

NCFF Residency

Looking back on 7 years of the
NCFF Filmmakers Residency

**PREPARED BY
KARIN CHIEN**

For 7 years we ran the
first artist residency
for independent
producers.

REST FOR PRODUCERS IS *RADICAL*.

Each year, we invited a handful of mid-career and veteran producers to a six-day retreat program centered on rest and renewal. Producers worked in fiction, series, nonfiction, video games, video art, and international cinema. The first residents were selected from Indigenous communities and those of Asian descent, which have long stewarded and contributed to the richness of Nevada City.

What's Inside



This booklet narrates the evolution of the Nevada City Film Festival (NCFF) Filmmaker Residency into the **first artist residency to center independent producers**. We document what happened and detail the program's architecture, with the hopes of guiding others to support independent producers.

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How We Changed

2017

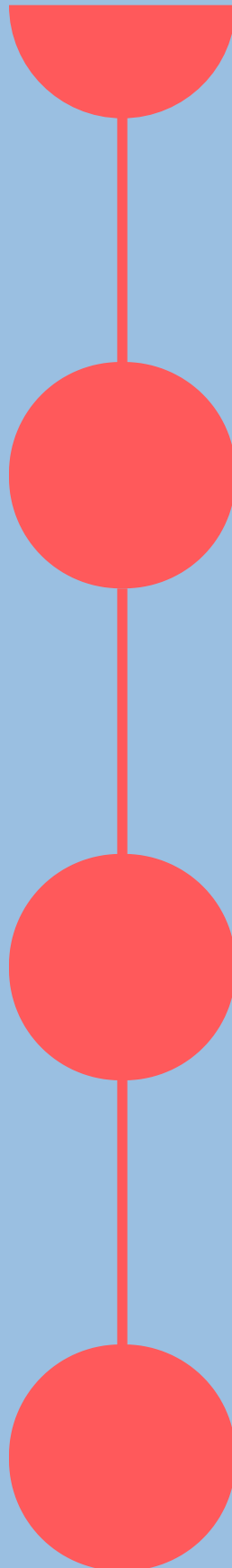
NCFF launched the MediaMaker Residency, a multi-day program supporting local Nevada County media makers.

2018

The residency expanded, welcoming two independent writer-directors for month-long stays and community engagement.

2019

The program reimaged itself to center independent producers, launching a creative retreat and hosting a producer-in-residence.



2020

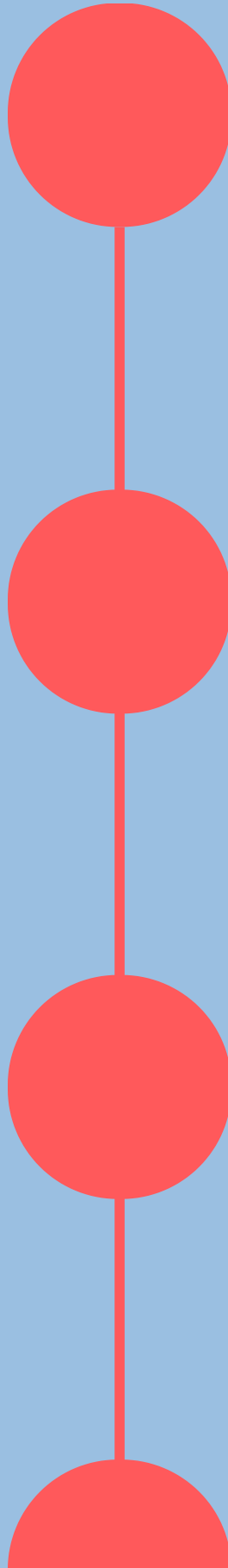
During the COVID-19 lockdown, residency funding supported online producer programs.

2021 - 2025

The residency welcomed five annual cohorts of mid-career & veteran independent producers.

2026

The residency paused while the festival transitions to include a creative cohort model.

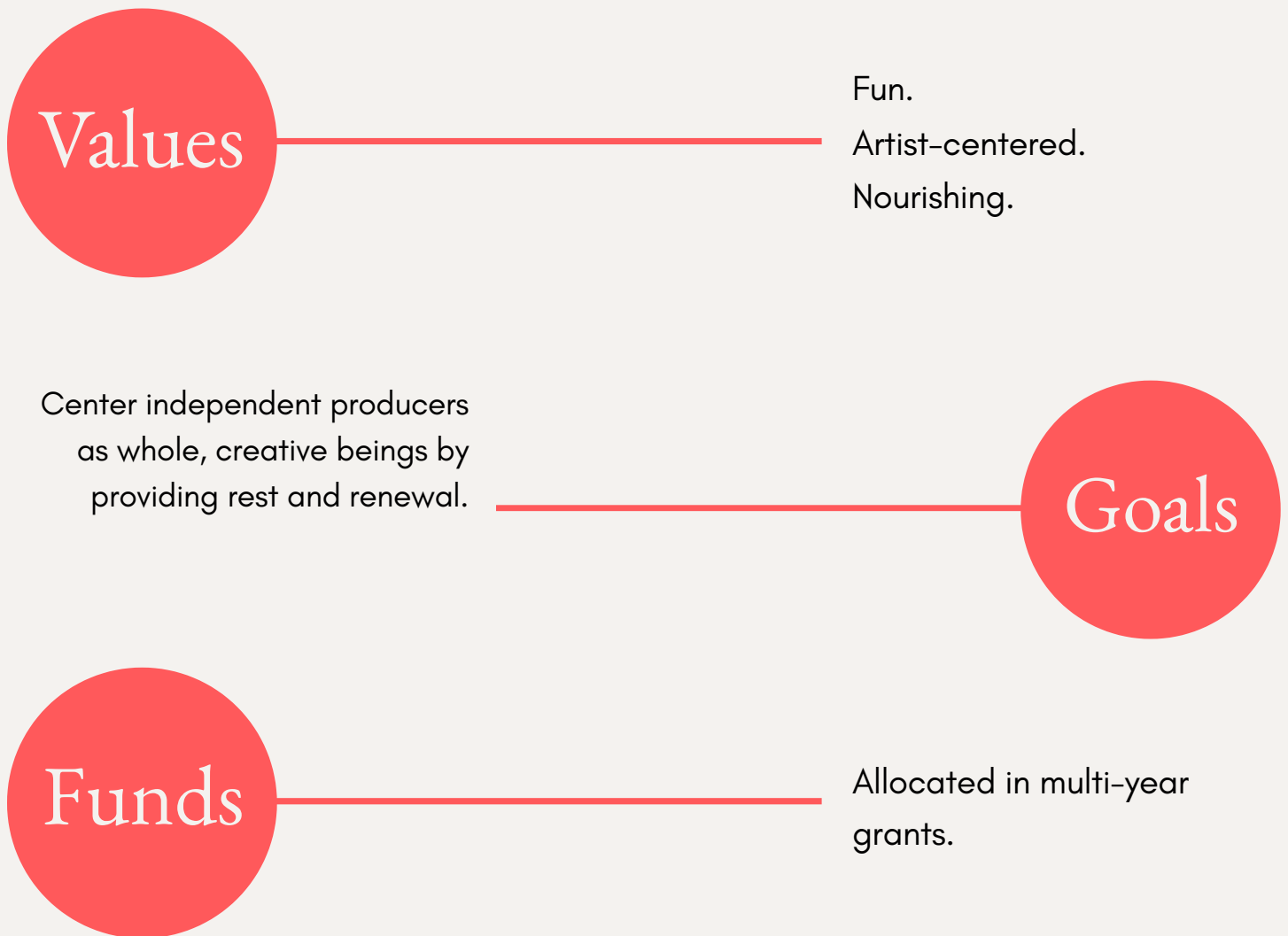


“It was the first time I understood that it wasn’t a badge of honor to be exhausted. It was the start of a *mindset change*.”

What Made It Work

The film festival's ethos provided a north star. NCFF Founder Jeffrey Clark and Executive Director Jesse Locks built a filmmaker-first festival from the ground up. Not only did the festival put great care into curating films each year, they paid for every filmmaker to travel from all over the world and hosted filmmaker events each day. Every year, the festival ended with filmmakers who didn't want to leave. A deep respect for artists was evident in every moment of the festival.

These values created the conditions for this unique residency program to emerge. And equally crucial was multi-year funding with budget commitments. Together, these fundamentals guided us:



How We Started

In February 2017, NCFF Executive Director Jesse Locks started the Nevada City Media Maker Residency and invited me (Karin Chien) as an adviser. I had visited Nevada City before when I was experiencing a period of grief. I discovered it through a friend & fellow producer, who lived in the sister town of Grass Valley. I found myself returning, where the small-town friendliness and the spectacular natural beauty were healing.

At that first residency, Jesse put together a robust 5-day program for select local media makers. During one of the breaks, I mentioned it had been a dream to run an artist residency, ever since trying a brief and successful filmmaker-in-residence program in Jamaica. Jesse said those magic words, "Tell me more." I sent her ideas, then a budget, then a proposal.

It was still a surprise when four months later, Jesse responded, "We're in!"

In 2018, I assumed stewardship of the residency. I jumped into that first year with only a couple of fixed ideas. I wanted to center artists from populations whose histories were crucial to Nevada City, but whose presence had been minimized or erased altogether – indigenous artists and artists of Asian descent. Further, I wanted to ask artists to find ways to contribute to local communities during their residencies. This coincided with NCFF's efforts to contribute resources to the Nisenan Tribe of California.

That first year, Jeffrey Clark (festival founder and artistic director), Jesse, and I interviewed filmmakers together, and we selected Blackhorse Lowe and Christina Choe – our proto-residents.



"One thing I made space for during the residency that I couldn't elsewhere was being honest about the challenges that come with independent producing. So often we are the ones that are meant to have all the answers."

Blackhorse did his residency at the homes of local residents Mike Mills and founder Jeffrey Clark. A favorite haunt was Fred's Szechuan on Broad Street. Christina did her residency at the home of NCFE adviser & line producer Louise Lovegrove in Grass Valley. A favorite haunt of hers was Heartwood Eatery on Commercial Street. Blackhorse worked with Nisenan spokesperson Shelly Covert to document language classes. Christina visited a local school, though her first feature was on a tour that took her away from the residency a couple of times. Their participation formed the general shape of the program to come, and we couldn't be more grateful to our early residents and local supporters.

Six months later, when summer was a distant memory, I was trudging through snowbanks at the Sundance Film Festival to join a rare roundtable. The Sundance Institute, had gathered most nonprofit film organizations into a breakfast meeting and invited me to serve as a producer-observer. Around the table, each organization listed what it was doing to support producers. The picture was clear: very little support was being offered to producers, and progress was incremental. For its part, the Sundance Film Festival said it was finally including producers' names in its festival materials-- a change that had taken over a decade of lobbying.

Immediately after that roundtable, I wrote an email to Jeff and Jesse, proposing a change in the residency. It was rewarding to host visionary writers and directors, yet I knew we could offer something no one else was doing. I put forward four options and to my delight, Jeff and Jesse chose a pivot that would center independent producers. Their whole-hearted commitment gave me the confidence to design something that hadn't been done.

"That last night. I remember hardcore belly laughs. I couldn't even tell you what we were laughing about. What is different about this residency is that it's soul enriching. It's not about building yourself for your career. It's about regenerating and rejuvenating yourself. It gave us the space to acknowledge the struggle and to rest a little bit. That's huge."



Here's how we *did* it.

“Quietly at first, and then
less so, I *stopped centering*
other people’s happiness
before my own.”

How We Did It

Selection of the Residents

I designed the selection to address gaps around which communities received support, and landed on supporting mid-career and veteran producers – those with 10+ years of producing experience. If they were my age or older, their career would have predated current producer labs or programs. If they were younger, the start of their career might have been supported by producer labs, but they'd be on their own as mid-career producers.

To select producers in the early years, I met with allies and nonprofit staff and asked them to nominate candidates, focusing on those from equity-deserving communities. In the later years, I tracked, discovered and selected producers myself, and relied on prior residents for recommendations. Two-thirds of the invited producers were people I had never met before.

I did as much due diligence as possible before sending out invites. The hardest part of the selection work was guessing the cohort's chemistry. In this residency, producers would spend a lot of time together. In retrospect, I learned that what helped most cohorts come together were shared life themes, e.g., parenthood, major career pivots, or managing burnout. Producers facing the same issues gelled quickly. And whether they faced similar issues often was determined by number of years spent producing. The closer their career spans were, the more likely they were to relate to one another.

Invitations were emailed followed by video meetings, and both often caught producers off guard in different ways. In the early years, some producers teared up when learning we would pay for travel, housing, and a stipend. For some, it was the first time an American festival had offered to pay their expenses. In later years, producers who received an invitation asked where to fill out an application, signaling the rise of application-based support programs, which were welcome but sometimes pitted producers against each other. This program worked hard to develop another way.



Location

Nevada City

In 2019, the first producer cohort stayed in a two-story house on many acres, a 15-minute drive winding up from town. That first cohort experienced a full retreat into nature – sleeping under the stars, hiking from their front door. Later cohorts would be housed closer to or in town. Ground transportation was an enduring challenge throughout the residency years. Many producers from New York City didn't drive. There was no shared-ride service, though the town now has an airport shuttle.

Most years, Jesse rented a house for the producer cohort and a separate rental for me. During the pandemic, the producers stayed in the refurbished National Exchange Hotel in downtown Nevada City, and loved it. And in the last two years, Jesse rented a stunning seven-room B&B in downtown Nevada City, where the producers stayed in the quieter section of the house, with access to balconies and patios. The advisers and I stayed in the front section with street access. After many years of searching for the right residency structure, this house had it all – similarly apportioned rooms, beautifully appointed common spaces, ample shaded outdoor seating, and parking downtown.



"What blew me away was how well we were treated. As an indie producer, I was not used to being treated like that! I felt pampered, in addition to feeling supported-- creatively, professionally, mentally."

Frequency

The residency was held during the annual Nevada City Film Festival. When it was in August, the heat was scorching and we spent time in the emerald-green Yuba river. But August was the start of wildfire season and after a smoke-filled 2021, the festival moved to June. Those later years saw more time spent hiking, walking, and cooking.

Duration

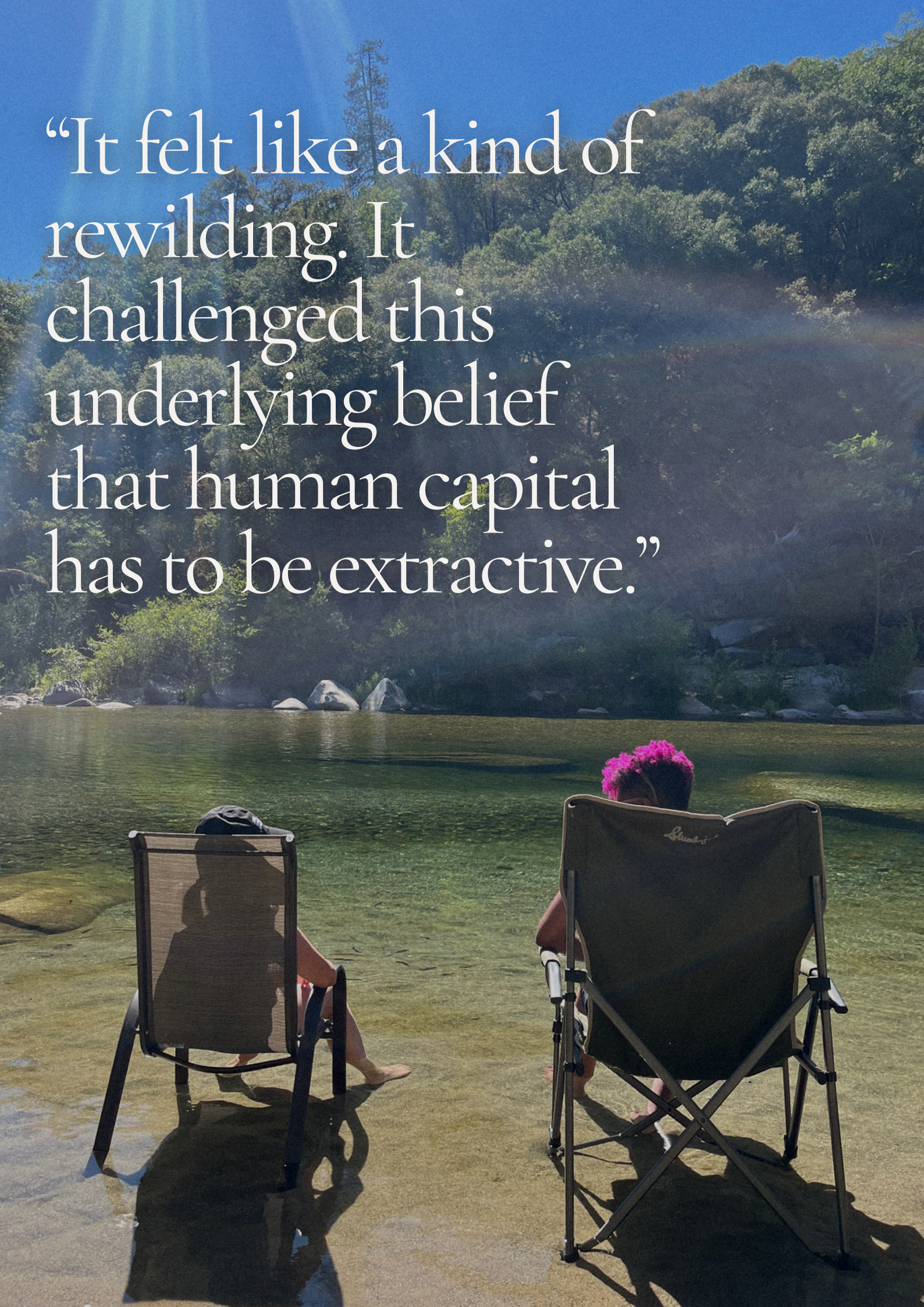
Six days. I asked myself, as a producer, how long I could attend an off the grid program. I came out to Wednesday afternoon to Monday morning. That felt like a feasible length of time to ask producers to commit to. Producers could justify being offline for two workdays, plus the weekend, and by Monday morning, they were back in the world.

The program was designed to optimize each sequential day to build toward a cumulative sense of rest and renewal. A few producers told me by Sunday that it was the most rested they had felt in a long time.

I told them the retreat was what they made of it and asked them not to come if they had can't-miss deadlines. What kept most producers off their laptops and their phones was each other. They spent days together talking, cooking, walking, eating, and laughing. Some years, the residency felt like one unending conversation. Only one year did a producer arrive with a budget to finish.

When we first pivoted to centering producers in 2019, I invited a producer to stay for a month: a producer-in-residence. In 2012, I had the opportunity to help invite a producer to the Jacobs Burns International residency. I wanted to try it again in Nevada City. I invited a producer from China, who brought his wife and young daughter. The monthlong stay meant the producer and his family were well integrated into the community. Though a longer stay also required more festival capacity. We tried one more producer-in-residence, but again NCFF did not have enough off-festival capacity to fully support it. Without full time or year-round staff, the festival was best positioned to support residents during the festival itself.

“It felt like a kind of
rewilding. It
challenged this
underlying belief
that human capital
has to be extractive.”



Activities

The residency started the day before the film festival. That gave us time with Jesse, who would set a tone of fun, which gave the producers permission to embrace fun. Jesse brought stories of local and institutional history, and that helped producers find points of connection to the festival before immersing into the residency.

DAY THREE: CONNECT				
	Activity	Objective	Location	Who?
Before 9a	Breakfast	Please eat before the first session.	Residency venue	
9a - 10a	Community of Practice	Community of Practice Session 2: Thriving	Residency venue	Facilitator: Karin
10a - 1p	Coaching	Discussion around sustainability practices led by a career coach (via Zoom)	Residency venue	Coach: Cynthia Pong
1:30p - 3p	Lunch	Lunch (cook at Parsonage, lunch at Heartwood)	TBD	
3p - 5p		Rest Creative Time Nature Options: Nisenan Tribute Trail Walk (1.5 miles) Visit Nisenan Arts and Culture: Uba Seo Gallery	Nevada City	
5p - 6:30p	Free Time	Rest Reflect Optional: NCFF Kickoff Cocktails @ National Hotel	National Hotel	Optional
6p	Dinner	Dinner at Sopa Thai	Sopa Thai	

Activities

I knew that to get producers to rest would be a challenge. So, the activity schedule evolved into a well-honed program that slowly marched us into a state of rest. I also knew that healing required a few things. One was movement. Another was talking. Equally important was food and nourishment. For producers coming from scarcity – sometimes without time to eat, sleep, or exercise – this program would center those activities.

The program operated on three levels of producer development. The first was to center producer stories and experiences. Gary Chou of Orbital showed me how to lead and design a community of practice for producers. Each session started with a simple prompt. We time boxed responses to ten minutes, to not overwhelm the speaker or those listening. We held communities of practice sessions on most mornings. Many years, once the producers started talking, they didn't stop.

The program also operated on fun and movement. Both were key to clearing blocks, processing emotions, and getting us out of our heads. We talked in the mornings and we moved in the afternoons and activities were determined by the heat. Weather permitting, I led us on walks, swims, drives, and hikes. In the later years, I learned to survey producers in advance and include more accessible options. For some, it was enough to be in nature and not move at all. The third level the program operated on was food and nourishment. Every year, the first thing we did together, after checking into accommodations, was grocery shopping.



Jesse would hand me a \$500 gift card, and I would drive the producers to a local organic co-op to stock up for the next 6 days. It wasn't originally designed this way, but the residency's first lesson became spending that entire gift card on groceries. For most producers, this was really hard. I told them we couldn't leave until we spent it all and not to worry about leftovers – they'll make their way to the festival office. This simple act of stocking the fridge became a first reorientation for producers to center their own needs.

Afterwards, we headed to dinner with Jesse, who would book the nicest restaurant in town and order in abundance. That further helped reinforce a frame of nourishment and abundance, as we eased into the residency.



“This residency mattered because of the community. That's the thing I'm going to carry through my career. Even now, after so many years, that's really stayed with me. Those memories of standing in the crystal clear water with the other producers was so healing and magical.”

Advisers and Professional Development

Before the residency, I polled producers to ask what advisers or professional development they needed. Some advisers returned every year. One year, a producer requested a sound bath and a truly exceptional local sound bath healer became part of our program for four years. Another year, a producer requested a career coach. It took me a year to find a coach who could work with independent producers and a tremendously talented coach became part of the residency for years.

A second adviser slot rotated every year and included experts in venture financing, intellectual property, franchise building, AI technology, personal narratives, and legal issues. An array of experts agreed to spend a few days and nights with us in Nevada City each year.

By design, with a focus on rest and renewal, the retreat intersected only occasionally with the festival program. In the first year, Jesse programmed a fantastic panel for the producer cohort. With a small audience in a small town, we had one of my favorite panel conversations ever – a chat just for us producers. In following years, we'd pop into the festival's filmmaker breakfast. Some producers welcomed a point of connection with the festival, but mostly, they were just content to rest.

Full List of Advisers

Cynthia Pong, *Embrace Change*

Laurie Jo Colvin, *Sacred Space Spa*

Anne Moore, *Lawyer*

Eva Kozanecka, *Google*

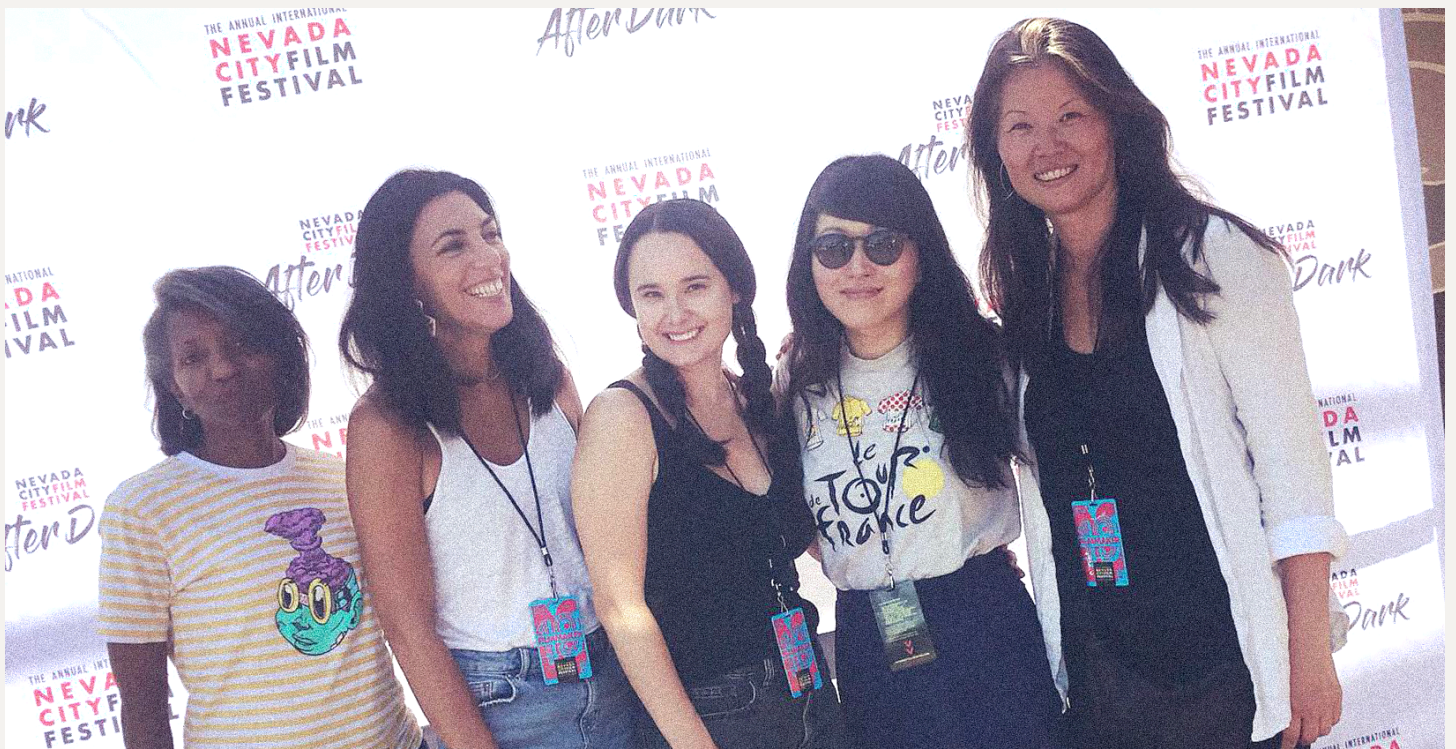
Christie George, *"The Emergency Was Curiosity"*

Gary Chou, *Orbital*

Diana Williams, *Kinetic Energy Entertainment*

Heather Box, *Million Person Project*

"One of my favorite things was the career coach. It gave me another perspective on my work, especially work-life balance. I'd never been given that before... it's always about the work, the work, the work, and this was about the work in the context of life. That's what I loved – that this was a break from the hustle of what it is to be a producer, and no one does that for us."



What It Cost

We did a lot on a small budget. The cost of the residency didn't fluctuate much over the years. The annual budget ranged from \$25,000 to \$35,000. Here's a budget from a later year:

Honorarium (x 4 producers)	\$5,000
Air + ground stipend (x 4 producers)	\$5,000
Grocery store gift card	\$600
Adviser fees	\$5,000
Sound bath	\$350
5-night housing rental per NCCF	\$5,000
Residency Director fee	\$10,000

“When we went to the grocery store and you told us to fill our cart. It was a visual example of how we always put ourselves last as producers — we don't ask for what we want. That really impacted my thinking about what I want career wise and even just personally — and feeling okay with answering that question just for myself.”

Funding

Thanks to the stewardship of Jeff and Jesse, program funding was allocated in three-year blocks. Multi-year funding was a tremendous gift. In addition to allowing the ability to plan cohorts one to two years in advance, it gave me the confidence to try new and different things and keep evolving the program.



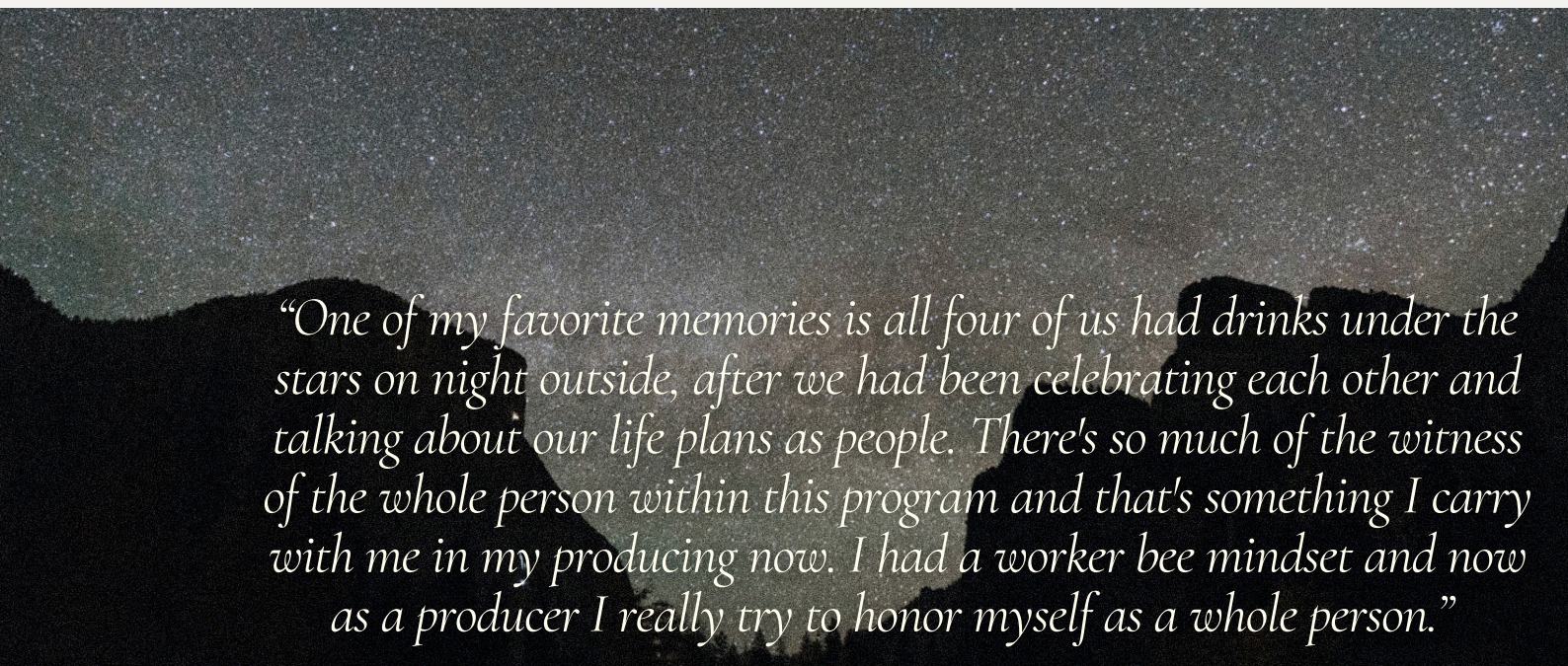
Team

NCFF Executive Director – Jesse Locks. Jesse set the dates and venues for the festival and the residency. Jesse secured housing each year – no small feat in a small town – and arranged our venues. She found local guides and gave recommendations every year. Jesse was onsite to troubleshoot issues and answer questions. The residency needed that level of deep local knowledge, networks, and year-round support.

Residency Director – Karin Chien. Every year the work started with producer cohort planning, invites, selections and coordinating arrivals. I planned our activities and secured requested advisers. During the residency, I led our communities of practice, supported the advisers and coaches, made dinner reservations, led walks and drove us to the rivers, hot springs and the mountains. I usually arrived and departed the same day as the producer residents, to help with airport transport.

Interns – in the first and last year, a program intern helped run errands. This support was greatly appreciated. But the presence of an intern sometimes put producers in a position of mentorship, so most years, we didn't include interns or assistants. Producers are asked every day to have their brains picked – to give away their knowledge or time or connections – and this residency aimed to be a place where producers centered their own needs.

“After the residency I finally started to charge a fee on projects, after the first meeting with a film team. This was something I felt uncomfortable doing before. But after the session with the career coach, I felt emboldened to state a fee up front. Sometimes the film team would agree or negotiate, and sometimes that would be the end — *and that was ok!*”



“One of my favorite memories is all four of us had drinks under the stars on night outside, after we had been celebrating each other and talking about our life plans as people. There's so much of the witness of the whole person within this program and that's something I carry with me in my producing now. I had a worker bee mindset and now as a producer I really try to honor myself as a whole person.”

Outcome

This program was designed for one outcome – rest and renewal. It asked this question: what conditions are necessary for independent producers to rest?

At the end of 2019's producer-in-residency with Zhang Xianmin, on the way to the airport, I asked, “So, what did you get done?” He stunned even himself with his answer: “Nothing!” And it filled me with joy. Here was someone who had produced 80 films while teaching filmmaking and holding up much of a community back home. I had only a glimpse into the stresses and pressures he faced. That he spent a whole month resting was beyond my expectation. At that moment, I knew the program could work. Then later, when Tricia Hersey published *The Nap Ministry* and popularized “rest is radical resistance”, it gave me the words to what we were building: “Rest for producers is radical.”

Past producer residents sometimes asked, what's the deliverable? “No deliverables, just show up,” I would reply. We are used to labs and fellowships and other programs that orient around a project. They're designed to support a project's life--not the producer's. For 6 days every year, across 7 years, we asked nothing of producers other than to show up in Nevada City and rest.

How Can We Best Support Producers *Now*?

“The retreat was key to reminding how much power we hold, as individuals and collectively, to shape our industry with equity and dignity. That we can imbue a more human-centered approach into an industry that often challenges those very values.”

In the final years, I noticed certain patterns with increasing concern about where the industry was headed. One year, a cohort struggled with health issues stemming from the stresses of producing, compounded by not being able to stop working for income. The next year, a producer arrived needing cashflow and more support than the festival had been providing. The year after that, the entire cohort arrived with ideas and plans to pivot from independent producing. It led me to ask whether it was all a coincidence, and if clearly not, why producers were arriving more broken or broke each year. The residency didn't change, but the business had, dramatically.

I loved every minute I spent with producers in this program. Most years, I left the residency filled to the brim with energy. But I couldn't deny these patterns. By the end, I knew the residency wasn't enough to address these epic gaps. Amidst the collapse of revenue streams and business models, rest was not enough.

We tried a few things differently in the last couple years. In 2024, I held an alumni gathering, a mini-retreat at the Pacific Ocean. In 2025, I selected two entrepreneurial producers working in new ways, alongside producers following traditional paths. I learned so much from spending time with these two types of producers and what they needed. That will certainly inform what I create going forward.

Up until the last day, I didn't allow myself to think about what's next. It was too hard while still running the program. Now that the program is wrapping up, that's what's on my mind. How can we best support independent producers to meet this moment? An ecosystem that cannot meet disruption with creativity won't survive change. I have faith that we will get there, even if it gets worse before it gets better.

I am profoundly grateful for the seven years I spent with the producers, with Nevada City, with Jesse and Jeff.

What a time we had. ■

“After the residency it became possible for me to see myself as a different kind of producer, one that’s not a cog in the machine. I developed a lot of self-respect. It’s hard to explain. I just value myself in a very different way than I did before.”

Seven Years: Who Came

Melissa Adeyemo
Nikkia Moulterier
Riel Roch Decter
Taylor Shung

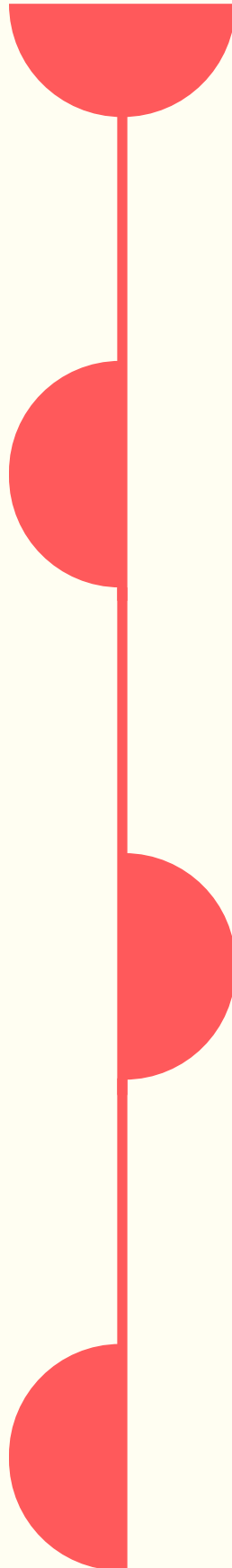
2025

2024

Giulia Caruso
Rachael Fung
Tory Lenosky

Mishka Brown
Amy Hobby
Mariko Munro

2023



2022

Jameka Autry
Diane Quon
Avril Speaks

Liz Cardenas
Rebecca Green
Kishoria Rajan

2021

2020

During lockdown,
funding supported
online producer
programs

Diane Houslin
Vassiliki Khonsari
Christina King
Kimberley Parker
Zhang Xianmin

2019

2018

Christina Choe
Blackhorse Lowe





Design by Juan Mateo Menendez

www.nevadacityfilmfestival.com