



“In the theatre, there’s this idea that on stage you should project, so that the people in the back rows can hear it. I think the same is true with film: **you want to project clearly so lots of different kinds of people can hear your film, and connect with it.** I can’t begin to say how much Beyond the Choir has helped me with that.” – Jennifer Taylor, Director of “New Muslim Cool”

AN ASSESSMENT OF

BEYOND THE CHOIR

AN INITIATIVE OF ACTIVE
voice®

Paul VanDeCarr

1. “Beyond the Choir” Background



Welcome to Shelbyville,
Photo: Greg Poschman

Preaching to the choir is often maligned as a useless practice. But preachers do it every week, and with good reason: it’s part of how they build a community of belief and mutual support. The audience at a documentary film screening is often not so unlike a church congregation. People may go to see an advocacy film they already agree with, or share their anger or grief with a like-minded audience or rally themselves for action. Consider the house-party screenings of Robert Greenaway’s documentaries on Wal-Mart or the Iraq War. Such screenings can be a uniquely effective way for the “choir” to learn, connect and activate.

For nearly a decade, Active Voice, and its predecessor, Television Race Initiative, have transformed a host of powerful documentaries into tools for social change agents. The organization has created “framing” materials and provided technical assistance to help viewers understand the human dimension of policy issues. Although Active Voice has occasionally worked with “advocacy” films—those that are structured to lead the viewer to a particular conclusion and rally them with a clear call to action—the organization has specialized in working with documentaries that feature nuanced story lines, complex characters and real-life depictions of multiple perspectives. And so, while the organization recognizes the value of preaching to the choir, it also knows that there’s nothing like a great story to bridge political, religious or other divides, and to bring people on different sides of an issue into productive conversation. But even filmmakers who want to reach “beyond the choir” may find it more difficult than they expected.

Active Voice launched a multi-year initiative called “Beyond the Choir” (BTC) to systematically explore how it could help filmmakers connect with new audiences. Active Voice’s experience suggests that if filmmakers, advocates and policy shapers connected earlier in the creative process, documentaries could be more vibrant tools for addressing social issues and public policy in ways that audiences outside the “Sundance Belt” can *hear*. Specifically, filmmakers could get expert input on the issues their films treat, and policy advocates could get powerful stories that are connected to the change they’re trying to make. “We could have been helpful—and we could have really used this documentary—if you’d come to us earlier,” is a common refrain Active Voice has heard from many policy experts and advocates. BTC has worked to create a community of producers and strategists who want to create and use films that tell powerful stories, engage people across divides and help them understand the high stakes of the policy options before us.

That’s the theory, anyway. In practice, the path is fraught with challenges and choices. How can a filmmaker work with target audiences during the production of a film without sacrificing her artistic integrity? If you ask someone to respond to the rough cut of the film, are you obligated to incorporate his input? How do you know when the kitchen is getting too crowded with cooks? All these questions have been asked, and some answered, as BTC progressed. This paper documents some of what Active Voice has learned.

2. Who We Spoke With And What Films We Covered

FILMS AND FILMMAKERS

- **“La Americana”** – Produced by Nick Bruckman, “La Americana” tells the story of an undocumented immigrant’s journey from Bolivia to New York City and back. Active Voice worked with the filmmaker towards the end of production and into distribution to reach new audiences. www.la-americana.com
- **“Getting High”** – Director Victor Silverman and producer Jack Walsh are at work on “Getting High,” which will tell the story of the Silverman family’s collision with drugs and alcohol, set against the backdrop of America’s “War on Drugs.” Active Voice convened brain-trusts and worked to secure funding for the film.
- **“New Muslim Cool”** – Jennifer Taylor is director of “New Muslim Cool,” a 2009 documentary about Hamza Pérez, a former drug dealer who converted to Islam and moved to Pittsburgh to rebuild his family, and take his message of faith to young people through his hip-hop music. Active Voice worked closely with Taylor to develop an engagement strategy for the film while it was still in production. www.newmuslimcool.com
- **“Welcome to Shelbyville”** – Director /Producer Kim Snyder is currently in post-production on “Welcome to Shelbyville.” Shot between the 2008 Presidential election and spring 2009, the film follows a small Southern town as it grapples with rapid demographic change and immigrant integration. Active Voice introduced Snyder to the Shelbyville story as part of a broader media initiative in support of immigrant integration. www.welcometoshelbyvillefilm.com

FUNDERS AND POLICY EXPERTS

- **Orlando Bagwell** – Emmy and Peabody Award-winning filmmaker and Director of the Ford Foundation’s “Freedom of Expression” program, which supports diverse arts spaces, public service media, media rights and access and religion in the public sphere. He funded Beyond the Choir. <http://www.fordfoundation.org/issues/freedom-of-expression/>
- **Belinda Reyes** – Assistant Professor in the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University. She is also an adjunct fellow at The Public Policy Institute of California. She participated in brain-trusts on “New Muslim Cool.” www.ppic.org/main/bio.asp?i=138
- **John Carnevale** – President of Carnevale Associates, LLC, a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm. He has worked for over 20 years in drug policy for three administrations and four drug czars. He participated in a brain-trust about “Getting High.” www.carnevaleassociates.com.
- **John Esterle** – Executive Director of The Whitman Institute (TWI), a private foundation in San Francisco which supports processes and programs that help people to improve their thinking and decision making. TWI is interested in the use of cross-perspective dialogue and has funded Active Voice. www.thewhitmaninstitute.org
- **Munir Jiwa** – Founding Director of the Center for Islamic Studies and Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He hosted the Active Voice brain-trust on “New Muslim Cool.” www.gtu.edu/centersandaffiliates/islamicstudies
- **Stephen Talbot** – President and co-founder, with his two siblings, of The Talbot Players, a story factory specializing in books, documentaries and films. Previously, Stephen Talbot was series editor of the award-winning PBS program, FRONTLINE/World. As a veteran broadcast journalist, Talbot is a trusted source for ideas about ethics, roles and public perceptions about public media today. www.talbotplayers.com

3. Components of a Theory of Change

LEARN HOW STORIES TOUCH PEOPLE

Any theory about how films can effect change begins with the power of stories. Films that tell stories can play an integral role in advancing dialogue on polarized issues. People “take sides” on an *issue*, but it’s much harder to “take sides” on a *story*. Stories, as opposed to polemics, have qualities that enable them to connect and move people. Belinda Reyes says that films “make issues more real” for her students, especially when dealing with matters like police constraint or second-generation immigration with which students have little or no personal experience.



La Americana,
Photo: Nicholas Bruckman

The best documentary films work on multiple levels, giving viewers many ways to connect with a film and its characters. Munir Jiwa says that “‘New Muslim Cool’ is not just about being Muslim. The main character is a convert to Islam. He’s a father. He works in a prison. There are many ways people could intersect with the film.” This sentiment is echoed by Victor Silverman, who says that a well-told story can draw out a viewer’s experience. “Everyone has a relationship with drugs and alcohol and the problems and good things involved,” he says. “Part of what might make ‘Getting High’ a mass-audience film is that it touches that experience in lots of people.” A good story-based documentary film can also humanize an otherwise abstract public policy issue, give viewers many ways to relate to those characters and link the story to viewers’ own experiences and lives. In this way, a story is less likely to generate argument about ideologies, and more likely to generate dialogue on values. It’s precisely that sort of dialogue that many funders, filmmakers and policy advocates dearly want to make happen. Active Voice sees stories as an important part of any “ecosystem of change.”

MAP OUT THE STATE OF THE DEBATE

As Active Voice comes to understand more deeply the roles that stories can play in *any* policy discussion, it lays the groundwork for putting those stories to work in *particular* policy discussions. In order to reach audiences “beyond the choir,” the filmmaker must learn where those desired audiences are coming from. Part of how Active Voice helps in this process is to convene thinkers, activists, policy experts, and others—in what the organization calls “brain-trusts.” Active Voice helps to map out the dialogue and the policymaking, discern the underlying interests of the people involved, and identify leverage points for the films. For example, brain-trust participant Belinda Reyes helped assess the immigration debate for “New Muslim Cool.” She says that some people may want to close the borders in order to “preserve” the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the United States, or protect jobs for U.S. citizens. On a more local level, she adds that some parents may feel threatened by a surge in Latino immigration and react by supporting English-only policies. So what may have previously looked like some inscrutable anti-immigrant sentiment is actually more complicated; people are concerned about jobs, or cultural heritage, or economics, and it happens that they feel those interests are threatened by immigrants. Only when a filmmaker understands and addresses the underlying concerns of his audiences can he involve them in dialogue. Through brain-trusts and other means, Active Voice can help filmmakers get a lay of the ideological land.

IDENTIFY AUDIENCES IN THE CHOIR AND BEYOND

Once Active Voice has helped filmmakers and funders clarify the role of stories, and situated the film within the current debate on the issue, it can then help by identifying what audiences—both within and beyond the choir—the film might reach to maximize its impact. “New Muslim Cool” director Jennifer Taylor says that “strange bedfellows are quite achievable, and the most delightful of combinations.” Her film captures the working relationship between its central Muslim character and a Christian prison minister. “If we can repeat that relationship [in the engagement campaign], then we can position this as something more than a story about ‘over there.’”

Like other BTC films, “New Muslim Cool” doesn’t lack for perspective, it just leaves partisanship behind. Kim Snyder says as much about her film, too: “I’m not out to create something pro-immigration or anti-immigration. If I did that, I’d only be speaking to a small group of people who already see the world the way I do. My approach—and I think this is the approach of Beyond the Choir—is a kind of diplomacy. We forget that this is what the U.S. was founded on. And what’s more, because I’m working in the Bible Belt with this film, when they go back to scripture, they have to acknowledge that it tells them to welcome the stranger.” By understanding the links to American and Christian values, Snyder is going beyond the typical left-right divide on immigration, and reaching people who might not normally support immigration. She says, “We have a lot of people who are unlikely leaders, it would be nice to see them feel spurred on to take action, to feel like they can organize.” Active Voice helped identify those audiences.

DETERMINE HOW TO CONNECT WITH TARGET AUDIENCES “BEYOND THE CHOIR”

For any film viewer, deciding to go see a film is a calculation with two interrelated parts: the practical (e.g. how conveniently can I get to the venue, do I have the cable station that’s airing it, is it easy to download or watch online, what is the time commitment) and the psychological (e.g. will I learn something, will my perspective be understood or appreciated in the film, will my neighbors be at the screening). The psychological element of reaching beyond the choir is complicated. Jennifer Taylor said that, as of the fall of 2008, the FBI and U.S. Attorney’s Office were refusing to grant her interviews for the film. “Another filmmaker told me, ‘If they don’t say anything, you’ll be lucky and you won’t have to talk with them.’ But that’s not my intent. I’m working hard to get law enforcement’s view.” If people beyond the choir don’t see their views represented or at least acknowledged in a film, they might just ignore it.

On a practical note, filmmakers—in concert with Active Voice—must take a film to places that are convenient to beyond-the-choir audiences. Jennifer Taylor had a PBS broadcast and YouTube clips, but also had to develop relationships with Christian churches and get the film into the venues and media outlets where beyond-the-choir audiences were more likely to watch it. Reaching beyond the choir may also mean producing different versions of a film that appeal more to certain audiences. Munir Jiwa says that “people can latch on to different parts of a film,” and that by creating different versions of a film, the director and Active Voice can help put the story within reach of different audiences beyond the choir. This does not mean pandering to audiences, just working to understand where they are coming from.

4. How to Make Input Useful for a Film Project

Filmmakers in the “Beyond the Choir” initiative say that its approach is best-suited to certain kinds of projects. Advocacy filmmakers, for example, aren’t necessarily trying to reach outlying audiences, and the BTC approach would only dilute the force of what they are trying to create. Victor Silverman says, “There’s something appealing to filmmaking with a sense of outrage at injustice and the bad guy. And there are a lot of things to be outraged at. But a film with outrage is not going to work [for us]. If we do another film that talks about how the drug war hasn’t worked, then the people we need to move along aren’t even going to watch it. So in that sense, I think we’re ideal for ‘Beyond the Choir.’ That’s something I’ve wanted to achieve with this film.”

Other filmmakers interviewed for this paper also said they felt well-suited to the BTC approach. All of them recognized the value of bringing in advisors to a “brain-trust” early on, and continuing throughout production; brain-trust participants help filmmakers imagine how their beyond-the-choir audiences might perceive the film. They might also suggest interviewees for the film, other advisors, advocacy organizations or other groups that might help distribute the film when it is ready. But there are drawbacks to the brain-trusts, and sometimes the input they provide can muddy the waters for filmmakers. Over the course of the BTC initiative, Active Voice learned about how better to manage input.

“GETTING HIGH” – USING ADVISORS TO NAVIGATE TRICKY POLITICAL TERRAIN

Victor Silverman and Jack Walsh understood the charged nature of the debate over drugs, which meant they had to tread carefully over mine-filled territory. Walsh says that the politics of drugs are much more polarized than they ought to be. “As a result of the culture wars of the 70s and 80s, there has been a manipulation of cultural issues for political purposes. And so we have these cultural divisions running everywhere through our politics.” That meant that they had to be thoughtful about how they discussed the project with different subjects.

“It is surprising to me how relatively simple it has been to get to elected officials to speak on camera and how much harder it has been to get to people who just disagreed with us,” says Silverman. He was especially eager to get a national family organization to speak. “But they felt if we opposed the war on drugs, then they were going to be the dupes. That was an a-ha moment for us about how we present ourselves. If we say the war on drugs has failed, then that suggests that we think the efforts they’ve been making all these years have been for naught. There are all these ways you signal where you stand.” Silverman adds, “There’s a logjam on this, and the logjam is political. The logjam is maybe about to break, and that’s where our film can make a difference.”

To navigate these tricky political waters and to help make the film more useful to advocates, Active Voice brought in policy experts for a brain-trust. They viewed clips from the work-in-progress and made what the filmmakers felt were helpful suggestions about which points of view to include, and so on. Silverman re-cut the trailer and showed it again to several participants of the brain-trusts, who were on the whole delighted with the changes. As often happens with independent documentary films, the process of raising funds and filming and

raising more funds became stretched out. In the meantime, a new presidential administration came to power; and while there was some hope for change in drug laws under an Obama administration, Silverman says he feels the film would be just as useful now as it was when the project was launched. “The fundamental divisions over U.S. drug policy remain. Criminal sanctions rather than treatment predominate even more than before, particularly with budget cuts gutting treatment programs in and out of the criminal justice system. And the one-sided solutions offered by the dogmatic advocates who dominate discussion on these issues don’t have that much to offer individual people grappling with family crisis.” For Active Voice, the experience pointed out the importance of a frequent feedback loop between the organization, the filmmakers and project advisors or brain-trust participants. That way, even as production continues over a long period of time, Active Voice can solicit input from individual experts, organize whole new brain-trusts or do whatever it takes to ensure that the BTC process is nimble, affordable, and useful.

“NEW MUSLIM COOL” – TAKING STOCK OF OTHER VOICES WITHOUT LOSING YOUR OWN

Active Voice had learned (and was still learning) from the experience of working with “Getting High” when the organization took on another film for BTC, “New Muslim Cool.” At brain-trust screenings of the work-in-progress, some policy advocates suggested some changes. For example, at one brain-trust, several participants balked at how in the first few minutes of the trailer, the main character, a Muslim, performs a hip-hop song about President Bush and the Twin Towers. Taylor recalls, “Some people said, ‘I can’t show this at a high school.’ That’s a fair point, but I had to think about the film more. Hamza’s personal evolution engages the viewer and takes them on a journey—that’s a theatrical experience, and people might come away with a deeper understanding of the diversity and complexity of Islam today. But we also know that we have to look at how people are going to use this media, and people who see this Muslim guy in the first five minutes doing a rap against America will just turn off and use this out of context. So it was good to have this pushback from brain-trust participants.” The trick, perhaps, is in balancing two different interests. As Taylor says, “Filmmakers want to get at the whole complicated truth, and policy people and advocates want to send a certain message.” Filmmakers say it’s a difficult balance to strike.

Taylor says that, useful as some of the comments from brain-trust participants may have been, “I was starting to lose my sense of the film a little bit.” That’s why it was helpful for her to take the work-in-progress to the Sundance Lab, “where I could talk with colleagues who don’t care what the film will be or what they think it should be. The people at Sundance said the more I put an attenuator on Hamza as a character, the less believable he becomes.” Taylor says she had “dueling impulses” about the input. “On the one hand, we have this grey character who is going to be a more interesting character, but then I found that what I’d been doing was smoothing off his rough edges!” On the other hand, she says, “We know that we’re dealing with material that’s controversial and a community that has been vilified in the media,” and she did not want to inflame the situation by carelessly presenting the character of Hamza. Taylor says BTC has provided valuable input, but she has to fall back on her instinct as well. Ultimately, says Taylor, “the question we’ve all asked ourselves is, ‘how do you as a filmmaker bring in these other voices and maintain your own voice?’”



New Muslim Cool,
Photo: Kauthar B. Umar



Welcome to Shelbyville,
Photo: Greg Poschman

“WELCOME TO SHELBYVILLE” – MAKING A FILM USEFUL, WHILE MAINTAINING AUTHENTICITY

That very question resonated with Active Voice as it initiated “Welcome to Shelbyville.” That film was conceived as a BTC project, and Active Voice was involved from day one, organizing a meeting to discuss a possible film about how long-term residents and new immigrant groups in small towns deal with each other. No town had been chosen, much less any characters. Active Voice encouraged Kim Snyder, filmmaker and co-founder of the BeCause Foundation, to visit Shelbyville. “People said that they’d seen a lot of films or stories on hate crimes or other crises,” says Kim Snyder, “but that there wasn’t a lot that showed how to figure this out—especially small towns where immigrants and refugees are coming into.” The BeCause Foundation entered into a multimedia production partnership with Active Voice, with BTC at the heart of the project.

Throughout production, Active Voice helped connect Snyder, who retains total creative control over the full length documentary, with people who could inform the various storylines. Snyder says that during production a story arose around a major food company, and she was able to use Active Voice’s contacts to ask about the background on this company and its relevance to the film’s characters. “Active Voice was very helpful with research,” she says. In addition, when Snyder had clips to show, Active Voice organized several screenings among policy makers and other experts. “It’s a little scary,” Snyder says, “because you think policy people won’t understand a clips reel, or that they’ll get attached to one or another clip or character that you may not end up including in the finished film.” But brain-trust participants understood the direction of the film and were pleased to find that it displayed empathy not just for the immigrants, but also for the small-town residents who were receiving them, and who had often been portrayed in news reports as insensitive or even racist.

Brain-trust participants and other advisors Active Voice has invited into the project have helped Snyder from the start: discuss what kind of story needed to be told, identify a town that would serve as a subject for the film, give vital background information on the issues and players in the film and consider how certain clips or quotes would be received. Snyder says that there is a point at which she can no longer receive input. The further along she is in post-production, the more set the structure of the film becomes. She explains, “The more experienced a filmmaker you are, the better it’ll turn out. You develop a more intuitive sense of what [advice] to throw out and what to keep. We’re walking that fine line between being an advocacy piece and being a real film that tells a story.” Striking this balance is no small concern, because, as Snyder says, “If you’re going to tackle an issue that has all this weight, only to learn that policy people don’t feel that it’s helpful or resonates, that’s a missed opportunity.” Since policy experts have been involved in the process throughout, they will be critically helpful in putting it to use in their communities. For example, Snyder hopes the film will be a tool for Active Voice’s campaign with Welcoming America’s 14-state (and growing) initiative to welcome immigrants, with policy makers and in community settings in new immigrant “gateways.”

5. Determining Active Voice's Roles

Active Voice has learned over the course of the BTC initiative how to be most helpful and how to avoid pitfalls. Producers and policy experts identified a number of roles that Active Voice can play in reaching beyond the choir.

- **Connect:** Through brain-trusts, networking, community screenings and other activities, Active Voice can help filmmakers connect with community groups that will form the basis for an engagement campaign once the film is completed. Director Nick Bruckman says, "I, as a filmmaker, can't really do what Active Voice does. You've got to develop partners and materials, so that when the lights go up after your film screens, you can capitalize on the energy that's in the room." Jack Walsh echoes this notion when he says that Active Voice serves the role of a facilitator, "to get policymakers and others to the table that we two shmoees in San Francisco could not get to the table. That helps us extend this way beyond broadcast."
- **Convene:** Active Voice convenes brain-trusts to consider how to reach beyond the choir. John Esterle of The Whitman Institute says he admires how Active Voice fosters dialogue on at least two levels. "During production, Active Voice hosts discussions about the issue and the film. Dialogue is therefore part of the process of creating the film, and then the finished film helps spark dialogue, too." The people Active Voice brings on board can help filmmakers see how parts of their film might attract or alienate viewers they want to reach. One brain-trust participant told Nick Bruckman that nowhere in his film "La Americana" did his main character say she was learning English, and that this would allow his target audiences "beyond the choir" to write her off as an "unworthy immigrant." Bruckman then made sure to include a quote of the woman talking about her English-language studies.
- **Document:** For purposes of the funder, the filmmaker and the audiences, Active Voice can document the impact of a film and how it changes people. Ford Foundation program director Orlando Bagwell says that there's an oft-missed opportunity in screenings and Q&A sessions. "It's in the moments where people are in a room, maybe it's a group that would not normally be together, and they're talking through these issues. There's an energy that takes place in that room. We [as funders] never really have access to those encounters and I think they're really useful encounters." Bagwell adds that it would be helpful for Active Voice to be able to capture that energy, document it, tell a story about it, maybe even make a short film. There's a moment there, when one person is changed by a film, when a light goes on, when a group of people connect or when a viewer commits to taking action based on a film she's just seen—those are the critical moments. Those moments of transformation are exactly what Active Voice is trying to create. And the better Active Voice can understand and document not just the whole *process* of engaging viewers, but also the very *moment* at which a viewer is changed—the better the organization will serve filmmakers, their funders and the many people working so passionately to make change.

La Americana,
Photo: Nicholas Bruckman



Such documentation will also demonstrate to funders the value of media. Jack Walsh says that BTC "is a great response to the predicament that independent film has landed in with funders. There's a sense that media is too expensive and has no impact." BTC isn't likely to make films any cheaper, but it can certainly make them more useful. And the better it can document that value, the better for the entire media field.

- **Negotiate:** Active Voice can serve to mediate between filmmakers and funders, so that both reach the beyond-the-choir audiences they want to activate. Jack Walsh remarks, “because filmmaking is a creative process, your assumptions change throughout the process. But foundations are very nervous about that, because the end product might not be aligned with their goals.” But he says Active Voice can use its understanding of filmmakers’ and funders’ respective needs to aid in the conversation between the two parties. “The great thing Active Voice is doing around this is getting funders to understand that, in fact, our goals are very aligned.” The views of a savvy media funder like Orlando Bagwell may be instructive for issue funders who simply want to include media funding as part of their portfolio. Bagwell says that, as a funder, “oftentimes what you want filmmakers to do is be what they are—these passionate beings who are not only going to produce a great film, but amass all this material to do that”—and the funder might be able to re-purpose those raw materials to suit her own program goals. Other funders might want a filmmaker to produce a “made-to-order” film that backs a certain point of view. Independent filmmakers may subsidize their other work by making such films. In any case, Active Voice can talk with funders and filmmakers to negotiate expectations about who they want to reach and the best ways to do that.
- **Strategize:** Active Voice can and does work with filmmakers to strategize about versioning, distribution platforms, engagement and funding. In today’s media environment, filmmakers are creating various versions of their films—two-minute YouTube teasers, segments tailored to specific audiences and so on. Filmmakers said they benefited from Active Voice’s knowledge of platforms, technologies and audience needs. Ford Foundation program director Orlando Bagwell adds that Active Voice has an important role to play in maintaining a civil conversation among people with different points of view. “As audiences we respond to [a film] differently. And if the work is done well, it’s going to bring to the surface lots of different views. You want all those people [in the audience] to stay in the room and not feel that certain ideas are privileged. “Beyond the Choir” can help whoever is presenting the film to facilitate an open conversation.” That kind of open discussion is as good an argument as any for the value of film as a tool for social change. Munir Jiwa says Active Voice could use its many contacts in philanthropy, academia and elsewhere to make a persuasive case for the value of film in the policy sphere.


- **Organize:** Active Voice not only helps strategize engagement campaigns, but also organizes them. With community screenings, policy discussions, educational materials, and other means, the organization puts all the strategy to use. Jennifer Taylor concludes, “for any filmmaker who has the opportunity to go through this process with ‘Beyond the Choir’, there’s no question they should do it. In this new environment, you can’t just broadcast your film and then think you’re done. There’s no question you should think about how the film’s going to be seen and what the conversation will be like, and you should plan for it. There’s *also* no question that you’ll be surprised in some ways. Some of our BTC audiences were different than we expected, but the planning was important.” The strategizing, planning and organizing did not begin or end with the screenings; instead, Taylor and Active Voice continue to assess how audiences respond to the film and make adjustments as needed so that the film is as useful as it can be.

One funder observes that Active Voice is building capacity for deep, long-term engagement. John Esterle of The Whitman Institute says, “People can create structures for temporary engagement—you bring an audience together once for a dialogue, for example. Some films really only have a short shelf-life, and that’s fine. Maybe they’re aimed at stopping a particular war or influencing a bill that’s coming up in Congress. But the real challenge is how to create lasting structures, and how to build lasting support among institutions for the use of media. That’s the challenge. And I think Active Voice has been a brilliant strategist in addressing this question.”



Welcome to Shelbyville,
Photo: Greg Poschman

Acknowledgments

 **FORDFOUNDATION** An Assessment of Beyond the Choir was funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation.
www.fordfound.org

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Active Voice uses film, television, and multimedia to spark social change from grassroots to grass tops. Our team of strategic communications specialists works with mediamakers, funders, advocates, and thought leaders to put a human face on the issues of our times. We frame and beta-test key messages, develop national and local partnerships, plan and execute high profile, outcome-oriented events, repurpose digital content for web and viral distribution, produce ancillary and educational resources, and consult with industry and sector leaders. Since our inception in 2001, Active Voice has built a diverse portfolio of story-based campaigns focusing on issues including immigration, criminal justice, healthcare, and sustainability. www.activevoice.net
