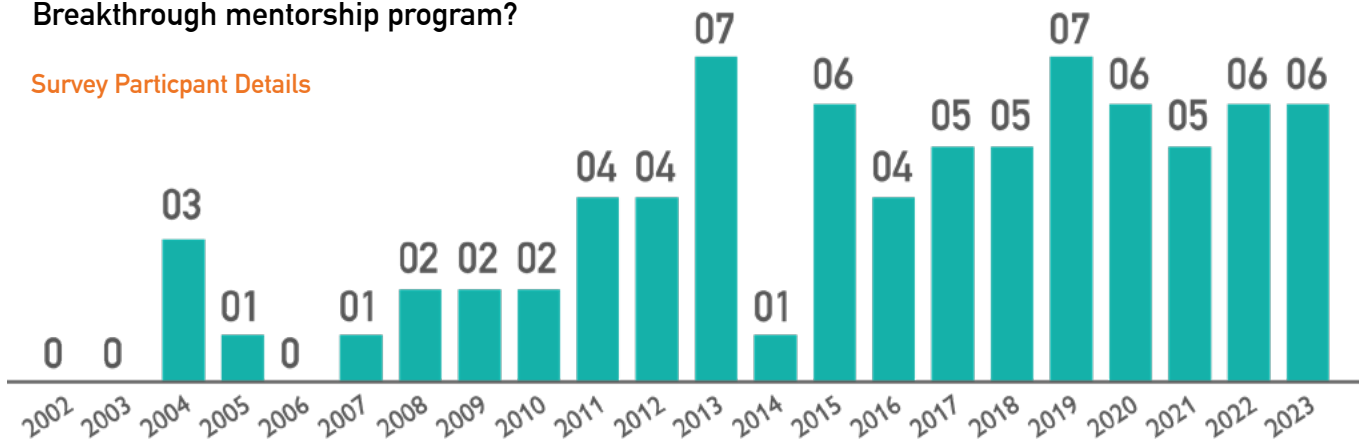
- **53.8%** identified as a member of Indigenous, Black, or racialized community members.

**Do you identify as a member of an Indigenous, Black or Racialized community?**



**What year did you participate in the Breakthrough mentorship program?**

Survey Participant Details



- The highest response rate was from the 2013 and 2019 cohorts. 7 out of 8 participants for each year respectively.
- Lowest - 2006. No respondents from that year.



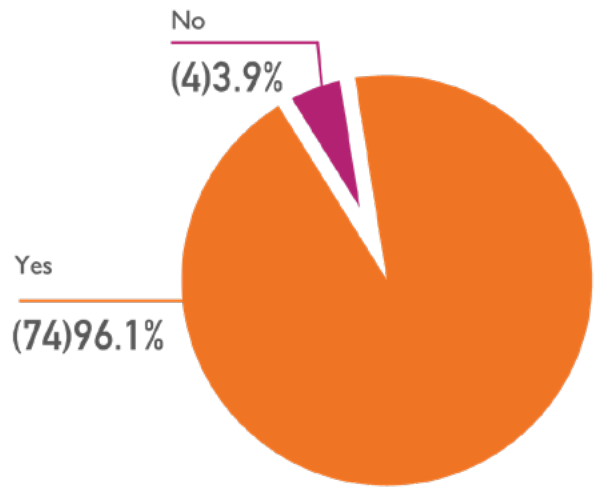


## CURRENT WORK STATUS

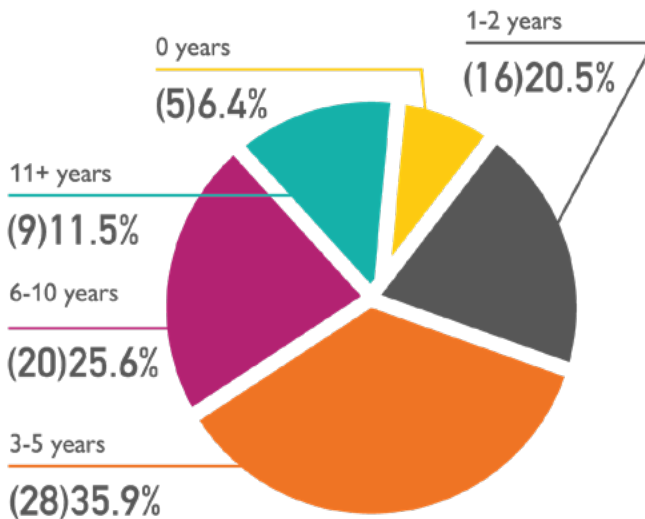
### Full time or part-time?

While **96.1% (73)** of the Breakthrough survey respondents are still working in the business, **21.9% (16)** do not work full time in documentary production. This seems to be in keeping with trends in the industry as documentary film production is not financially sustainable for most people.

Have you continued working in the business?

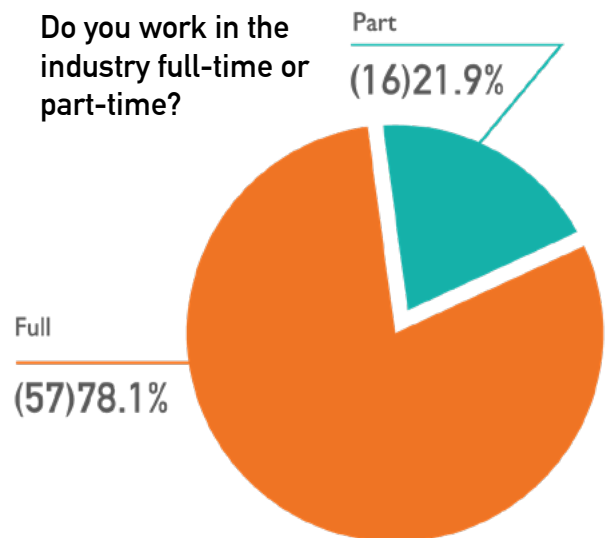


How much film or tv production experience did you already have when you were selected for the Breakthrough (or Quebecor Fellowship) program?



At start of the Breakthrough program, **35.9 % (28)** respondents had 3-5 years industry experience, **25.6 % (20)** had 6-10 years experience, **20.5% (16)** had 1-2 years of experience, **11.5% (9)** had 11+ years experience and **6.4% (5)** had 0 years experience.

Do you work in the industry full-time or part-time?



# FINANCIAL STABILITY & REALITY CHECK

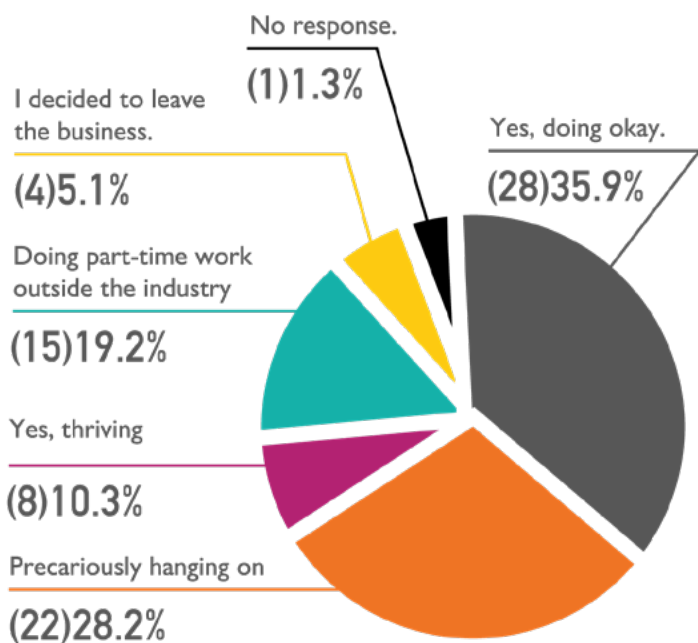
“Would be nice to know how many can actually sustain themselves doing documentaries”.

**Anonymous, 2013**

“Compared to drama, it is shocking what we make in docs. I do well but have to work so many hours to make the money and, of course, the work is inconsistent.”

**Sheona McDonald, 2009**

Are you able to sustain yourself financially in the business?



Of the **78 alumni** who responded to the research survey, when answering the question about being able to financially support themselves in the business, almost 50% of the respondents, said they were either ‘precariously hanging on’ or ‘doing part-time work outside the business to survive’

- **10.3% (8)** said yes, they are ‘thriving’,
- **35.9% (28)** indicated they are ‘doing okay’,

- **28.2% (22)** said they are ‘precariously hanging on’,
- **19.2% (15)** are doing part time work outside the business to survive
- **5.1% (4)** said they decided to leave the business.

Trying to decipher the secret of being sustainable as a filmmaker here

**Anonymous, 2023**

Thriving is a feeling that doesn’t reflect my yearly income, but I mostly live from my own productions

**Anonymous, 2017**

I decided to leave the business. I still work with the medium, but not in the television production business

**Anonymous, 2007**

# BUSINESS PRACTICES AND CASH FLOW - LESSONS LEARNED

Learning about getting paid, when you are an entrepreneur, when payments are triggered by deliverables is another learning curve for many first-time producers. The question about sustainability is tricky. Sometimes it is precarious, lately I’ve had a project that has led to some stability, but it is not consistent.

**Anonymous, 2019**

I didn’t realize that certain milestones need to be hit before they can disperse a certain amount. I thought about it almost like a nine to five that like oh, this is what it is therefore this is how much I’m going to be making and therefore I’ll be okay. But, that’s not what happened and I kind of wish I knew that ahead of time. Two years become three, become four, the film took a lot longer to make than expected, so it was really tough financially to figure out the dance of that of like, when am I getting money and how do I do what I need to do to figure out the gap in the waiting, but then, I still have to give the project my all

**Anonymous, 2018**

# AWARDS, ACCOLADES AND OTHER RECOGNITION

The list of awards and both domestic and international film festivals that the participants have garnered is really impressive. **76.9% (60)** of the respondents have received award recognition for their work. 75 different awards (and many multiples) were mentioned including international and domestic broadcast awards and prestigious film festival awards (including TIFF and Hot Docs) plus at least 18 CSA Nominations, 7 CSA wins, DGC Awards, Ace Awards, BAFTA's, Yorkton Golden Sheafs, Peabody, Emmys, and even an Oscar. A good number of films developed by Breakthrough alumni have been selected for the Hot Docs Film Festival and some producers participated in the highly competitive and prestigious Hot Docs Forum. However, it was also pointed out that success on screen and accolades in festivals does not equal financial stability.

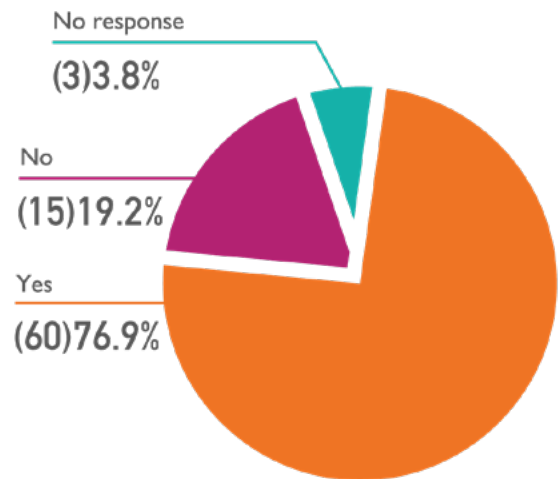
“ 18 months after the program I was invited to coproduce a feature film called Karmalink, which was selected to be the opening film for Critics week at Venice International film Festival, 2020.”

**Christopher Rompre, 2017**

“ I've received over 30 international awards for my feature films. In 2021 I received the Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 2022 The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Residency.”

**Jorge Thielen-Armand, 2017**

Have you received any recognition for your work?



doc institute

## Congratulations to the 2019 Breakthrough Program Participants!



This rigorous and intimate market-preparation course mentors eight early career, high-potential producers as they get ready to successfully pitch and sell their projects at Hot Docs.

FOUNDING SUPPORTER



FESTIVAL SUPPORTER



# BARRIERS AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

The biggest barrier faced by filmmakers is related to funding and financial support. Most participants invest a lot of sweat equity and their own money in the early development phase of their projects hoping to get a development or production deal. As a result of the partnership with the Rogers Group of Funds and CBC, Since 2019, 25% of the projects in the Breakthrough program now get development funding.

**Barrier:** We know of some potential Breakthrough candidates who decided not to apply because they were worried about the demands of the Breakthrough workload and schedule. They did not have the flexibility to take 'unpaid' time off from their day jobs, mostly demanding non-film work (due to losing income) and/or pay for additional childcare on weekends/evenings to allow them to attend Breakthrough sessions.

**Weakness:** A couple participants said they thought the program did not focus enough on documentaries that are not intended for broadcast. Sometimes they felt hamstrung by focusing only on the Canadian system. More connection to international funds and programs would be helpful.

**Challenges:** One participant mentioned that it would be very difficult to participate in the program in a fulsome way without access to funding to shoot, edit and travel if needed.

Another participant said that they felt there is sometimes a mismatch in the curriculum versus the wants of the participants. Many who apply are director/filmmakers, and not all want to be producers. There aren't enough executive producers who are interested to take on projects by filmmakers from the program.

“ I didn't know anyone. I didn't have any family in the arts. I'm trying to make things that are slightly unusual, so there's the challenge of my films being maybe more difficult to sell or harder for people to imagine. ”

**Hugh Gibson - The Stairs, 2015**

“ I was just following my instincts. It was challenging, because I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know if I was doing things the right way ”

**Anonymous, 2018**

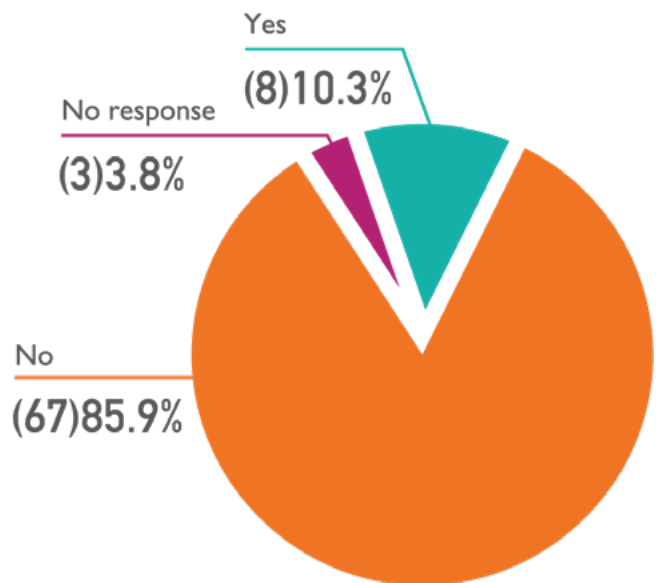
“ I've never felt necessarily that being a woman has been a barrier. It's just more 'finding the money' and trying to survive. ”

**Sheona McDonald, 2009**

“ There were certain moments when harmful statements were made by advisors attending the pitch sessions. I think those moments should be unpacked afterwards, especially when they are rooted in white supremacist or homophobic ideologies. ”

**Anonymous, 2019**

Do you feel there were any barriers to access to participate in the Breakthrough program?





## KEY LEARNINGS AND IMPACT ON FUTURE PROGRAMS

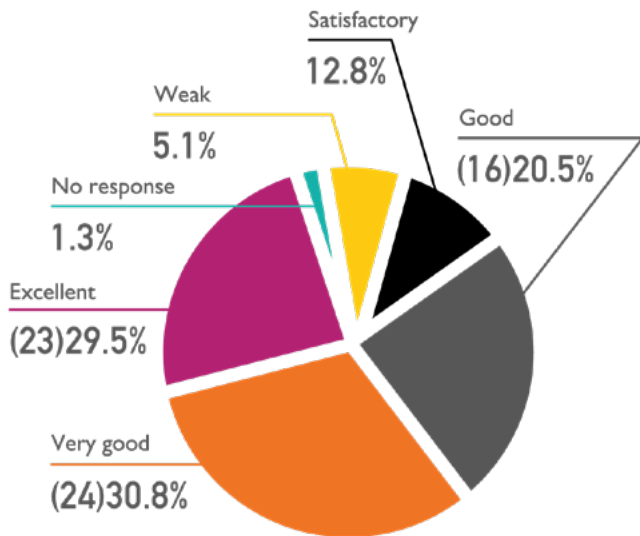
- The Breakthrough program originally targeted emerging filmmakers with the objective of creating connections. It is clear from the responses to the survey that a program like this is needed for filmmakers at mid and advanced levels too.
- Documentary filmmakers are often responsible for financing their own films especially for first and second films, and at the development stage.
- The Business aspect of the curriculum needs more emphasis. Vetting participants' knowledge to make sure they understand and commit to the roles they will need to take on during the programme in advance.
- Doc Institute could provide the less experienced filmmakers 'producer training' on an ongoing basis (on-line and in person) and attending those transition type programs should become a prerequisite to attending Breakthrough.
- Providing childcare support for interested but needy participants would help remove barriers for applicants with parenting responsibilities.
- The leaders/moderators for sessions should be skilled in sensitivity language training so that any racist, misogynist or homophobic comments brought up during sessions are discussed/addressed immediately.

---

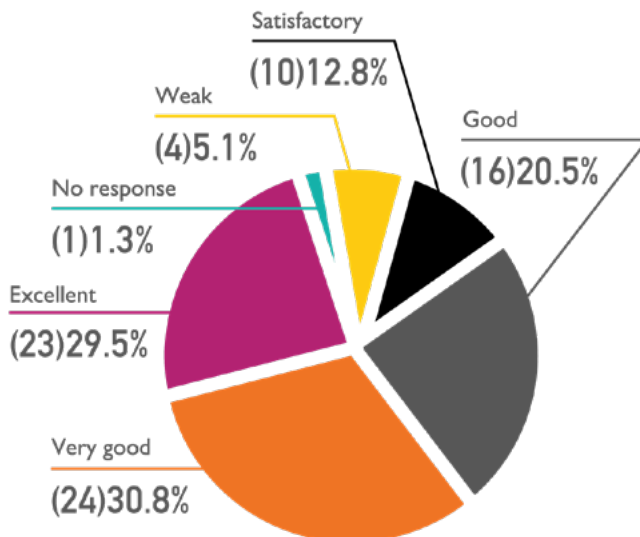
# Section 03: Program Evaluation

# NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

How do you rate the networking opportunities with industry experts and decision makers that came from the program?



How do you rate the networking opportunities with members of your cohort that came from the program?



## Industry Networking

- **82.1% (64)** of the respondents rated the opportunities to meet industry experts and decision-makers as good to excellent.
- Some broadcasters greatly appreciated the opportunity to meet new filmmakers

*It's important to CBC to show our commitments to developing new voices by being involved in projects like Breakthrough, to be exposed to some people that we might not have had a chance to meet yet, that can only be a good thing in terms of what we are looking to do and to try and find great content.*

**Lesley Birchard, Production Executive, CBC GEM**

*It was a great way of meeting people that are breaking into the industry. I always try to say 'Hi' to them at Hot Docs and sort of help them out and introduce them to other people. So, it was a good way to make sure there were opportunities for the filmmakers to meet the broadcasters and each other as well.*

**Charlotte Engel, former commissioning editor for BRAVO and CBC Docs.**

*I benefited from building a network of creators that I would identify as wanting to work with whether that project made sense or not. The NFB had such a specific mandate that while so many projects were so interesting, they may not have been a fit for us. And that was the thing that I always said that at the end of the day, me not being able to, you know, invest in your project is not an indication that it's not a good project. But I do think that there were so many creators that I ended up developing relationships with. And if it wasn't that project, working with them on something else.*

**Lea Marin, former NFB Executive Producer**

*I found my editor for Zero Position, Lawrence Jackman through Breakthrough. He was one of our guest mentors. He's a great collaborator.*

**Louie Palu, 2015**

“There's a lot of really important connections that I made in that program, and it kind of gave me a window into this other world. Since 2011, I've made tens of thousands of dollars income because of the networking and relationships I built through Breakthrough.

**Eamonn O'Connor, 2011**

## Cohort Networking

- **80.8% (63)** rated the networking opportunities with members of their cohort being good to excellent.

## Comaraderie

*It gives you a community. It helps you build confidence in yourself by providing you with education and access. It was just a great experience overall and a fond memory for that period of my life. I'm grateful to the team/organizers of the program. I wish we had alumni events to bring everyone back together again. Maybe there are but I missed the notices. I think it was being around others who were going through the same growing pains and lessons as you. And people who have similar aspirations.*

**Kacey Cox, 2017**

*I just remember very much how we had camaraderie between all of us and still have very fond relationships with everybody.*

**Shasha Nakhai, 2015**

*Yes, at the time it was, it was good. I was the oldest person in the group. And it's always difficult to, you know, to be the oldest, you know, there is a big age difference. But still, everybody was friendly. But our group didn't continue for some reason. Like, I would have expected, you know, but it didn't.*

**Münire Armstrong, 2011**





# PITCH TRAINING



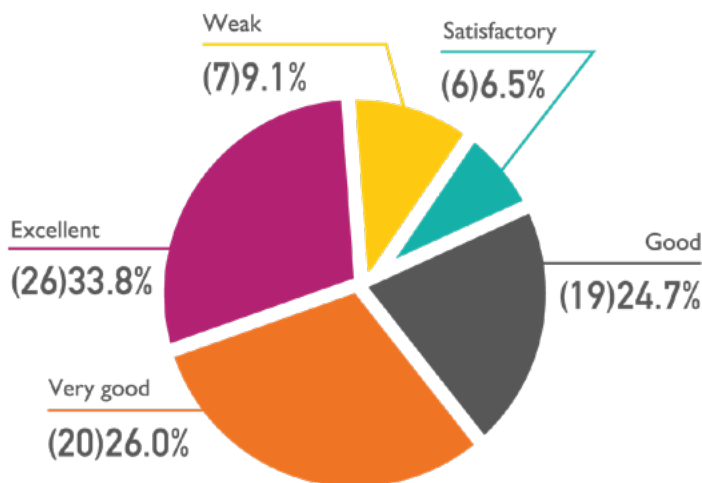
The pitch training is such a gift, I would like a person to help me do that every day of my life, you know before I go into meetings. The reality of hearing a pitch is that pitches are always evolving. No pitch is ever perfect, or they are rarely perfect. And you can tell that they've had some really good mentorship and support leading up to the time that I get to hear the pitch, they do seem well prepared and most are nervous.

**Lesley Birchard, Executive In Charge of Production, CBC Docs**

Pitching support and training was considered really valuable to **84.5% (65)** of the participants.

- **10% (7)** felt the pitch training was weak.
- A few commented that there was too much repetition when it came to practice pitching. (this comment was more common when Breakthrough took place during the pandemic)

How would you rate the film pitch exposure and pitch training you received while in the program?



*If you're not going to take the time to develop your project, then you're not going to make it. It was really awesome. And I think that intensity of it was really what made the program. I remember maybe it was that June after Breakthrough when I went to Sunnyside with Ed Barreveld, and I could wake up in the middle of the night and pitch the film, you know, because you really only get to be that good at pitching it once you've gone through so many iterations.*

**Shasha Nakhai, 2015**

*The most memorable part of the program was the negative feedback I got. It really stung in the moment but was good for me in the long run. It made me able to withstand criticism and not take it so personally. I also remember getting feedback that ranged from "good" to "bad", which can still be a confusing thing to navigate!*

**Andrew Moir, 2014**

*"I was kind of surprised at the performance of selling a story...because I come from journalism, but I think so much of it is grounded in facts, pitching angles, but there is a performance on how you present the information so that you can help sell and get it financed." Yasmine*

**Yasmine Mathurin, 2018**

*I found with the program, it really showed how much work went into just pitching and I didn't have the capacity to do it, because I also learned, I needed to work with more people, so I wasn't doing everything anymore.*

**Maya Annik Bedward, 2018**

*The program focused a lot of time on constantly pitching your project. I wish there was more time allocated to talking about the industry in general.*

**Colin Scheyn, 2019**

*The pitch training was weak, actually non-existent*

**Anonymous, 2004 (note; this was before the formal curriculum was developed by Lalita Krishna in 2005 to address these comments.)**

# PROGRAM EVALUATION - KEY LEARNINGS AND IMPACT ON FUTURE PROGRAMS

- Pitch practice is appreciated and participants improve with repeated pitching however perhaps there could be some tweaks or variations to the pitch format. For example, change the timing for the pitches. Or focus on a different aspect of the pitch.
- The Breakthrough program cannot be seen only as a one-off yearly program. The connections and bonds that the cohort form with each other and with the facilitators need to be harnessed and developed.
- DOC INSTITUTE should provide year-round formal and informal mentorship opportunities.
- DOC INSTITUTE could create more networking opportunities throughout the year for Breakthrough participants



## BREAKTHROUGH AWARDS

The Breakthrough program caught the attention of funders who had been monitoring the success of various participants. In 2019, The Rogers Group of Funds agreed to annually award a cash prize of \$20,000 each to two winning pitches, and CBC provides a development license with one of their strands.

### Winners:

**2023** - Alejandro Valbuena, Tobi Abdul  
**2022** - Noa Im, Mariam Zaidi  
**2021** - Maria Markina, Erin Byrnes  
**2020** - Shazia Javed, Aïcha Diop  
**2019** - Polina Teif, Lulu Wei, Qais Pasha

*The feedback from the mentors helped me hone my pitch so it was as strong as it could be, which helped me win the final pitch. The prize from the final pitch has allowed me to continue developing my documentary feature with the help of industry professionals.*

**Aïcha Diop, 2020**

*I won the \$20,000 from Rogers and a development offer from CBC to make my feature-length film, Exegesis Lovecraft. I was able to receive additional grants due to the momentum generated from winning the pitch. I finished this film in 2021. It went on a successful festival run globally and won some awards. It premiered on Amazon Prime in Europe, and is on Amazon Prime VOD in the US, UK and Mexico.*

**Qais Pasha, 2019**

*You know, at first, I thought it was fantastic. Because the number one challenge a new filmmaker faces is where do you get money for development if you have no track record? How does someone give you the first, "I trusted you, I believe in you". So, I thought that was wonderful, because not a lot of filmmakers have access to development funds, and not a lot of filmmakers can shoot and edit their own things. Then I heard about how someone framed it recently, that it does create a competitive atmosphere. I thought, oh, yeah, you're right. I wonder what the vibe is like now. I could totally see that making people are more competitive with one another.*

**Shasha Nakhai, 2015**

*I don't like the competition aspect at the end of the program. We spent a fair amount of time developing a rapport amongst the group of us and I felt that some of the participants became very competitive and attempted to subtly sabotage my chances as the final pitches approached.*

**Graeme Bachiu, 2021**

# BREAKTHROUGH AWARDS - KEY LEARNINGS AND IMPACT ON FUTURE PROGRAMS

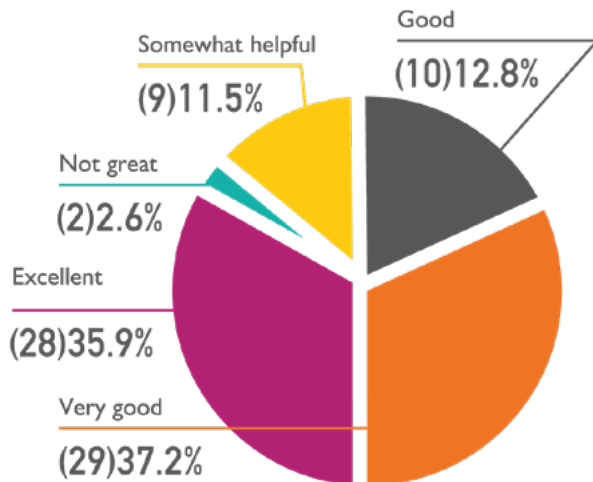
The introduction of a pitch prize has had a very big impact on the program. On the one hand it is validation of the program's success and a tangible outcome where 25% of participants get a development prize and a development deal which is the goal for all participants. However, there is no question that the element of competition does take away from the camaraderie and support system that the cohort had built with each other. The introduction of the competitive pitch also came as a surprise to many of the participants who felt under pressure and also complained about the lack of information.

In 2023 DOC Institute changed its marketing messages. The pitch prize is now mentioned as a tangible goal of the program.

Program leaders talk about the pitch prize from the very beginning and the schedule reflects the date and time for the pitches. The curriculum also helps participants with the pitch demo reels and pitch packages at the start of the program giving participants time to modify and refine their pitches.

# BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

How do you rate the experience overall?



**85.9% (67)** of the responding participants rated the experience as good to excellent.

**11.5% (9)** of the 78 respondents rated the program as somewhat helpful and 1 person rated it as 'not great'.

“It gave me a very strong primer on how to develop a film, the type of materials needed, and the confidence to produce these materials. It gave me a good introduction to the industry, as well as connected me with professionals and more senior members of the community. The network of peers in our cohort is very precious to me as well and I actively nurture those relationships to this day.”

**Javier Lovera, 2020**

Only one person out of 78 respondents chose the 'not great' option this was prior to 2005 when the formal curriculum was developed.

- 9/78** Somewhat useful
- 10/78** Good
- 29/78** Very good
- 28 /78** Excellent

A few comments from participants who rated Breakthrough 'Somewhat helpful' give us additional insight into how the program can be further improved. They also helped us realize the program cannot 'be everything' for all the participants. Some participants have higher expectations than others. A couple of the participants who later joined on as co-ordinators and leaders were motivated with good ideas for improving the program.

*The program I took and what the program is like now is quite different and the lab has evolved for the better. The business elements, lawyers, budgeting and financing are elements added which I believe are essential tools.*

**Aeyliya Husain, 2010**

*Got my feature film pitch deck and sizzle done. I also think it helped me pitch, and that was the most memorable. I would have liked more support though.*

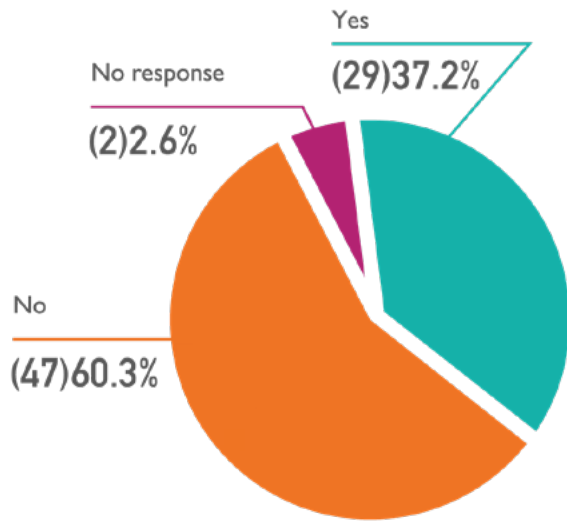
**Weiye Su, 2023**

*My answer is yes and no. Somewhat helpful. My goal was to meet industry professionals and that goal was achieved and exceeded within the limits of a program edition that was affected by a global pandemic and lockdown. Tangible career advancement beyond this was minor otherwise. I realized there is simply not enough funding for independent documentary productions in Canada, and most of the funding is inaccessible to me as a majority of funding and resources require a market partner (i.e. broadcaster). The funding that is accessible to me (i.e. public arts funding that does not require a market partner) is capped at an amount that is far below most standard production expenses today. It is an increasingly unsustainable and precarious financial system.*

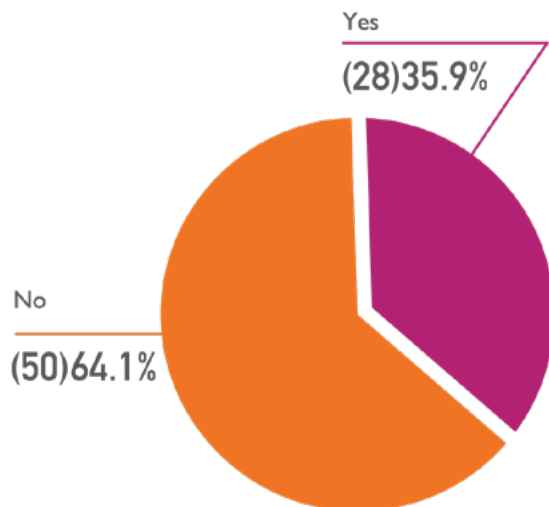
**Cliff Caines, 2020**

# BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & FINANCING

Were you able to secure development money for a project after the training?



Were you able to secure production funding for a project you prepped and pitched during the fellowship?

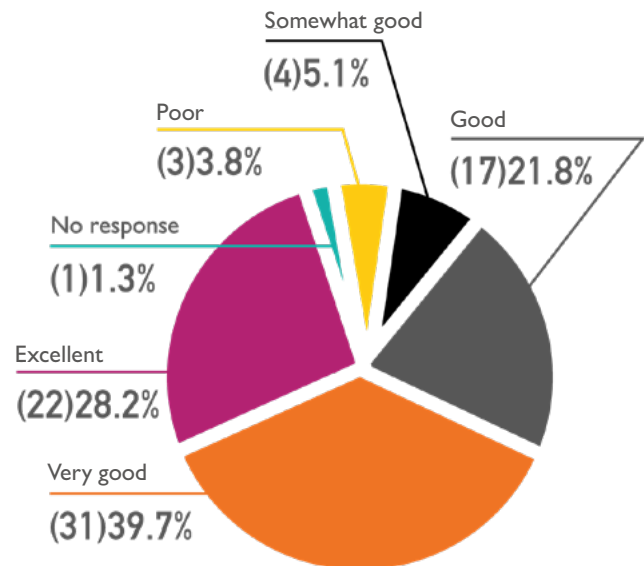


**37.2% (29/78 individual respondents)** said they were able to secure development money after their DOC Institute Breakthrough Training program. If we assume that the majority of participant non-respondents probably did not secure immediate development money, the percentage would drop to **29/124** or **23.38%**, well over **20%** of total participants, which is still an impressive number.

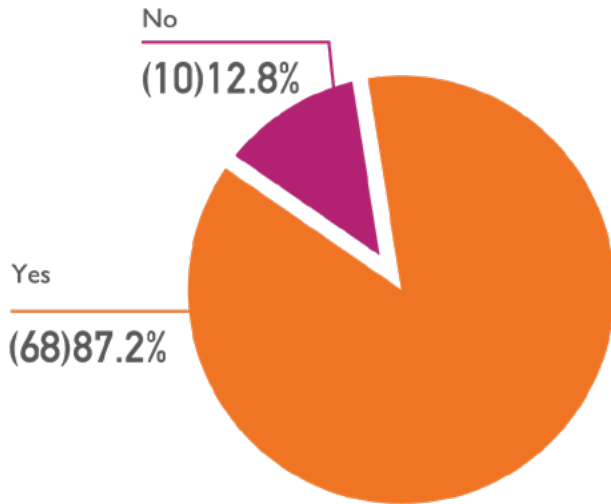
Similarly, **28/78** or **35.9%** of respondents indicated the projects they prepped and pitched during Breakthrough, were successful in finding production funding. Again, if we make assumptions on this stat, it indicates that **28/124** of projects developed with Breakthrough support and mentoring (**22.58%**) successfully advanced to production.

In addition, it should be noted that almost **90% (68)** of the respondents said that Breakthrough was significant in moving their business objectives forward. (On a sliding scale of 1-5, with 3, being good, 4, very good, 5, excellent and 1 being poor)

How do you rate your experience/business results relative to the objectives of the mentorship program?



**Did participating in the program help you advance your film/tv/media career goals?**



“We can see that the rate at which Breakthrough projects are financed is quite a bit higher than the rate at which our general membership accesses funding. Participation in Breakthrough has had an extremely positive impact on documentary filmmakers’ ability to finance their work.”

**Sarah Spring, DOC Exec. Director**

The Documentary Organization of Canada has 1300 members across the country. Some of the most important sources of support for documentary films are the National Film Board of Canada, the Rogers Documentary Fund, the Canada Media Fund, Telefilm, and new funds such as The Rogers/BSO (Black Screen Office) Fund administered by the Canadian Independent Screen Fund for BPOC Creators (CISF). All of these partners are supporting a portion of a productions budget, but it is an indicator of how many of our members’ project are financed each year within Canada’s mainstream funding system. Below are statistics for 2022 or 2022/2023:

- The National Film Board of Canada greenlit 14 feature documentaries in 2022/23, which amounts to 1.08% of DOC members.
- The Rogers Documentary Fund provided \$3 million in grants to 42 projects in 2022. This amounts to 3.2% of DOC members.
- Telefilm Canada spent \$3.3M on 25 documentaries as part of its Theatrical Documentary Program in 2022. This amounts to 1.92% DOC members.
- The Canada Media Fund spent \$7.1M on 32 documentaries as part of its POV program in 2022.

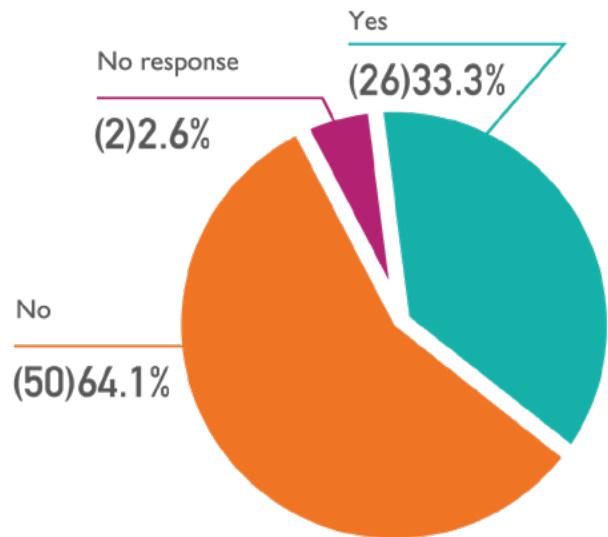
This amounts to 2.46% of DOC members

- The Rogers/BSO (Black Screen Office) Fund administered by the Canadian Independent Screen Fund for BPOC Creators (CISF) financed 11 documentaries over the last three years with \$156,869 in support (23% of its funding, higher than any other Canadian funding institution) This amounts to less than 1 percent, 0.8% of DOC members.

**Source: DOC**

## FINDING AN EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

**Did you seek out and work with an Executive Producer while or after being in the program?**



The percentage of Breakthrough respondents who sought to work with Executive Producers is **33.3% (26)**. This is just a bit lower, but seems remarkably close to the percentage who were able to secure Development and/or Production funding for their films as a result of Breakthrough.

# BUSINESS OBJECTIVES: KEY LEARNINGS AND IMPACT ON FUTURE PROGRAMS

- Compared to the general membership of DOC, the Breakthrough participants get valuable introductions to decision-makers which has resulted in a substantially higher percentage of success for development funding.
- Securing an executive producer makes a difference for both development and production funding for emerging filmmakers.
- DOC Institute should facilitate year-round meetings between Exec producers and filmmakers looking for an Executive producer.
- Documentary funding opportunities with broadcasters seem to be shrinking so there should be more emphasis and exposure to co-productions, digital streaming services and international funding opportunities.





## HOT DOCS FORUM EXPERIENCE

**The Hot Docs Forum is a dynamic live event where pre-selected projects are pitched for co-production financing to a roundtable of leading commissioning editors, film fund representatives, financiers, programming executives, angel investors, and delegates from around the globe.**

*Being able to enjoy Hot Docs at the end of all the pitching was really great!*

**Robinder Uppal, 2013**

*There's a level of performance to pitching, that I didn't know, it didn't click for me until that point*

**Yasmine Mathurin, 2018**

*Hot Docs was an excellent opportunity to watch movies and attend amazing industry events, especially the Forum! All this experience will impact on my filmmaking career, especially because I am a newcomer who did not know much about the doc scene in Canada.*

**Ahmed I. Nour, 2023**

*I think just the comfort in the place, because we attended Hot Docs Forum for the first time together as a group. And so just beginning to develop the comfort in being in that space and seeing all those faces. That was critical. Recently, we just pitched "The Sandbox" at the Forum. And I was so comfortable by that time, because I've been so many times and knew some people.*

**Shasha Nakhai, 2015**

*While in Breakthrough, that was the first time I saw a forum type of pitching platform. And I really liked it. You know, I thought that's great. You know, you pitch your project. People are all over there and they tell you, they want to help you, or they don't want to help you. You know, like I thought that's a quick way of finding out at the time if they are on board or not.*

**Münire Armstrong, 2011**

# COMPARABLE TRAINING PROGRAMS CITED BY PARTICIPANTS

## Names And Objectives Of Comparable Training Programs

**Doc Accelerator Run By Hot Docs** - A bespoke private lab and industry conference sessions during the annual Hot Docs Festival. The program focuses on skills training and career advancement with a goal to foster an inclusive new generation of Canadian documentary filmmakers, and included a paid professional development mentorship the year following the Festival.

**Source: Hot Docs Website**

**Eave On Demand Access Program** is a part-time program offered by NSI Canada, focused on building stable and strong production companies owned by Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) creators, along with the development of their intellectual property for national and international financing and distribution. Through world-class training and coaching, the EAVE On Demand Access Program provides producers with tools and resources to move their projects, companies and careers forward.

**Source: NSI Website**

**TIFF Talent Accelerator** is a program that provides year-round mentorship to a select group of women who are emerging producers, directors, and screenwriters in Canada. A shortlist of candidates, created through an internal nomination system from TIFF's network of industry contacts and alumni are presented to a committee that will select six outstanding women: two producers, two directors, and two screenwriters. With the goal of fast-tracking careers and projects, TIFF Industry will provide programming to spur artistic, professional, and project development.

**Source: TIFF Website**

**Forum RIDM, presented by Netflix**, recently introduced Doc Lab Montréal, the new incarnation of Talent Lab, and launched a call for projects for Canadian participants. Doc Lab Montreal welcome a cohort of Canadian and international filmmakers and producers with short, medium-length, or feature-length projects in

development. This talent incubator is designed to help them take their work and their approach to documentary creation a step further.

**Source: RIDM Website.**



Breakthrough was more hands on and personalized.

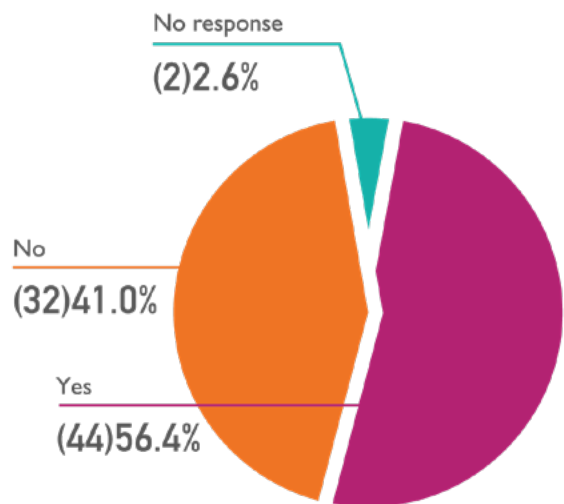
**Celeste Koon, participant 2018**



I think it was comparable in quality to Hot Docs Accelerator, but much better than RIDM's Talent Lab.

**Javier Lovera, 2020**

## Have you been selected and participated in any other filmmaker or producer industry training programs?



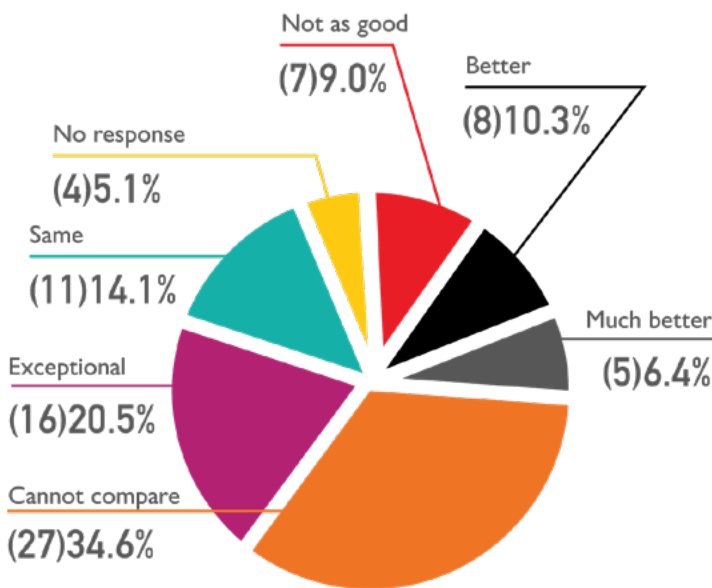
**56.4% (44)** of the respondents have participated in other filmmaker or producer professional development training programs. For many, Breakthrough was the program that inspired them to apply to others.



Some other programs, you kind of feel like you're thrown in and out. You do your spiel, and then they get to ask you questions, and you move on. But Breakthrough is actually really focused on craft and the projects at hand. And so that approach of having one project that you hone for several weeks at a time, and that you interact with industry members to ensure that those creatives are developed through that process. I haven't seen anything like it to be really frank. I think it's one of the strongest producer creator programs that exist out there. And, and I think, other programs, you take a page out of that book".

**Lea Marin, former Executive Producer for the NFB and Breakthrough mentor**

### How do you evaluate Breakthrough in relations to this or any other professional development training program you have taken?



While **34.6% (27)** of the research survey participants said they could not compare the quality of breakthrough to other training programs (due to lack of participation elsewhere) **20.5%** evaluated it as 'exceptional' and another **16.7%** thought it was 'better' or 'much better' than other industry run program.

*I come from journalism, I understood what it meant to pitch, but the Doc Breakthrough Program, which was one of the first labs I attended felt like my first little mini film school. It helped me understand each medium requires a different way of talking about the story, so Breakthrough gave me the confidence to tell my story.*

**Anonymous, 2018**

*DOC Breakthrough was great! but it was different than the other labs that I participated, because some served different purposes (scripted work - TIFF talent accelerator + Writers studio) It was excellent in allowing me to incubate my idea for my project and leave with tangible connections and know what to do next for my project. Some other labs allowed for more experimental ways of storytelling, but Breakthrough geared more towards a more traditional/commercial way of storytelling in projects, (and it didn't really encourage stepping outside of the box)*

**Yasmine Mathurin, 2018**

*Breakthrough was more thorough, but the Berlinale did a better job of connecting you with decision-makers at the actual market. I also did an EAVE/NSI course, which was good, but I found EAVE focused a lot on the creative and after a while I think it interferes with the process. I think artists should generally be left alone because too many voices in the room can flatten the work creatively. I think labs work much better when they are more market driven and producer focused.*

**Andrew Moir, 2014**

# THE PANDEMIC EFFECT

Many of the Breakthrough alumni had projects that were stalled or delayed for years, (or indefinitely) due to Covid-19 shutting down the world. Some directors could not travel. Other projects could not be shot because of subjects with vulnerable health issues. Some filmmakers had to pivot and work other jobs just to survive.

*My project stalled during the pandemic.*

## **Hugh Gibson, 2015**

*When I was in Breakthrough it was online, so I don't know what it is like in person. I really did not like the on-line platform. It felt distant. I would have liked more personal interactions. I think it would be a good if there was an alumni platform for Breakthrough participants so we can all get to know each other.*

## **Annie Sakkab, 2020**

*When the pandemic hit, all our plans for shooting "One of Ours" halted. I had to cancel a whole third act we'd planned for the film, that was going to happen in Haiti at an orphanage that the family owns. It basically forced me to start post using footage that I already had. But it became a bit of a gift, because I really had to sit with the material and try to make the film with what we already had.*

## **Yasmine Mathurin, 2018**

*The competition should be in person. If it doesn't need to be virtual, then it shouldn't. Because when you pitch to someone, a lot of it is in body language, a lot of it is in that energy that you feel.*

## **Chrisann Hessing, Participant 2020, Program Leader 2022**

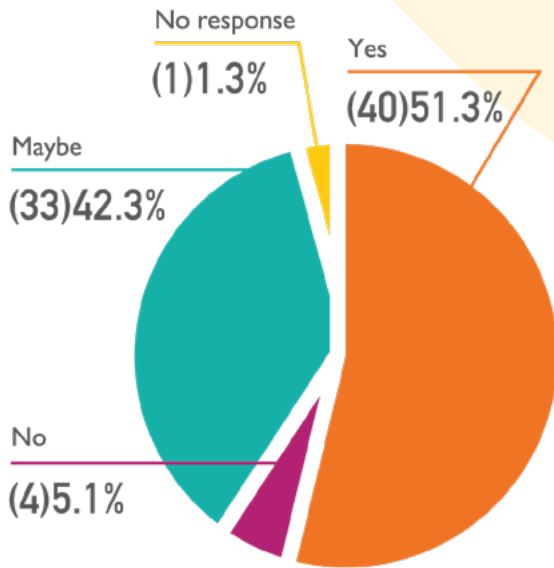
*"I really felt the pitching format every week stifled any casual conversation or real mentorship from the people. There was sometimes interesting information that was shared but it was often quite impersonal. I know that the pandemic atmosphere probably added to this. I was actually grateful for it in a way because I didn't have to drive downtown and with kids that would have been challenging and perhaps even make it impossible to do the program. Also, because the Hot Docs festival was also online, it made networking difficult as well.*

## **Jamie Day Fleck, 2021**



# GIVING BACK & GETTING OUR FILMS SEEN

Would you like to participate in and be part of Breakthrough Alumni showcases or participate as a guest speaker or mentor for future cohorts?



Over 51% (40) of the respondents said that they would like to participate in Breakthrough Alumni showcases or be special guests for future cohorts.

*I work as the Senior Program Manager for Chicken and Egg where I oversee the Chicken & Egg award / lab, the research and development grants, and the forthcoming Producers program. If it would be valuable for me to speak to future cohorts, please let me know... I do think these labs are important, and would be happy to contribute if it feels useful.*

**Elaisha Stokes - 2015**

*I made The Stairs which premiered at TIFF, but it was only after winning the film critics prize that we finally made a broadcast sale. We did not have a distributor either, so I had to figure out an independent distribution strategy. Telefilm was interested in helping with some marketing funds, so that allowed me to hire a team to get the film out there.*

**Hugh Gibson - 2015**



# ADVISOR/MENTORS



**Lea Marin,**  
former NFB Producer

*The final year that I was there, it was the most diverse group of people that I've ever seen, and that was exciting. What's interesting is that when you are telling stories from these unique points of view from underrepresented or marginalized communities, you reveal other elements of story that haven't been seen.*



**Ed Barreveld,**  
Producer StoryLine  
Entertainment

*I think it's really great that they get all this specialized information, education and know how things work so that by the time they hit Hot Docs, they are in much better shape.*



**Ricardo Acosta,**  
Editor/Story Consultant

*All the members of Breakthrough, by default are family. They come from isolated environments where they have an idea, and they enter the circle. The circle is always very powerful, because it is not just about listening to yourself, but about listening to others. That's very important part of what we also do, when we collaborate in the business.*



**Maureen Judge,**  
Producer/Director  
Makin' Movies

*Its a unique industry-based training program, not classroom-based based and I think that is a huge advantage for the people taking the program.*



**Lawrence Jackman,**  
Director/Editor/Story Consultant

*To be honest, for me, it was really fun. There was always such a variety of projects. I've worked with a lot of diverse filmmakers throughout my career. And you know, they've all had a really hard time making inroads in the industry. So the more opportunities like this there are, the better.*

---

# Celebrating Breakthrough Success Stories: Case Studies

This is just a sample of some of the Breakthrough alumni who are making their mark in the industry.



2006

# Gail Maurice

Director/Writer/Producer

**Company:** Assini Productions

**Website:** [gailmaurice.com](http://gailmaurice.com)

**Years in business:** 21

**Films produced:** 1 feature, 9 shorts



Seeing the Hot Docs Forum for the first time was amazing. It reminded me of the gladiators, you know, the arena. It was helpful to see how prepared everyone was.

*I applied to the Quebecor program (now Breakthrough) because I was interested in documentary. I love, love that world and I had made a short doc on finding my brother. I remember telling a friend, who is not in the business anymore, I'm going to pitch this at Hot Docs, and I'm going to walk in with a horse, and that's going to get their attention. I was so inspired.*

**Background:** Gail Maurice is fluent in Cree/Michif and proud of her Métis upbringing in Saskatchewan. She is passionate about telling Indigenous stories in front of and behind the camera. She had a couple of shorts including

*Smudge* when she applied for the year long Quebecor fellowship which included the DOC Toronto/Hot DOCS mentoring program. *It took me 20 years to finally make my first feature film. After making Rosie, the short, I was able to do the feature film development with support from the Harold Greenberg Fund and imagineNATIVE.*

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** Gail's nine award-winning short films, which she wrote, produced and directed, have screened at Sundance, imagineNATIVE, the Smithsonian, Enroute, CBC and APTN, with a recent win for Best Children's Film at UNICEF. Gail states: "Arts Council grants helped me survive in the industry." The NFB short *Smudge* brought her the first recognition with a world premiere at Sundance in 2006. In 2022, her first feature film, *Rosie*, the story of a young girl forced to live with her aunt and her two best friends, premiered at TIFF, won the Audience Award at imagineNATIVE, and was selected as a TIFF Top Ten Film for 2022. As an actor, she's a two-time Canadian Screen Award nominee for Best Supporting Actor for *Trickster* and *Night Raiders*.

**Current work:** Gail is in development on her second feature film, *Blood Lines*, and a comedy series, *Rez in the City*. She also has a feature documentary in development.

**Challenges:** *I've started a documentary called Nokum, about my grandmother, who was almost 103 when she passed, but I'm having a hard time finding an editor to work with. It's mostly in our language Michif.*

**Filmography:** [Gail Maurice - imdb.com](http://Gail Maurice - imdb.com)

**Other programs:** Quebecor fellowship, WDC Banff, Canadian Film Centre, Netflix Banff Diversity of Voices Initiative.



There's still a lot of judgement. There's always been racism, and I've always been underestimated even though I have two degrees...





2018

# Yasmine Mathurin

Director/Writer/Producer

**Website:** [yasminemathurin.com](http://yasminemathurin.com)

**Years in business:** 5

**Films produced:** 1 feature, 1 short



What I appreciated about the space, I was able to honour my own instincts and my own voice. I think it was the first time. I started to cut out the noise and actually hear what I had to say for myself, and my own sensibility for story.

*Doc Breakthrough was excellent in allowing me to incubate my idea for my project and leave with ideas of what to do next.*

**Background:** Yasmine has a master's degree in journalism and a background in political science. She is Haitian/Canadian and spent her formative years in Calgary. Yasmine says, "I've always been deeply curious about film." She was working on contract for the CBC podcasts *Shadows* and *Tai Asks Why* when she heard about Breakthrough. She had already been

gathering video footage of her neighbour's unique family on personal trips to Calgary for a few years, before she attended an ESPN event at TIFF for first-time female filmmakers. There, she met a producer who was intrigued by her film's story—about a Haitian boy who was adopted into an Indigenous family and then refused the right to play in an Indigenous basketball tournament.

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** Yasmine was able to meet Jordana Ross at the Breakthrough Program in 2018. After the program ended, Yasmine initiated a follow-up meeting for *One of Ours* which led to the CBC documentary channel coming on board for development and production financing. *One of Ours* won the special jury prize at Hot Docs 2021 and the best documentary at Weengushk Film Festival 2022. It was also nominated for three CSA's (Best Writing, Best Direction and Best Documentary 2022).

**Current work:** Yasmine has two projects in development, an animated short doc and a feature, and she is also trying to dive into fiction. In 2023, she won the CBC TIFF Screenwriter Award, which came with a financial prize. She also directed three short docs for the *Witness* series (CBC documentary, GEM).

**Challenges:** *I have to prove myself with every project. Before Breakthrough I was not a proven documentary filmmaker. I have been developing an animated doc and find I have to prove myself again as I don't have a track record in directing animation.*

**Filmography:** [Yasmine Mathurin - Document](#)

**Programs:** DOC Accelerator (HotDocs) Reel World, TIFF – Talent Accelerator, TIFF Writers Studio, Netflix/Banff Diversity of Voices, RIDM Talent Lab, Union Docs Feature Doc Lab, Yale University's multi-media Storing Telling Fellowship



**Regarding her cohort at Breakthrough:** They're everything, honestly, they're the people that every time I go to Hot Docs, that's who I connect with. They are the ones I reach out to, to feel a bit less alone, because this work is very hard.



2014

# Louie Palu

Director, Producer,  
Director of Photography

**Company:** Summit Road Films

**Years in business:** 8 filmmaking, 30 still photography

**Films produced:** 3 (1 short, 2 features, many on-line videos)



Breakthrough changed my career and life. It was excellent.

*Having the language to be able to negotiate or talk about possible collaborations, that is a skill that you cannot learn just on your own. Breakthrough was like this life boat that came in with a way to get there. It helped me learn how to talk about my film projects.*

**Background:** Louie Palu says, “I faced so many obstacles trying to become a filmmaker. Some of us just come from sideways into the business.” Born and raised in Toronto, he is an award-winning photographer and filmmaker whose work

examines social-political issues, human rights, and war. Louie’s docs have screened at film festivals like FDBA Doc in Buenos Aires, Hot Docs and Barcelona, and have been broadcast on CBC *documentary* channel. He is an author of numerous books, and his photography has appeared in major international publications including *National Geographic*, *Bloomberg Opinion*, *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail*, *El País*, *Der Spiegel* and *Le Figaro*. Louie’s photos have been exhibited in collections around the world.

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** *I was disappointed Kandahar Journals did not get into Hot Docs, but it forced me to look outside at other film festivals and it got into DOK Fest in Germany and there I was nominated for an award. It was however, really exciting to have my second film, Zero Position selected for Hot Docs in 2022. It was filmed before the Ukraine/Russia war was officially declared, and it really showed what was already happening to the people there. Breakthrough introduced me to decision makers at CBC who bought my films.*

**Current work:** *I am thriving and work mainly out of Washington DC, although my film company is Canadian. I now have a full documentary practice that spans the gamut from still photography, art installation, short online films and feature documentaries. The way I make films now, I still pretty much do everything, except editing and business affairs, and I own my films outright. I really appreciate having someone who helps with business affairs, contracts and insurance needs.*

**Challenges:** *Before the pandemic I was filming in the Arctic (2015 onwards) and I was in talks with National Geographic about a new TV series, and then with the pandemic we never got back to it.*

**Filmography:** Louie Palu - imdb.com

**Other programs:** Ontario College of Art and Design, MFA Maryland Trust College of Art, BravoFACT, grants and fellowships from the Ontario Heritage Foundation, Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts and the Peter Reed Foundation.



Hands down, the only reason my first film Kandahar Journals got made was because I was in Breakthrough.



2009

# Sheona McDonald

Producer, Director, Writer

**Company:** Dimstore Productions

**Years in business:** 20+

**Films produced:** 11, plus TV series work



I made contacts that I otherwise would not have made.

**Background:** Sheona McDonald is a multi-talented writer, producer and director. Through her company, Dimstore Productions, she has produced 11 award-winning films (including shorts). She is a very experienced creative producer who also works on doc series and lifestyle factual productions like *Border Security: America's Front Line*. Before Breakthrough, Sheona sought arts council funding. *I was at Capilano College in the mid-90s. I made a couple of student films, then produced and directed Lifers: Stories from Prison. It took five years. I was very ambitious in terms of looking through every fund, foundation, government grants, arts council grants—everything you can imagine. Stuff that I would not have the*

*energy to do now.*

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** Sheona had met her subjects for *When Dreams Take Flight*, which she pitched during the Breakthrough program. That doc won a Gemini. She feels the two recent films she made during COVID put her on the map in a different way. Her 2022 doc feature, *Dead Man's Switch: A Crypto Mystery*, unpacks the mysterious death of Canadian CEO Gerald Cotten, and his failed cryptocurrency exchange. It premiered at Hot Docs 2021, was broadcast on CBC, sold to Discovery+ and was nominated for Best Documentary at the CSAs. In 2021 she also wrote and directed a short NFB film featuring a family with a young child who identifies as a different gender than the one they were born with.

**Current work:** She is directing and producing a 4-part documentary series for Knowledge Network about organ transplants (Omni Film) and developing another feature doc that was put on hold during the pandemic.

**Challenges:** *It's not an industry that feels like it builds. You think you are proven, in terms of making your own films and the ideas that come forward. But my phone's certainly not ringing off the hook. I don't feel like I have any sort of international appeal. And now that my kids are grown, that might be something I press more for. In Vancouver, I'm a big enough fish in a small enough pond now that yes, I can show run a series or be hired to direct something and be offered jobs as opposed to having to fight for them, but it doesn't feel easy. You have to stick with it, embrace change and be okay with the volatility.*

**Filmography:** [Sheona McDonald - imdb.com](#)

**Other programs:** RIDM Talent Lab



This is a program that's adding to the industry, in a very profound way. Being able to increase the number of participants would be great. Funding is always the thing, but I feel this is something that different funders should be investing in for sure.



2015

# Shasha Nakhai

Producer/Director/Owner

**Company:** Compy Films

**Years in business:** 13

**Films produced:** 2 features, 11 short films



I think that the intensity of pitching in Breakthrough is really what makes the program.

**Background:** *"I moved to Canada on my own from Nigeria when I was 15, so I didn't have family or a safety net of any kind... so that was kind of a barrier for me."* After journalism school Shasha landed a position as a production coordinator with Storyline Entertainment. She worked closely with Ed Barrevelde and film directors there for nine years, moving up to a producer level. In 2015 when she applied to Breakthrough, Shasha says she just threw together two ideas quickly, "And then when I got selected, I was like, 'Oh, I actually have to make one now.'" That's the idea that became *Take Light*, her first feature doc. For Shasha, the program "demonstrated that this story idea could become a big project and helped me hone my story telling chops."



Breakthrough has been my favourite of all the mentorship things I've done. It's the one I recommend most to those in the industry. You are changing and adapting and adjusting your pitch over several weeks and that is really valuable.



It's because you're actually doing the work of getting better over an extended period of time, rather than just being there listening to someone who tells you how to do it.

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** *A couple years after Breakthrough, my partner Rich Williamson and I made a short film Frame 394, (2016) that ended up on the Oscar shortlist and screened at many festivals. And then after that I made Take Light and that was proof that I could do a feature doc. And then we made our first drama feature Scarborough, so, that was also proof that we could work in drama.*

**Current work:** Shasha is collaborating with Kenya Jade Pinto, Breakthrough Alumni 2021, on *The Sandbox*, which Kenya Jade honed and developed at Breakthrough. The film secured a distributor prior to pitching at the prestigious Hot Docs Forum in 2023. They won two prizes, the Cuban Hat Award for powerful and unique projects, and 2nd prize in First Look voted on by philanthropic investors. *The Sandbox* is in production in 2024.

**Challenges:** *I am learning business sustainability, managing a small business. I would say consistent freelance income or consistent passive income seems necessary for survival. Editors or DOPs can get freelance jobs, but you can't really do small producing gigs.*

**Filmography:** Shasha Nakhai - imdb.com

**Other programs:** TMU (formerly Ryerson) Journalism Program, TIFF Talent Accelerator, EFM Doc Toolbox, Doc Accelerator (Hot Docs), WIFT's Ubisoft Toronto Producer Mentorship, Reel World Film Festival's Emerging 20.



2015

# Hugh Gibson

Producer/Writer/Director

**Company:** The Stairs  
**Years in business:** 19  
**Films produced:** 4



Breakthrough was a great experience. The people were all terrific. The guests were really good as well. As far as I could tell they were genuinely interested, they wanted to be there.

*I had been shooting what would become The Stairs for a long period, but I was in a transient state, just trying to figure out the next steps and Breakthrough struck me as a really good opportunity to immerse myself in pitching, networking and connecting with funders to help finish the film.*

**Background:** Hugh Gibson graduated from film school in 2004 and started working freelance in the film industry. He was filming educational videos for a local Toronto community organization on safer strategies for sex workers and programs for crack users and says he did it with innate curiosity, no judgement. That filming led to *The Stairs*. He's also directed and produced two short dramas and two feature documentaries.

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** Hugh's short film *Hogtown Blues* premiered at TIFF in 2004. Having his film selected then opened up networking opportunities, but it was his 2016 documentary *The Stairs* that got the attention of film critics, who called him a major new voice in documentary filmmaking. Hugh's work is non-judgemental as he captured the lives of drug users in urban Toronto. *The Stairs* premiered at TIFF and won the Toronto Film Critics Rogers Best Canadian Film Award and became runner up for the Toronto Film Critics Allan King Documentary Award. In 2022, the *Globe and Mail* included *The Stairs* as one of the 20 Best Toronto Films ever made, calling Gibson's work "unforgettable."

**An opportunity:** Despite the accolades, *The Stairs* did not initially get a Canadian distribution deal, so Hugh took a hybrid approach. Telefilm provided theatrical marketing money to help promote a film screening tour. Hugh went on the road, inviting special guests to participate in audience Q&As. *The Stairs* exhibition and film festival tour lasted until 2018, following a TVO broadcast.

**Challenges:** *I'm trying to make things that are slightly unusual. So, there's the challenge of being more difficult to sell, or harder for people to imagine. I would love to hire people, but I can only seriously devote myself to one project so the other one suffers. I'm sort of introverted, so the whole thing about pushing yourself is challenging, but important to do.*

**Filmography:** [Hugh Gibson - imdb.com](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1045744/)

**Other programs:** York University Film, TIFF Talent Lab, TIFF Studio, Berlinale Talent Lab, TIFF Pitch This, RIDM Talent Lab.



I was able to achieve a lot through the program. Everyone was set up to succeed, which I thought was great



Breakthrough taught me if you sit back and wait for things to happen, they probably won't.



Thinking about the project from the point of view from a funder or commissioner is very valuable.



2013

# Robinder Uppal & Marc Serpa Francoeur

Producer/Directors/Editors/  
Interactive Producers

**Co-founders:** Lost Time Media

**Years in business:** 10

**Films produced:** 7 plus interactive projects



You don't want to go in with a pitch for an interactive to somebody who's never done it before. If it's not the right person that doesn't mean there is no value in the project. The project can be good, it just wasn't the right person.

**Background:** Growing up as good friends in Calgary, Robinder and Marc were joined at the hip. They did their undergrad studies at UBC then went on to complete MFAs in Documentary Media at TMU. Since then, they've made

five short films, one feature-length interactive documentary, two combination TV hour/theatrical docs and created numerous projects for other production companies and institutions. They founded Lost Time Media in 2013. They made their first short films with modest arts council grants, followed by their interactive documentary *The World in Ten Blocks* (2016) which they developed while completing the Breakthrough program. It was later featured at Hot Docs and Sheffield Doc/Fest, and launched episodically in partnership with *The Globe and Mail*. Their short documentary *The Head & The Hand* (2018) was listed by DOC NYC as a top contender for the Oscars' Documentary Short category.

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** In 2020, they released *Above the Law* (CBC Docs POV) in tandem with the feature-length *No Visible Trauma*, an award-winning exposé of police brutality and accountability issues in their hometown of Calgary. *Above the Law* was nominated for the CSA Donald Brittain Award. In 2022, they co-produced *Love in the Time of Fentanyl* in partnership with ITVS and support from Sundance Institute. Following its premiere at Vancouver's DOXA, where it won the Colin Low Award for Best Canadian Director, the film had its US premiere at DOC NYC and broadcast premiere on PBS *Independent Lens* in early 2023.

**Current work:** Marc and Robinder are in development on a feature documentary about the US immigration system (through a Netflix-supported development program for producers) as well as a follow-up film on policing issues.

**Challenges:** *Competition is fierce out there. There are a lot of really good filmmakers competing for the same slots, the same envelopes and funding, and a lot of good films aren't getting made because there aren't enough resources to go around. Funding certainly remains a challenge for us.*

**Filmography:**

Marc Serpa - [imdb.com](#)

Robinder Uppal - [imdb.com](#)

**Other programs:** Hot Docs Incubator with Netflix.



I appreciated that there was a magnification sort of element, where you're learning not just from your own pitching but from everybody.



2019

# Maya Annik Bedward

Producer/Director/Writer

**Co-founder:** Third Culture Media

**Years in business:** 15

**Films produced:** 10



I consider myself a full time filmmaker now.

**Background:** Maya Annik Bedward is of Jamaican-French Canadian descent. After living in Brazil and studying media in the UK, Maya returned to Toronto and co-founded Third Culture Media with her producing partner, Kate Fraser. Prior to starting her company, she worked for some arts councils and in educational media. Her films have screened at Hot Docs, TIFF, Black Star and the New Orleans Film Festival. She has also directed episodes of Farm Crime (CBC Gem), BLK: An Origin Story (History Channel, Global TV) and LIDO TV (CBC Gem). She has produced podcasts and co-produced the CSA - winning short documentary Patty vs. Patty. Dedicated to fostering a more equitable and inclusive industry, Maya is a founding member of the Black Screen Office and a filmmaker mentor for the OYA Black Arts Coalition through the DOC Institute.

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** Maya has secured arts council grants, broadcast licenses and government support for her productions. She went to grad school for media studies in the UK before returning to Canada in 2008 and applying for an internship through the CMPA Producer program. She says, “I returned to Canada at a time when jobs were very limited, so I became an independent producer because it was my only option at the time. I made my first short film, The Foreigner, with a lot of love, supported by a community of artists who gave free time. I continued working a 9-5 job to pay off the expenses from that film. I started to get noticed when I won two main awards at a WIFT Toronto showcase.

**Currently working on:** Maya is in post-production for her full-length documentary, Black Zombie, which is the film she pitched at Breakthrough. Maya is the writer/director, sharing producing duties with Kate Fraser. Jennifer Holness (Hungry Eyes Media) is Executive Producer. Black Zombie has been commissioned by documentary Channel and was selected for Telefilm Feature Documentary funding in 2023.

**Challenges:** This year I went to Cannes, and I’m now learning about sales and distribution. It has been challenging to be “emerging” for a very long time.

**Filmography:** Maya Annik Beward - imdb.com

**Other programs:** CMPA Producing Mentorship, DOC Accelerator, Netflix/Banff Diversity of Voices, RIDM Talent Lab, BSO DGC Women Accelerator, EFM Toolbox Programme, CBC Business of Broadcasting Mentorship, Masters in International Communication at University of Leeds.



The best part of that program was the camaraderie meeting other filmmakers—you see how they’re doing things, how they’re struggling, you help each other on each other’s projects. They’ve become colleagues for life.



The Breakthrough program was really great because it introduced me to decision makers who took my project really seriously. I got a lot of feedback that helped me refine my pitch.



2011

# Münire Armstrong

Producer

**Company:** YN Films

**Years in business:** 20+ (13 in Canada)

**Films produced:** 8 features, 7 shorts



I initially couldn't do documentaries. Breakthrough helped me understand and learn new things about the art of documentary filmmaking and it introduced me to Canadian decision makers. So, it was very useful.

*I'm a filmmaker for a reason, I want to make films. That's why I am here.*

**Background:** Münire is a Turkish-Canadian filmmaker with a background in computer engineering. She immigrated to Canada in 2008. One of her strengths: "I'm a very, very good project manager." She worked for various production companies in Turkey before starting her own feature film company there. After moving, she faced a lot of barriers

and frustration trying to find jobs in the Canadian industry. By volunteering for WIFT-Toronto she was able to get an internship with PTV Productions, who needed someone who knew the Turkish industry and could speak the language. Then she applied to Breakthrough. She says of Rama Rau, 2011 program leader "Rama was an inspiring albeit tough leader, as well as a great example."

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** Münire created and produced the 2019 web series Ashbridge for CBC GEM. Some of her fiction films have played at international festivals. The Waiting Room premiered at both Locarno and TIFF. *When I was able to get funding through ONHSC (Northern Ontario fund) and the Harold Greenberg fund for a low-budget narrative film, and I participated in the TIFF Producers Lab, I felt like my projects would now at least have a possibility of getting funded.*

**Current work:** She is producing a narrative film with an international co-producer in Serbia. She also has two feature docs on her slate. One is potentially a pilot for a new doc series, the other has been shooting for over 10 years. Münire was selected to pitch *Cinema Kawakeb* at the Hot Docs Forum in 2023. The quirky characters and beautifully shot film about one of the oldest cinemas in downtown Amman was well received. It is an international co-production with a Jordanian production company, directed by Mahmoud Al Massad (an acclaimed Jordanian-Dutch director who she has worked with previously).

**Challenges:** *I am not where I want to be yet. I still need to finish the docs. It's very difficult not to give up. Sometimes being stubborn is a bad thing.*

**Filmography:** Münire - Document

**Other programs:** CMPA Producer Internship, FIN Atlantic Transatlantic Producer program, TIFF Producers Lab (which came with lots of PR). She regularly attends MIPCOM, Cannes and Berlinale.



Two years after doing Breakthrough, I applied to the Hot Docs Forum but didn't get in. But I put my card in the Mountie Hat pitch draw and I was chosen. I had less than 24 hours to prepare. My pitch was good, and we also had a very good trailer.





2012

# Jules Arita Koostachin

Producer/Director/  
Screenwriter/Actor

**Company:** Visjuelles Productions Inc.

**Years in business:** 20

**Films produced:** 4 features, 1 TV series, 13 short films



Representation matters. Having more BIPOC people in positions of power and decision-making positions makes a huge difference.... some execs just don't get it.

*You'd see people making these big budget things and you'd wonder, how the 'heck' are they doing it? You don't even know how to get from A to B. So, in terms of business I didn't even know how to get a distributor on board before I was in the DOC Breakthrough program.*

**Background:** Dr. Jules Arita Koostachin is a band member of the Attawapiskat First Nation. Her identity is integral to

her work as she has always had a strong drive to tell authentic personal and First Nations stories. Her short films, now available at [Vtape](#), are often personal and truth-telling projects. She says, "Initially I started to identify gaps or things I wasn't seeing on the screen." She was finishing her master's degree in Documentary Media at TMU when she applied to the DOC Hot Docs mentoring program. Since then, her company Visjuelles Productions has developed numerous film concepts, and produced a popular series for APTN, three short docs for CBC Gem, and four feature films. In 2022 she completed a PhD with the Institute of Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice at UBC. Her thesis *MooNaHaTihKaaSiWew: Unearthing Spirit* is focused on Indigenous documentary and positionality.

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** *I feel like I'm just working really hard, waiting to step into the spotlight, I feel it has taken a long time. It has been many years of picking myself up and doing it again, so you must have the drive. For AskiBoYZ (APTN 2016 series) I secured development funds from CMF. I'm now on my second Telefilm feature.*

**Current work:** Jules recently finished two documentaries: *WaaPaKe (Tomorrow)*, an NFB film which she wrote and directed, and *Chubby Cree* with Soapbox Productions (Telus). She is now in post-production for her second Telefilm-funded feature *Angela's Shadow*.

**Challenges:** *Right after I earned my PhD, I turned down a tenure-track university position and decided to work in film full time. There has been a lot of trial and error. Barriers are always finances. Putting yourself financially on the line for deliverables can be really scary. It's always good to hire a business affairs person to help, but it took me a while to figure that out.*

## Filmography:

[Jules Koostachin - imdb.com](#)

[Jules Koostachin - Vtape](#)

**Other programs:** imagineNATIVE Shaw Media Mentorship Program, Women in the Directors Chair Banff, TIFF Filmmakers Lab, Whistler Screenwriters Lab, LA Black Magic Collective Next Level Initiative.



It was such an amazing program. I learned a lot and I met some wonderful people. I remember dancing all night with the other DOC nerds.



2011

# Eamonn O'Connor

Editor/Owner/Story Consultant

**Company:** Refraction Films

**Years in business:** 19

**Films as an editor:** 17, plus many TV series



I didn't end up producing or directing, but I ended up using that understanding of how films are made. I do a lot of film consulting and when people reach out to me for help, it's part of what I can offer them.

*Breakthrough gave me a good lay of the land, and it also helped me realize I was in a very good spot. One of the advantages of being an editor is that I get to work with one, if not two, talented creative teams a year. So I already had a network coming into Breakthrough and it expanded it. I was also able to share my network bandwidth with the group.*

**Background:** Eamonn was developing a music doc concept about a talented but misunderstood musical performer

when he applied to Breakthrough. Early in his career, he gravitated to the edit suite to make a living. He found he really liked editing and he was being paid well. *In 2011, I had been editing for almost 10 years, and I was having some successes, including working on higher profile feature documentaries. But I started my career as a director, and went to film school, so I really wanted to explore the possibility of using a program like Breakthrough to see if I could further my directing ambition.*

**Establishing yourself in the industry:** Eamonn's editing résumé reads like "who's who" of award-winning films. He initially trained in the early 2000s as an assistant editor for *The Corporation* and since then, he's won several CCE awards. Films he has worked on have won awards at: the Canadian Screen Awards, DGC Awards, Hot Docs, Sundance, the Oscars, the ACE Awards, Producers Guild of America, the BAFTA Film Awards, the Peabody Awards, the Emmy Awards, and countless film festivals across North America and Europe.

**Recent work:** *Black Life: Untold Stories*, *Remix Revolution* episode.

**Challenges:** *Within the world of editing, I am doing more work in the States now, but I wonder if the perception at home is that I'm going to be in high demand, unlikely to be available, and maybe too expensive. I'm not very well known outside of the Canadian documentary community. The reality is I prefer collaborative filmmaking and I like to do work on home-grown projects within all levels of budgets, at all stages. I've helped with storyboards and film concepts, advised on rough cuts, and contributed to writing and directing while in the edit suite.*

**Filmography:** Eamonn O'Connor - Document

**Other programs:** DOC Institute workshops, Documentary Film Editing instructor at Seneca Doc Film Institute, Advanced Film TV at Sheridan College, Post-Production Certificate from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.



In 2023 Eamonn was one of the editors on two Academy Award nominated films, *Fire of Love* and *Navalny* by Canadian Daniel Roher, which won the Oscar for best documentary.

---

# Key Learnings and Program Implications

**The data and learnings gleaned through this research process will shape the future of Breakthrough.**

**KEY POINTS**

- **85-90%** of the respondent's rate achieving business goals as an important skill being taught in the program. This is indicative of filmmaker's potential success and their hope for the future. Their drive and ability to tell compelling, diverse and important stories should be nurtured with more funding opportunities.
- The strength of the Program leader is important to the vitality and integrity of the program. They should have excellent industry experience and be able to inspire, coach and guide the participants in the program.
- It's important that the mentors who attend the weekly session provide practical and honest advice. Many respondents stated it was valuable although a bitter pill at first.
- The meetings often lead to connections and partnerships after the Breakthrough program is completed. DOC institute should organize more alumni meetings.



The access to decision makers and the mentors that come in are really high calibre.

**Shasha Nakhai**

- Networking, mentoring and pitch training does not work as well virtually as it does in person. While virtual training widens the net for applicants and allows some wonderful opportunities for participants from outside the Greater Toronto Area to participate, the years when the program was forced to go virtual due to the pandemic was less satisfactory for the participants and the industry advisors. In the future, while some sessions could go virtual, the program should have a good balance of in-person and networking opportunities leading up to Hot Docs.
- Post Hot Docs follow up. It would be really useful for the participants to have a meeting a couple of

months after the festival, to evaluate where they are and what they need to further their projects.

- DOC Institute should facilitate year- round opportunities for Breakthrough past alumni to meet newer cohorts to provide guidance and advice. Many participants have asked for annual opportunities to meet up and for mentoring to continue long after the official Breakthrough meetings are over.
- Create an on-line community and also celebrate the successes and screenings of all Breakthrough participants.
- At least half of the Breakthrough alumni want to give back and may get involved in peer-to-peer mentoring.

**Expanding beyond Ontario.** The Breakthrough program is currently being offered in BC and Atlantic Canada through the local chapters. There is potential to take the DOC Institute Breakthrough program across the country and also form international partnerships.

- **Mid career support.** It's important to foster and support the pipeline of emerging creators, but many filmmakers need an advanced version of Breakthrough to develop their careers to the next level.



# CONCLUSION

The value of DOC Institute's Breakthrough program has been kind of a well-kept secret within the DOC community in Ontario. This research study provides valuable data on this training program but some of the research data will be useful to any organization that offers training since it has implications for all professional development training programs.



Undertaking the survey was certainly to measure the value of the program to participants, but after interviewing industry experts we realize this process was a comprehensive overview of program planning, concept and delivery, with funders, commissioning editors and production advisors weighing in too.

**Joanne Jackson, Report  
Researcher Writer,  
Breakthrough Alumni 2008**

One of the key recommendations is that the program should be marketed widely, and the work of the alumni celebrated publicly. There are lots of ways we can explore how to raise the profile of Breakthrough alumni at home and in the international community, at film festivals and industry markets.

The comments in this report albeit only a sample, clearly show that the Breakthrough Program has been pivotal in shaping the careers of many documentary filmmakers and also made a huge impact on the documentaries being commissioned in Canada. So, it is imperative that training programs like Breakthrough continue to help train and inspire industry ready producers and filmmakers from all walks of life and diverse communities in the future.



**Joanne Jackson**, is an award-winning producer who has been the driving force behind many thought-provoking documentaries. She is an alumni of the Breakthrough program, 2008. In 2021-22 she was an Executive and Impact Producer for *Last Of The Right Whales*. (HitPlay Productions/CBC). Feature documentaries she has produced include *The Woman Who Loves Giraffes* (2018-19) which was released theatrically in the US and Canada and was an audience favorite at film festivals. (Crave, Kinoshm, Canal D, Zeitgeist & Kino Lorber, Off the Fence,) and *The Messenger* (2015-16 international co-production with France) CBC, documentary channel, Canal D, ARTE, Netflix USA, Kino Lorber & ZED) Accolades include a CSA nomination for Best Cinematography, Best of Fest and Best Theatrical Documentary-International at the Wildlife Film Festival. Other award-winning independent docs include *The Big Wait* (2010, OMNI TV) and Gemini nominated *Long Haul Big Hearts* (2007, Vision TV). Jackson previously worked as an in-house broadcast producer and as a production executive for YTV, WTN and Discovery Digital Channels.



The work that DOC Institute and Hot Docs do to build careers is invaluable. I owe so much of my success as a filmmaker to these initiatives and helping me to build my career, make valuable industry connections and access events that would otherwise be unaffordable.

**Victoria Lean - 2013**

# ALL PARTICIPANTS BY YEAR

## 2004

Summer Love Larazou  
Howard Fraiberg  
Erin Faith Young  
Jeremy Edwards  
Velcro Ripper

## 2005

Rama Rau  
Sanjay Talreja  
Eric Geringas  
Nadine Valcin

## 2006

Gail Maurice  
Siddan  
Desalegn Eyobe

## 2007

Ralph Brown  
Audrey Huntley  
Jane Gurr  
Areta Lloyd

## 2008

Joanne Jackson  
Lisa Valencia Svensson  
Mark Collings  
Juan Baquero

## 2009

Sheona McDonald  
Joanne McConnell  
Kathleen Maitland-Carr  
Steven James May

## 2010

Elisa Paloschi  
Aeyliya Husain  
Diana Dai  
June Chua

## 2011

Aaron Hancox  
Tamara Dawit  
Jen Recknagel  
Eamonn O'Connor  
Münire Armstrong  
David Moses  
Nick Wilson

## 2012

Jules Koostachin  
Jeff Thrasher  
Rob Lindsay  
Craig Jackson  
Azfar Rizvi  
Nathalie Younglai  
Mark Bochster

## 2013

Yvonne Drebert  
Jane Hui Wang  
Victoria Lean  
Jason O'Hara  
Margarita Ramon  
Marc Serpa Francoeur  
Nadia Tavazzani  
Robinder Uppal

## 2014

Sherien Barsoum  
Andrew Moir  
Elaisha Stokes  
Ngozi Paul  
Stephanie Weimar  
Erin McMichael  
Stephanie Brown  
Louie Palu

## 2015

Ashley Brook  
Hugh Gibson  
Janine Fung  
Janine Heath  
Jesse McCracken  
Julia Morgan  
Nicolas Kleiman  
Shasha Nakhai

## 2016

Vivian Belik  
Andrea Conte  
Kaz Ehara  
Serene Husni  
Lindsay Kutner  
Lisa Rideout  
Farzana Shammi  
Caitlin Starowicz

## 2017

Amanda Buckiewicz  
Christopher Rompre  
Jorge Thielen Armand  
Kacey Cox  
Lena MacDonald  
Lindsay Fitzgerald  
Rayne Zuckerman  
Rémy Huberdeau

## 2018

Alexis Wood  
Caitlin Durlak  
Cat Mills  
Celeste Koon  
Daniel Froidevaux  
Josiane Blanc  
Maya Bedward  
Yasmine Mathurin

## 2019

Eui Yong Zong  
Betty Xie  
Colin Scheyen  
Jamie Miller  
Polina Teif  
Lesley Johnson  
Qais Pasha  
Lulu Wei

## 2020

Aïcha Diop  
Alexander Humilde  
Chrisann Hessing  
Cliff Caines  
Javier Lovera  
Jennifer Laiwint  
Renata Mohamed  
Shazia Javed

## 2021

Carolina Valencia  
Erin Byrnes  
Felipe Lopez Gomez  
Graeme Bachiu  
Jamie Day Fleck  
Kenya-Jade Pinto  
Maria Markina  
Nadeer Hashmi

## 2022

Joel Elliott  
Alice Il Shin  
Mariam Zaidi  
Ryan Singh  
Emily Graves  
Calvin Hudson Hwang  
Noa Im  
Annie Sakkab

## 2023

Weiye Su  
Alejandro Valbuena  
Chelsea Nyomi  
Manuel Garcia  
Sara Taylor  
Tobi Abdul  
Ahmed Nour

# REPORT CREDITS

## **Project Lead:**

Lalita Krishna

## **Researcher/Writer**

Joanne Jackson

## **Co-ordinator**

Miru Yogarajah

## **Graphic Designer**

Donica Willis

## **DOC INSTITUTE Managing Director**

Lauren Howes

## **DOC INSTITUTE Program Associate**

Warren Chan

# PARTNERS

THE DOC INSTITUTE BREAKTHROUGH PROGRAM IS SUPPORTED BY







