

## BlackStar Film Festival Announces Major New Grants, Full-Time Staff and Board of Directors in Advance of Summer Festival

Now in their ninth year, the Festival makes big moves in response to rapid growth

(Philadelphia, PA – April 6, 2020) The BlackStar Film Festival is pleased to announce several new developments that highlight its growth as the world's premier celebration of film and video artists of color: the hiring of **five full-time, year-round staff members**, a first for the organization; the receipt of two substantial grants from the **Surdna Foundation** and the **Philadelphia Cultural Fund**; and the welcoming of a new **Board of Directors**. Together, they are emblematic of the great strides the festival has made in recent years, drawing national and international acclaim and bringing together some of the most innovative and impactful filmmakers, producers, thinkers, and distributors working today. This year's festival, the ninth, remains scheduled to take place from **July 30–August 2** in Philadelphia, PA, with more information to be announced in mid-May.

The **Surdna Foundation** has awarded BlackStar Film Festival a significant **three-year, \$500,000** grant and the **Philadelphia Cultural Fund** has awarded the festival **over \$11,000** in additional funding for this year. The support from these organizations will go towards expanding BlackStar's yearlong programming, going beyond the festival model to support creatives and communities of color around the country and wider world. BlackStar's robust slate of initiatives includes an Annual Filmmaker Seminar, that invites participants to explore the technical and creative aspects of mediamaking, and a Production Lab, offering fellowships, equipment, mentorship, funding, and critical feedback to young and emerging Philadelphia-based filmmakers. There are also plans for an Exhibition Program and a periodical Journal of Film and Visual Culture, which aims to extend the critical discourse of BlackStar's to a wider audience while also creating a platform for writers of color and critics with a racial justice analysis.

The organization has also welcomed four full-time staff members, who join Founder, Artistic Director, and CEO, **Maori Karmael Holmes**: **Nehad Khader**, Program Director; **Lauren**



**Hunter**, Operations Director; **Imran Siddiquee**, Communications Director; and **Kira Rodriguez**, Administrative Coordinator. The newly constituted team will help BlackStar in its mission to showcase the varied and nuanced landscapes of communities of color, while also expanding upon and illuminating the global experience.

BlackStar's board also boasts stellar additions, bringing with them a wealth of knowledge to further the organization's growth, including Holmes, **Denise C. Beek**, Chief Communications Officer of 'me too.' International; **Amanda Branson Gill**, Co-Founder of Kilo Films; **Sekou Campbell**, Partner at Culhane Meadows PLLC; **Michael Garden**, Principal of Michael Garden Group; **Sunanda Ghosh**, Director of External Relations at Philadelphia Contemporary, **Ted Passon**, President of All Ages Productions, **Tayyib Smith**, Principal of organizations Little Giant, Smith&Roller, and Pipeline Philly; along with an Advisory Board consisting of Ahmir "**Questlove**" Thompson and Tariq "**Black Thought**" Trotter from **The Roots**.

Lauded as the "Black Sundance," the BlackStar Film Festival is scheduled to take place from **July 30–August 2** in Philadelphia, PA. Now in its ninth year, attendance to the festival continues to increase with each iteration. BlackStar receives support from its dedicated audience along with private foundations, public agencies, corporate, non-profit and individual sponsors. Past and current supporters include: Barra Foundation, CAA, CineReach, Color of Change, Comcast/Streampix, Critical Minded, Firelight, Ford Foundation, Fractured Atlas, HBO, Independence Media Foundation, Knight Foundation, Leeway Foundation, Lionsgate/STARZ, Lomax Family Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Netflix, PECO, Pennsylvania Department of Economic Development, Philadelphia Cultural Fund, William Penn Foundation, Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Annenberg School for Communication, Wyncote Foundation and Visit Philadelphia.

### **About BlackStar Film Festival**

The BlackStar Film Festival is an annual celebration of the visual and storytelling traditions of the African diaspora and global communities of color – showcasing films by Black, Brown, and Indigenous people from around the world.

### **About the Surdna Foundation**

The Surdna Foundation seeks to foster sustainable communities in the United States-- communities guided by principles of social justice and distinguished by healthy environments, strong local economies, and thriving cultures. Learn more at [www.surdna.org](http://www.surdna.org).

### **About the Philadelphia Cultural Fund**

Established in 1991 to support and enhance the cultural life and vitality of the City of Philadelphia and its residents, the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, through the combined efforts of the Philadelphia City Council and the Mayor, promotes arts and culture as engines of social, educational and economic development and has played a key stabilizing role for numerous organizations by providing much needed general operating funding. Learn more at [www.philaculturalfund.org](http://www.philaculturalfund.org) and follow along using the hashtag #PHLArtsSayThnx and @PhilaCulturFund on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

### **Press Contacts**

Ed Winstead

Director, Cultural Counsel

[ed@culturalcounsel.com](mailto:ed@culturalcounsel.com)

Danellys "D.W." Wong

Account Coordinator, Cultural Counsel

[dw@culturalcounsel.com](mailto:dw@culturalcounsel.com)

Robert Grand

Account Coordinator, Cultural Counsel

[robert@culturalcounsel.com](mailto:robert@culturalcounsel.com)

## Staff Member Biographies

**Maori Karmael Holmes** (She/Her) is the Artistic Director & CEO of BlackStar Film Festival, as well as a curator, filmmaker and writer. Included in *Essence Magazine's* 2019 Woke 100 List, she is also a 2019 Soros Equality Fellow. Maori is founder and artistic director of BlackStar Film Festival. She has organized programs in film at a myriad of organizations including Anthology Film Archives, Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), The Underground Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Previous professional positions include Executive Director of ARRAY Alliance, Director of Public Engagement at the Institute of Contemporary Art at University of Pennsylvania, and Associate Director at Leeway Foundation. Her writing has recently appeared in *The Believer*, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, edited by adrienne maree brown (AK Press, 2019); and *How We Fight White Supremacy: A Field Guide to Black Resistance*, edited by Akiba Solomon and Kenrya Rankin (Nation Books, 2019). Maori received her MFA in Film & Media Arts from Temple University and her BA in History from American University. She currently serves on the board of American Documentary, the advisory boards of Ulises, Vidiots, and Lightbox Film Center, and was a juror for the 2019 Full Frame Film Festival and the 2019 Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival.

**Nehad Khader** (she/her), Program Director of BlackStar Film Festival, is a filmmaker, curator, editor and writer whose work in film informs her work as a historian and vice versa. Trained in media and literature by Black and Palestinian creators, Nehad believes in art that carries aesthetic excellence as well as social and political significance. Nehad is a 2017 Leeway Transformation Award winner, a 2018 Tribeca Film Institute fellow, and a 2019 Logan Nonfiction Fellow. She is the producer of “White Fright,” now streaming on The Guardian. When not watching films, Nehad enjoys reading fiction, singing and gardening.

**Lauren Hunter** (she/her), Operations Director, lives for detail. Her expertise is a result of her unique, diverse, and hands-on background in media, fine arts and event planning including the last 5 years as Membership Manager for BlackStar. Overall, she brings 15 years of experience in operations management and events production for both local and nationally recognized organizations including Philadelphia Museum of Art where she led

the planning, design and execution of 50 to 80 public and private events each year. This behind the scenes queen brings people together for memorable experiences in arts and culture with the core intention to help social impact leaders fulfill their mission and equity. Her precision is a result of supreme organizational and problem solving skills coupled with her creative flair and passion for bringing order to chaos and creating meaningful experiences. Lauren holds a bachelor's degree in Public Relations from Delaware State University and a special event certificate from University of San Diego. She also earned the CMP Designation: Certified Meeting Professional. When she is not planning events, Lauren serves as Stage Manager for SisterSpace of Delaware Valley, a Tribute to Change planning committee member for Bread and Roses Community Fund in Philadelphia, and Stage Manager for the Rock and Roll Marathon in San Diego, CA, Washington DC, and Philadelphia, PA. Lauren enjoys the beach and being outdoors, attending concerts and theater, and running (completing over a dozen half marathons since 2012).

**Imran Siddiquee** (they/them), Communications Director, is a writer, creative, and activist challenging white supremacist patriarchy. Their writing on race, gender, and popular media has been published by The Atlantic, BuzzFeed, LitHub, Bitch Magazine, Longreads, and elsewhere. Imran most recently served as the Communications Director at MediaJustice, a non-profit fighting for the digital rights of people of color, and was previously a founding staff member of The Representation Project, where they helped develop documentaries exposing limiting gender norms. They are a frequent collaborator with the South Asian American Digital Archive in Philadelphia, where they co-created and currently lead the *Revolution Remix* historical walking tour.

**Kira Rodriguez** (She/They), Administrative Coordinator, is a Venezuelan-American artist, organizer, and performer who works primarily at the intersections of nightlife, queer community, and gender, racial, and economic justice. Her previous work includes grassroots nightlife organizing and fundraising to support queer and trans people of color navigating the judicial system in the Philadelphia area and beyond, as well as nonprofit and arts organization work as a Grants Programs intern at Leeway Foundation and as a Black Box intern at Vox Populi. Currently, Kira works both as a DJ and in sound design for theatre and film. She has performed and played at venues such as MoMA PS1, the

Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, Berlin Community Radio, the secret rave by the river, and cross country queer celebrations and festivals such as Pansyfest and Idapalooza. Her creative work is characterized by a centering and embracing of queer and global south club music, dance, and thunderous sound. Her performances exist as a carrier of stories and memories, and as a practice of imagining and creating more hopeful and alternative possibilities and environments for queer and trans joy and healing. Kira attended Temple University where she studied studio arts and art history. She lives in West Philly with her cat Barbara.

### **Board Member Biographies**

**Denise Beek** (She/Her), *Chief Communications Officer, 'me too.' International*

Denise Beek is a communications strategist who has worked in the nonprofit sector for over a decade. As the Chief Communications Officer for 'me too.', she leads branding, engagement and media relations for the organization. Denise's prior experience includes arts administration, philanthropy, and event production, always with a mission to help foster cultural dialogue, organizing and social justice.

**Sekou Campbell** (He/Him), *Partner, Culhane Meadows PLLC*

Sekou Campbell attended Yeshiva University's Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, where he interned for a life-tenured, federal judge in Brooklyn; edited the *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal*, a nationally-recognized intellectual property journal; and served as an officer for two student-led organizations (Public Interest Law Student Association and the Black Law Students Association). He also earned a Public Service Scholarship and Award from his school.

He began his legal career at an AmLaw 100 firm founded in Philadelphia, representing commercial litigants in a range of disputes from copyright infringement to breaches of contract and related claims as well as entertainers who required sophisticated and diverse commercial transactions from diligence on film projects to renegotiation of complex record deals. Now, in addition to traditional artists, he represents intellectual creatives who explore the intersection of technology and traditional entertainment

**Amanda Branson Gill** (She/Her), *Co-Founder, Kilo Films*

Amanda Branson Gill is the co-founder of Kilo Films. Her credits include *Love Means Zero* (2017), *Theo Who Lived* (2016), *The Unknown Known* (2013), *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), and the short film *Hidden Idols* (2015). A member of the Producer's Guild of America and the International Documentary Association, she received her M.A. in American Studies from Yale University and her A.B. in History from Princeton University.

**Michael Garden** (He/Him), *Principal, Michael Garden Group*

Michael Garden moved to Philadelphia in 2005 after living in NYC for 20 years, where he was an art and architectural antique dealer. In 2006, Michael obtained a real estate license and began assisting buyers, sellers, investors and developers in Center City and its neighboring communities. Beginning in 2010, he began to regularly host fundraising events for various non-profit organizations including; Friends of the Rail Park, Mighty Writers, Woman's Way, Friends of Rittenhouse Square, DesignPhiladelphia, and BlackStar Film Festival. Michael is currently on the board of directors of Ars Nova Workshop and BlackStar Projects.

**Sunanda Ghosh** (She/Her), *Director of External Relations, Philadelphia Contemporary*

Sunanda Ghosh is the Director of External Relations at Philadelphia Contemporary. She has over decade of experience in fundraising and has worked with national and international nonprofits for over 20 years, including The American Friends Service Committee, Human Rights Watch and Mural Arts. Her work has mostly focused on fundraising strategy, leadership gifts, campaign management, planned giving and board development. She is based in Philadelphia and has worked in India, South Africa, and Brazil, and speaks fluent Bengali.

**Ted Passon** (He/Him), *President, All Ages Productions*

Ted Passon is an award-winning director and video artist. He is a 2016 Sundance Lab Fellow and a 2018 Sundance Catalyst Fellow. His has received grants from The Ford Foundation, MacArthur/IDA, The Meadow Fund, and SF Film and others. He is a recipient of the Pew Foundation Individual Artist Fellowship Grant, and a 2016 Headlands Artist in Residency. Ted has exhibited his award winning short films in festivals and galleries around the US and abroad including exhibitions curated by The Whitney Museum, Yerba

Buena Center for the Arts, and The Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. He is currently directing two documentary series for major networks which will both be released in early 2021. Ted is the co-founder and president of All Ages Productions, a creative full service film and video production company, specializing in commercials and music videos. All Ages has worked with brands such as NBC, GAP, Guinness, Google, and others. They have also worked with musicians including St. Vincent, Iggy Pop, Blood Orange, The National, Kurt Vile, Kimya Dawson, and others. Ted has also created and directed multiple children's television series for Comcast networks and one series for the Disney Channel. He is also the co-founder of the Small Change Experimental Film Screening Series and a former member of Space 1026.

**Tayyib Smith** (He/Him), *Principal, Little Giant Creative, Smith&Roller, Pipeline Philly*

Tayyib Smith is Principle of Meta Global, parent company to Little Giant Creative. He is dedicated to cultural competency and the ability to engage multicultural audiences. He co-founded Pipeline Philly to serve as an inviting and dynamic co-working space filled with professionals from various backgrounds and industries, creating one of the most diverse workspaces in the city.

Tayyib is also a partner S&R Holdings, a real estate company that engages and invites diverse stakeholders of neighborhoods to become part of a growing, multicultural and multi-socioeconomic tapestry. Tayyib has long been a successful conduit of professional and cultural ecosystems. He is a fellow of the Place Lab Ethical Redevelopment Salon at the University of Chicago and sits on the boards of the Kensington Corridor Trust, Prizm Art Fair in Miami, Memphis Slim House, and the Green Light Fund.