

Impact Report: **Heroin(e)**

Prepared for The Center for Investigative Reporting
By Lindsay Green-Barber, PhD
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 **IMPACT** ARCHITECTS

I. Background

In February 2016, Elaine Sheldon McMillion set out to film change makers in her home state of West Virginia. Specifically, Sheldon wanted to capture people on-the-ground working to make a positive impact on the the opioid epidemic in their communities.

In August 2016, CIR released a call for proposals for women filmmakers, and in January 2017, it announced publicly the Glassbreaker Films initiative to support five accomplished female filmmakers to produce a thematically integrated series of half hour documentaries for widespread distribution. Five Glassbreaker Featured Filmmakers were chosen through a RFP process that garnered more than 350 submission. Elaine Sheldon McMillion was one them.

The theme for the film series was “Women taking control, taking power, and taking chances.” The selection criteria focused both on the filmmakers and on the stories they pitched, and prioritized creating a diverse cohort of women representing various points of view and filmmaking styles and who had enough experience to deliver a compelling story with the necessary production values within the allotted budget and timeline. Furthermore, the cohort should include women whose reputations in the documentary world would help secure a premiere distributor for the series, with track records of producing beautifully told, compelling stories with strong characters and interesting narratives that could sustain a half hour film. And, while CIR wanted Glassbreaker Films to have strong women characters at their core, it was important that they appeal to a broad audience.

Sheldon is an accomplished documentary filmmaker and visual journalist who explores the themes of identity, roots and survival. Sheldon’s film, “Heroin(e),” promised to embed with female first responders battling to stem the tide of the heroin epidemic in West Virginia, the state with the highest rate of fatal overdoses in the country, and, more specifically, Huntington, WV, where the overdose rate is 10 times the national average. The struggle is set against the backdrop of the state’s lawsuit against drug manufacturers for flooding West Virginia, a state with a population of 1.8 million people, with 100 million pain pills in a five-year period.

CIR and Sheldon’s goals for Heroin(e) included:

- Support an accomplished woman filmmaker to complete a project that would otherwise not be possible;
- Highlight strong women making change on the frontlines of the opioid crisis;
- Reach a broad and diverse audience through a mainstream distributor (Netflix);
- Change public perspectives and stereotypes about West Virginia by providing an alternative representation of people and communities; and
- Spur film screenings to generate new networks of people to engage in shared work.



II. Film and activities

Heroin(e) is a 39-minute film that highlights the work of three women in Huntington, West Virginia as they respond to the heroin epidemic in their community. *“Sheldon highlights three women working to change the town’s narrative and break the devastating cycle of drug abuse one person at a time. Fire Chief Jan Rader spends the majority of her days reviving those who have overdosed; Judge Patricia Keller presides over drug court, handing down empathy along with orders; and Necia Freeman of Brown Bag Ministry feeds meals and provides support to the women selling their bodies for drugs. As America’s opioid crisis threatens to tear communities apart, the Netflix original short documentary Heroin(e) shows how the chain of compassion holds one town together.”* The film premiered at the Telluride Film Festival, and is available for streaming on Netflix.

CIR support

CIR provided full funding for the production, along with editorial support and oversight, marketing to distributors and audience engagement strategy and support. CIR held bi-weekly story meetings with Sheldon to talk through the status of her project, any obstacles she encountered, stylistic choices and aesthetics, and any legal or access issues. CIR director of video and executive producer Amanda Pike and producer Rachel de Leon provided support in the form of research, reporting advice, freedom of information act needs, production suggestions and feedback, character outreach, and liaising with the CIR legal and fair use team.

Once the rough cut was complete, the film went through many rounds of edits. After Netflix licensed the film, Netflix and CIR worked together to provide notes and feedback on each cut to hone and complete the film. According to Sheldon, CIR support, “both financially and creatively, was critical for the film’s creation. Furthermore,” she says, “being part of a cohort of filmmakers allowed my creative process to flourish.”

Prior to the film’s release, Sheldon and CIR created an engagement plan, which included hiring BlueShift, a social impact campaign organization, to design an educational [Field Guide](#) to be used by community members and organizations to host screening of the film.

Film release

Heroin(e) premiered in September 2017 at the Telluride Film Festival, and the film began streaming on Netflix on September 12, 2017. Netflix promoted the film through extensive press outreach, a trailer, posters, billboards, social media spots, print ads, and festival screenings. CIR promoted Heroin(e) through its social media networks, weekly email newsletter, Reveal podcast, Bay Area events, educational guides, and website. The organization also produced an hour-long Reveal episode about the opioid epidemic in the U.S., which first aired in October 2017.

Coinciding with the film’s release, Sheldon published the Field Guide and other audience resources on the film’s website (heroinethefilm.com). Every time someone reached out to CIR or



Sheldon, they replied with a template letter that included an invitation to host screenings, along with information about how to stream from Netflix, suggested discussion questions, an invitation to share outcomes from community screenings with the hashtag #HeroineNetflix, and an invitation for audiences to text to CIR to receive updates and stay informed.



III. Impact

While Netflix does not make proprietary analytics about audience reach and streaming available, immediate and ongoing press coverage of Heroin(e) and audience feedback suggest the film's reach and impact have been massive. Sheldon and the women featured in the film have received hundreds of messages from around the world and the film received positive reviews in the [Los Angeles Times](#), [Forbes](#), [Mother Jones](#), and [HuffPost](#), as well as many local media outlets in West Virginia, such as the Huntington [Herald-Dispatch](#), the Charleston-Huntington [Fox News affiliate](#), [100 Days in Appalachia](#), and the [Charleston Gazette-Mail](#). In 2018, [Time Magazine](#) named Huntington fire chief Jan Rader as one of its 100 most influential people of the year, saying "if every city had a chief like Jan Rader, our country would be a better place." And, in perhaps the most prestigious mark of quality for a film, Heroin(e) was nominated for an Academy Award in the Documentary (Short Subject) category.

Press coverage of the film was overwhelmingly positive. A sampling of coverage includes:

"Heroin(e) puts human faces on the [opioid] crisis." New York Times

"It transcends the politics of our current moment." Slant Magazine

"[The women featured] are beacons of hope and compassion." IDA

"This Netflix documentary shows the women trying to save a city from addiction." Think Progress

Screenings: changing minds, strengthening communities

Organizations and individuals across the country reached out to Sheldon and CIR to screen the film, and, in the six months following the film's release, the team responded to 153 inquiries with the Field Guides and additional resources. In general, inquiries came from four categories of people:

- Health care professionals
- Educators
- Local advocates
- Concerned citizens

Sheldon worked with twelve organizations to coordinate screenings, and countless other screenings were held independently, resulting in thousands of individuals seeing the film in communal settings, often accompanied by panels and/or structured conversations.

Screening hosts include:

- Camden Film Fest
- LACMA
- Marshall University
- Appalshop



- Obama Foundation Summit
- SF Doc Stories
- Netflix
- Meet The Press Film Festival
- Aspen Institute (two screenings)
- Shepherd University
- West Virginia University School of Public Health
- West Virginia University Library
- West Virginia Public Broadcasting

In West Virginia communities such as Fayetteville, Morgantown, Shepherdstown, Parkersburg, and Charleston, where the opioid crisis is particularly severe, university groups and public health organizations have used community screenings as a tool to move residents to talk about and act upon the addiction crisis. For example, the Fayette County Health Department, Sheriff Department, and Prosecuting Attorney’s Office hosted a screening and roundtable, which brought together more than 100 people. And in Morgantown, with support from West Virginia Public Broadcasting, the WVU school of Public Health, the Monongalia County Health Department, WVU Collegiate Recovery Program, WVU Student Government Association and Milan Puskar Health Right organized a screening and panel conversation that filled the town’s Metropolitan Theatre to capacity.

According to Laura Jones, Executive Director of Milan Puskar Health Right and co-organizer of the Morgantown screening, the film opened the door for attendees to a more empathetic way of looking at addiction and harm reduction programs that can help address the overdose issue, such as Health Right’s syringe program. Although some in the audience still voiced concerns about the harm reduction tactics, Jones is optimistic that the conversations like those sparked by the film are helping change people’s opinions. “I think for the most part the community is beginning to understand that we are trying to keep people alive and as healthy as possible until treatment is available,” she said. “That’s why harm reduction is important in the meantime. It’s not going to end the drug problem but it will protect our community and it will keep people alive until they can access treatment.”

About one screening, Judge Keller explained, “We went to my parents’ church about five hours away and it was standing room only. These parents who had just buried their son the day before from an overdose still wanted to come and watch and to talk. I think it was so important and healing for these parents. And that’s part of what’s so invaluable about this documentary, it gets people to start talking.”

Sheldon and the three women in the film participated in a screening at the University of Charleston for an audience of more than 300 people. They also went to a screening of the film at the West Virginia governor’s mansion for approximately thirty lawmakers.



Sheldon and/or the women participated in post-screening conversations at many events, and especially those in West Virginia where the film had significant impact. In interviews, Sheldon, Rader, Keller, and Freeman, along with screening organizers, said that audiences were moved by the film and discussions. Post-screening discussions often focused on ways community members, elected officials, and institutions can take action to help address the opioid and heroin crises in their communities. Audiences also said they felt more empathy for people suffering from an addiction to heroin and changed their perspective about harm reduction programs.

Following Heroin(e)'s Academy Award nomination, West Virginians felt that their state was gaining new recognition and respect for the positive work of its residents, rather than only the negative press associated with coverage of the opioid crisis. One [editorial](#) stated, "For a state that often feels forgotten, and if not forgotten, stereotyped, it was emotional to see that West Virginians really can make it, that our dreams aren't limited by our area code."

Action

The film led to some immediate actions. After premiering on Netflix in November 2017, the film prompted an immediate and far-reaching response. Soon after the documentary premiered, West Virginia Senator Shelley Moore Capito announced \$350,000 in funding from the Department of Health and Human Services to Huntington, W.V., to address the opioid epidemic.

In some cases, the ideas and relationships generated through the screenings have led to real action. In Fayetteville, the community identified a need to get the information in the film to youth. Following the screening, the Fayette County Board of Education began working to bring the film to the local school system. After the screening at Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.V., Dr. David Didden, Jefferson County Health Department's physician director and a post-screening panelist, received a call from a member of the audience who plans to create a local campaign promoting safe injection facilities and dispensaries.

Necia Freeman, founder of Brown Bag Ministry, says that she was given a building in downtown Huntington by a church and the city in order to create a constant, stable location for the women she serves, largely as a result of being featured in the film. She has also received financial donations from about twenty people from across the country who have seen the film. Others have sent donations of warm clothes, personal hygiene products, and gift cards for Brown Bag Ministry to distribute through their work.

And, Sheldon and the women in the film were invited to a screening of Heroin(e) at the W.V. state legislature. "The first and most important thing about all of this is the ability to have the conversation, in small groups, community groups, professional groups. But being able to then take this discussion to the legislature, where we can talk with them about what needs to happen to solve these problems and help people in recovery. That's so important," said Keller.

Judge Keller also thinks the film influenced the W.V. State Supreme Court. The Huntington Police Chief had previously wanted to expand the drug courts because the city has the highest



prostitution rate in the state, a result of the heroin epidemic, but the supreme court said it didn't have funds available. Keller was able to work with the city to get grant funding to expand the court, but that funding is expiring. Now, she says, "I went back to the Supreme Court and said the city doesn't have resources. And now [the court] is on board - after the film - and we didn't have that support before. I don't think we would have had it but for this film. They don't see what we do here and they don't hear about it much. But now they've seen the video."

Both in West Virginia and in other states, there has been an ongoing debate about the availability and use of Nalaxone, a drug that can reverse an opioid overdose. Jan Rader is a defender of Nalaxone, and the community's conversation about the drug features in *Heroin(e)*. In the six months since the film was released, there have been screenings of the film held in conjunction with Nalaxone trainings and panel conversations. In early April, 2018, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a [national advisory](#) urging more Americans to keep Naloxone on hand and to be trained in using the drug. While this announcement is not directly connected to the film *Heroin(e)*, it is demonstrative of the importance of the debate about the use of this drug.

Perception shift

In addition to audience feedback at screenings, Sheldon, Rader, Freeman, and Keller received hundreds of emails from individuals across the U.S. and internationally. Freeman said, "There's not a day that goes by that someone doesn't contact me, mostly through my personal Facebook and random phone calls from all over the U.S. I'm a realtor so I'm getting some feedback through when they're googling my name and they're chasing me down through my company's website." Many of these messages expressed gratitude to Sheldon for highlighting the positive examples of individuals and communities in W.V., and for showing that there are people doing important work in the face of the heroin and opioid crisis in the U.S. The women featured in the film received messages of thanks for their work, but also inquiries as to how to get started with similar initiatives in other areas.

In many messages, people said that they had a new perspective on the heroin epidemic. People said they had more empathy for people suffering from heroin addictions, and understanding about root causes. People also said they had a new understanding about potential solutions, such as the effectiveness of drug courts, the importance of first responders, and the difference that one motivated community member can make.

Through social networks, celebrities and influencers said they had watched the film and were inspired by its message. Freeman recounted, "My daughter told me Sia [the pop musician icon] had gone to Twitter and she said something about the documentary and how it's awesome, and I said, "Hey buddy that's really cool but who is Sia?'"

And, as further evidence that the film and the women featured in it are elevating the debate about the opioid crisis to a national level, in March of 2018, Jan Rader was named one of Time Magazine's most 100 influential people of the year. In the words of U.S. Senator Joe Manchin of



West Virginia, “She has saved countless lives and has been unrelenting in her commitment to help people struggling with substance-use disorders return to lead productive lives.”



IV. Learning and recommendations

1. Filmmakers, often working alone, can benefit from the support of an organization and a cohort of peers.

Elaine Sheldon McMillion said that the support of CIR was absolutely necessary for the production of Heroin(e), from financial support to research and production. The cohort of women filmmakers also provided a support network for troubleshooting challenges that arise through the course of making a film, honing and improving the film, and camaraderie and support when exploring often difficult subjects.

2. Reporting by individuals who have deep community roots fosters trust among the reporter and subjects, allowing for trust-based relationships to form quickly and for deep storytelling.

Sheldon is from West Virginia and has created films and multimedia about the challenges and successes of West Virginians in the past. Her roots and track record meant that the women who were featured in Heroin(e), as well as other sources for the project, trusted Sheldon from the beginning of the process. The women in the film noted that they did not see even a rough cut of the film until it went live on Netflix, but that they had faith that Sheldon would fairly represent their lives, their work, and their communities. This trust resulted in Sheldon having the access needed to report and film the stories that ultimately became Heroin(e).

3. Documentary film, as a medium, is a tool that can be used to create physical spaces for different sectors of a community to come together in conversation.

A variety of community members and institutions, including researchers, faith groups, professors, governments agencies, first responders, and more, saw in Heroin(e) an opportunity to gather community members to screen the film and have productive, solutions-based conversations about concrete paths for addressing community challenges associated with the opioid addiction crisis.

4. A focus on positive change, rather than problems, generates a shift in perspective among audiences.

Heroin(e), in humanizing individuals struggling with opiate addiction and focusing on the work being done by community members to make positive change, shifted audience perspectives and inspired action. The website resources and screening guide provide further information to individuals inspired to contribute to positive change.

