



## The Artist as Leader: Deirdre Haj

**Interview conducted by Corey Madden**

**Edited by Betsi Robinson**

*We recently had the opportunity to sit down with Deirdre Haj, the Director of the Durham-based Full Frame Documentary Film Festival—the first and largest film festival in the United States devoted solely to documentaries—to reflect on her experience as an Artist Leader.*

*Under Deirdre’s leadership, the festival—which celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this April—has achieved international acclaim and consistently expanded its national, regional, and local impact. This year, nearly 100 documentary features and short films will be showcased at the festival, which has been recognized as a qualifying event for both the Academy Awards and The Producers Guild of America Awards.*

*As an artist leader, Deirdre prides herself on being able to identify and capitalize upon the strengths of her staff, and is a champion for equity and diversity in the documentary field. The Kenan Institute for the Arts proudly supports this endeavor*

*by supporting two Durham high school students from the Festival's School of Doc program to attend the prestigious UNC School of the Arts Filmmaking Summer Intensive.*

*We are excited to present our Artist as Leader interview with Deirdre here, and we congratulate her on another spectacular Full Frame Festival this year!*

**CM: Deirdre, would you start by telling us a little about your upbringing and your background, and how that informed your leadership style before you became an artist?**

**DH:** I came from a business family, my dad worked for IBM, as did many people in Connecticut in those days. There was a business sense in the house at all times, and late night calls from Tokyo for my father. It was a family dominated by a very large company that had a very big reach in the 1970s. However, I was the youngest of three daughters and I remember thinking that if I ended up working for IBM I would be a failure, which is ridiculous because that was a great, well-paying job.

**CM: It sounds like one of the things that attracted you was to move away from it.**

**DH:** Absolutely.

**CM: How did you find the arts?**

**DH:** I think I was just born knowing I was a performer. I was good at it. I understood sales from an early age and knew how to sell things really easily. I also remember having a very strong concept of ROI (Return on Investment), although I didn't have the words for it then. I remember being in my first year of college at Boston University and thinking there are far too many people here that are not going to be actors. What ROI am I really getting being in a group of 80 people? Then I promptly turned around and auditioned at Juilliard and at Purchase College, and went to Purchase where there were far fewer students because I felt I would get more attention.

**CM: What was appealing about acting school, given that you had innate sales skills and leadership skills?**

**DH:** That's easy. I was a generalist. I think I did a lot of things really well and, as an actor, you get to do all that. The problem for me, as an actor, is I didn't have the drive. I remember a great teacher who I had, Israel Hicks, who is now deceased, saying, "What do you want to be?" I didn't have really good answers for that. I remember seeing great actresses win their Academy Awards and realizing I don't have that drive. I want to be respected by my peers but I don't have the need to best everybody else. Yet I was super competitive. What I discovered was I'm far more nurturing than was required, and I also was a lot smarter than I looked, and that was really harmful when I started to get cast on camera.

**CM: You made a transition. What were those key moments when you made the transition from being an actor to thinking about other things?**

**DH:** I remember Leonard Katzman, who was the executive producer of "Dallas" when I was on the series. I loved being on a series because I was part of a group, I was part of a family. I remember Leonard saying to me, "OK, so now you've done a TV series. You really ought to produce." I remember him bringing me scripts and asking me for notes on the scripts and the grips, the guys on the set, going, "He does not do that." It was odd. I didn't know it was odd. I was in my 20s ...and he saw something in me before I saw it in myself, which was I didn't belong there. I just didn't see it. The transition happened because, at one point, I was frustrated with the roles I was getting. I was frustrated hearing from directors that I wasn't having auditions for the roles that they thought I was right for, and my agents were sending other people out in front of me.

It's important to know that when I was 30 I was still doing swimwear catalogs. I didn't look 30 so I was still getting cast a lot, but I was married and I wanted to have a baby relatively soon after that. So I started to look for assistant jobs where I could learn the nuts and bolts of the business. I was working for an entertainment attorney at the time and understanding contract law. He wanted me to become an attorney and I didn't want to do that either. A job came up to produce a documentary, it was under a state arts grant, the grant would live at the American Lung Association, and there would be a certain pile of money to run these various programs. In the end, I took that job and left the law firm and produced that film. They thought it would be this little health film and it ended up being internally distributed at 20th Century Fox, and being broadcast on Discovery. I just took it as far as it could go while I was pregnant. I would say that was the big transition, the big turning point.

**CM: It sounds like there was a hunger or a desire or a capacity that couldn't be met just by being an actor, and that began to drive you forward.**

**DH:** I had many, many friends in the industry who were producers, and when I would come in just because I wanted to learn, I noticed that my instincts were always aligned with the more important people at the table — instincts about what a film needed, how it needed to be edited, how it needed to be marketed. I saw macro really well. Let's be frank, the power, when you're living in LA, is with the producer. The power dynamic was to be in that smart, driven part of the world.

I applied to Women in Film and I was part of their mentorship program. I got to be inside of a television network for a little bit, I just had an instinct for the business. I had no real interest to go to directing, I really wanted to be a producer. I remember, on that film, the very first time we shot, I had on the headset, and we got the shot, and I remember the director turning back and he goes, "Is that good for you?" And me realizing for the first time, "Oh crap, that's me. I have to answer that question." I was like, "Yeah, I'm good." I felt very comfortable in that position, and very comfortable when it wasn't good to say, "No, this is not working, change it." Learning how to talk to a director, that was a whole other ball of wax because I was young and I was, I think, a little arrogant, and I didn't know yet how to talk to another artist respectfully. And that took years. Years.

**CM: How do you think that your arts background, or that arts sensitivity that you carry with you, started to infiltrate these challenges and how does it impact you today?**

**DH:** I used to think leadership was management and it's not. It's much more mentoring and much more nurturing than that. If you ever work with me, you'll hear me say, "We all work in service to the programming." That's strictly from being an actor. You work in service to the script, not to your performance, not to what the director says. At the festival it's not about my vision. We are working in service of the programming. My programmer reports to me, but I see it as an executive producer/director relationship. In other words, I see her as the primary creative, and we all work in service to a vision that she brings in her work. An uber vision is set by me, of what the entire organization does and its impact. But I'm not there to tell her what to do or what to program. I'm there to have her back, I'm there to give her courage when she needs it, I'm there to actually push against her when I think she needs that. But those are very different things than I thought in the earlier days — getting into the black, raising money, creating programs. It's not

management, it's leadership. It's very, very different, and that now includes creating leaders all around me.

Our current programming coordinator came from the Walker Arts Center here [in Minneapolis]. We did a whole series of films with the Walker Arts Center, and so I really felt like I was poaching talent and I don't like that. I went to her boss and said, "We've made this offer and I just need to verbalize that this was not intentional, I did not set out to get your coordinator." She said back to me — this is the greatest compliment I've had in a long time — she said, "When I heard how you spoke about your staff, I knew this was the right job for our coordinator." I'm like, "OK, I've done a good thing."

**CM: I hear in what you're saying this deep respect for the human experience, which is something that I think acting also gives you. It sounds like that moment-by-moment living in creativity is related to your style of leadership. Can you talk about that more?**

**DH:** I think recognizing talent and where it belongs is a leadership job. I had someone who worked for me who was in production and was miserable, and we moved him to marketing where he belonged because he's an artist, and even in marketing I knew he couldn't stay. I remember our staff did a visioning day and I asked, "What gets you out of bed in the morning? What brings you to work every day?" Everybody is yelling out things except for that one employee. I looked at him and I said, "I know what gets you out of bed, say it." He said, "Helping kids and the arts." We had started the education program and I stuck education under him because he loved education. He had a background in K-12 arts education. Well, he left very shortly after that to go work at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and run their educational programs.

I think that's a win, right? To be able to recognize where someone belongs, and sometimes in the arts that means I cannot pay you any more, you need to leave. I don't have a job for you to grow into. I think that is essential for arts leaders to recognize. That is not a failure, that's a gift.

We are an ensemble, if you will. Nobody lets anybody fail and everybody has a very particular job, just like on a set, and all together we make this thing happen. I never see it as, I'm this leader over here and these people follow me, I see it as my skill set lends itself to be the leader, so that's my best role in this ensemble.

Marketing is a great example of that. I have these ideas presented to me and I'll be like, "Really? Do you really think this is going to do well?" Then it would be the

highest-selling piece of merchandise that we had that year and I'm like, "Well clearly this person knows what they're doing and it's a good thing I didn't make a decision."

**CM: You have a background, though, in marketing and PR. What is the translation between the arts and that field, from your point of view?**

**DH:** Storytelling. And isn't it great that I work in documentary? I think any time I get up in front of a donor, or a sponsor, we're making a case for where you're going to spend your dollars, and are you going to spend them with us. I think that is about telling a story. As an actor I very quickly assess: Is this somebody who wants a touchy-feely story? Is this somebody who wants to know the dollars and how we impact our community? Is this somebody who cares about diversity? I need to know that, and if I don't have that research I need to read it very quickly and then I'm going to tell that story. I think the storytelling aspect — the ability to talk in front of 1,000 people without your pulse moving — is really essential to leadership for the arts.

**CM: Actors are constantly reacting. Acting is reacting.**

**DH:** I like to think I really know and love all those 1,000 people that are there on opening night and I feel very comfortable speaking from notes, I don't really speak from a script. Here's what I want to say, here's how I'm going to convey it depending on what the feedback is from the house. I do that whether I'm in a small group of donors, a board, even staff. I think it's essential you do that with staff. How is something going to land with the staff?

I also think that issue of trust as an artist is that your team needs to know that you understand the work deeply. Even though I'm not programming it, it took a long time for my staff to trust that I actually knew what the heck I was talking about. I think they saw, "Oh, this woman is coming from LA, she's coming from the big film world, she doesn't really know what we do." Then, I remember going to Sundance or a meeting somewhere and I spotted this film that was a work in progress and I was like, "I really think we ought to look at this film." They looked at me with the side eye and shrugged. Then that film went on to win two awards at Sundance and we ended up programming it and being one of the only other places where it played because it was a North Carolina story. I think gaining that trust of, "Oh, this person actually isn't just about budgets, this person actually knows how to look at a film and will listen to me when I talk about what I think is good or not

good in that film, or why it belongs in front of our audience or why it doesn't belong in front of our audience." I think that bond of trust is essential.

**CM: It is like ensemble work, and the way that great work gets made in an ensemble is that you can trust the people that you're working with and you can take risks with them.**

**DH:** I've had these conversations as well in leadership, "I'm seeing a bigger picture that you don't see, can you trust me that I can't share that with you, and that I need to make this other decision right now?" Because Full Frame belongs to this enormous institution, there could be things coming down the pipe that I know about but my whole team doesn't know about, and maybe a team member is only looking at their slice of the pie and I have to be able to say, "You've got to trust me, I need to hold off on this. I see what you're seeing, I respect it, and I can't make that choice right now." That requires gaining their trust. I think that experience is what makes for a good leader, period, whether you're leading an arts institution or any institution.

**CM: What is the hardest part of being a leader and where do you see your greatest challenges now?**

**DH:** I think the hardest thing is the solitude, being alone.

I think it's part of the reason I'm a founder of the Film Festival Alliance. Finding other festival directors was essential for me. There was no organization to do that, so we just built one. ...

What I saw a lot in festivals was a competitive streak — "I want that premiere, I want that film." Yet what's better is when we collaborate. ... We have hundreds of members now sharing best practices, from Sundance to Tribeca all the way down to the smallest mom and pop festivals, and we're our own standalone 501(c)(3). It's so alleviating to have the ability to call a peer and say, "I've got this issue, what do you think?" Because you don't get to share that with your staff. You don't get to share your anger, you don't get to share your frustration, and you don't get to share your solitude. ...

I think it's also important to notice there's the organism of the entire staff as one, and then there's the individuals in that organism. A staff meeting may yield a group think that is different than those individual meetings with those human beings. I think it's very important not to mother your employees, but I do think you have to mentor and nurture. I do think there's a line. One of those lines is really

understanding when you need to leave them alone, but I do think listening is essential. Sometimes it's as much as, "How are you? Did you get that thing worked out with your apartment? What's going on with that? How have you been? How's your mom?" Those personal things that I used to think were prying are actually essential so that you know I care about you beyond what you deliver on my desk. I actually care about you in this organization.

**CM: What are the greatest rewards for you in being a leader?**

**DH:** Having employees move on to Netflix and Microsoft, having that other employee move on to the Nasher Museum. I consider that a leadership thing. I think watching the festival become a leader in the field. That came from the spirit of collaboration and teamwork. And not only is my team a team, we are all teams in the festival world. If there's a panel or an article about filmmakers getting on with festivals, I'm often one of the first people called. I run an event that is taking care of artists and how do you do that?

**CM: Tell me about that. How does it define itself as an artist-driven enterprise?**

**DH:** First of all, festivals are largely market-driven events. Ours is not, ours is filmmaker-driven. We keep it intimate. There were many times when I could have grown the festival by a day, by a venue, and I said, after really listening to others, "No." Our power is in our intimacy. We're going to stay this place — the filmmakers call it documentary summer camp — where they can be with each other in this intimate way with this incredibly diverse, educated audience that leans forward, and make it about them. Where we're going to grow is what we give to our community. That became the educational programming, year-round programming, the ability to underwrite things that gave back to the filmmaking community by diversifying the pipeline, which is one of your goals, or diversifying our audience.

In terms of the filmmaker, number one is being extremely confidential in how the materials are handled. We don't talk about a filmmaker's work outside of the group. We're just not going to have those conversations, period, unless it's been accepted and then we love all our children equally. It can be extremely damaging to that film and the life of that film if that were to get out, pro or con. It's all so subjective, you can't let the imprimatur of the festival skew anybody else's opinion about a film. It should not.



Number two is we're the only festival that feeds everybody three meals a day. We feed them, we pick them up at the airport, you can have a hotel room if you're in competition. We're taking really good care of them from the minute they get off the plane until the minute they get back on the plane. A lot of festivals can't afford to do that. I've worked really, really hard to beef up our budget so that we can.

Then it's also ensuring that they have the right size house for the film. That means if you've got the right film and you're in a 350-seat house that feels really good and full and intimate, those 350 in our 1,000-seat house would have felt really bad. Keeping that is part of our magic. It's really, really important to make those filmmakers feel appreciated.

Then the last piece is pushing the publicity year-round so we are keeping that ball in the air. So that when you get to the Oscar season, and we are a qualifying festival, you have everything you need from us, and that we're pushing that forward. As the imprimatur of the festival rises, it helps the filmmaker because now those laurels from Full Frame really mean something for them.

**CM: By being service-oriented to an artist and their vision, you bring back to the institution a kind of authenticity and reward from the artist themselves. You have a deep authenticity as opposed to an authenticity that's manufactured.**

**DH:** I think when the filmmakers themselves say, "This is a filmmaker's festival," that is the highest compliment. When that goes away we'd be in trouble because that's who we are. Now, did I decide who we are? No, I got the job and I went to the team and I asked, "Who are we? You tell me who we are." Then I got to listen to the community, where were we not in tune? Retuning that as the leader, that was my job.

**CM: In the film business there's been a drive to work toward becoming more profits-driven or a move toward new practices in film. Then there also are these drives which are more toward leadership that has to do with core values. Where do you think that your field is right now and how do you see yourself as a leader within the field?**

**DH:** There's a move in the field, and I think I am considered a leader in the field and Full Frame is, to ask should there be a union? I've said probably not a union but maybe a guild. Full Frame itself cannot do everything. What is Full Frame able to do? Full Frame is able to do the best of theatrical exhibition, which means audiences in front of a big screen. To me, no matter what the delivery device is for

documentary, whether it's online, whether it's on your phone, whether it's going to be virtual reality, audiences aren't going away. People are always going to want to sit in a theater and watch somebody else's story. That, to me, is the power of the festival experience.

Other festivals are dipping their toe into VR [virtual reality] and all this other stuff. I don't think that's who we are and I don't think the organization as it is currently constructed financially can bear going into these other fields. Other festivals are giving grants, for example. We have one grant, but it is actually to bring a new filmmaker to the festival and plug them in to the field. That track record is enormous, those films have gone on to be at Sundance and the Institute, almost without fail, for the last five years. They've gone on to win awards. You can say what you will that we're not giving them cash, we're clearly giving them a path to great success. So the ability to create a landing pad and carve out space for those filmmakers once a year is what we can do and what we do well, and carve out space for an audience. We have an audience that's very smart about documentary. They really understand the form as quickly as the form is changing.

To touch on diversity for a moment, most festivals are in what we call destination locations, where you could go skiing or go to the beach or something else. Durham is not. Durham is a funky little city that is awesome and full of great ideas and great people, and it is almost 50 percent people of color. We feel we have a mandate to help diversify the field, which is painfully white. We do that with our youth programs, as you know very well. We do that with our teacher programs, helping teachers understand how to use documentary effectively in the classroom. And now, with our program with Kenan Institute bringing kids to the college level, understanding there's this hole in the pipeline. And because that same program is funded by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, suddenly together with the Institute we have the ability to bring this to a national attention level.

I just got back last month from the Getting Real conference, which is the International Documentary Association's conference. Unbeknownst to me, Roger Ross Williams, an Oscar-winning African American director and documentarian, got up and started talking about our program, and talking about the power of the School of Doc, and how we're really looking deeply at this issue, and how he, as a new Academy member, is going to help look deeply at this issue. So we're identifying these issues of inclusion. Where are we losing people in the pipeline? We're bringing them in, but where's the hole in the pipeline? How do we help get them, without being a grant-giving organization, into the right mentorship, into the right team, into the right internship? With, by the way, the means that I, as a white

female, would have. They don't have rent, they're probably working to go to college. They're probably in a very different circumstance than I am. I had a dad that helped pay my rent, because I'm a white woman in the United States. I'm talking about not just diversity here, no, I'm talking about economic diversity as well.

These are vast areas where Full Frame is seen as the leader in the field. I think we're spoiled because we are documentary only. If we were what I call a red carpet festival, meaning showing narrative film, we'd have to pay a lot of attention to a kind of PR, press, actor-based thing that we don't have to do. We have the privilege of putting the artist, the filmmaker, at the center of the festival. If you're at a festival that does both you don't get to do that. I've heard from filmmakers, "Well, the actor gets all the attention and we don't." "Wow, really? Because the actor wouldn't have a job if it weren't for you." The primary artist is the person who made something out of thin air. In documentary that's the director. That I love. That I will get behind. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning, and my team. I think that is why it's a privilege to do what I do.

**CM: Artists stand behind the idea of integrity, and in many cases an artist will, in a rehearsal setting, have a conflict in order to defend a decision of integrity. That's really an important moment that we honor in the artistic process, especially when working with artists of diverse backgrounds, when the play has to reflect the reality of some person who the director is not. We are willing to go to the mat to allow for that to happen, and we'll also go to the mat for the freedom of different voices to be heard.**

**DH:** I think in documentary it's even more essential because documentaries are telling stories that journalists can no longer tell. When the media got owned by five separate companies — and that happened 20 years ago, 30 years ago — that's when it all shifted, whether it's print or television. These guys are out there telling these stories that CNN cannot tell and they are often risking their lives to do it, like Tim Hetherington who died covering the civil war in Libya, or they're risking their livelihoods like Joe Berlinger, who almost lost everything on the “Crude” film when Chevron went after him. ...

I have to say I'm really proud to be at Duke University because I do think institutions of higher learning, particularly private institutions, are able to stand on principle, and the current administration at Duke is very, very good that way. It's not an accident that the head of government relations and public relations is on our

advisory board. I'm keeping a close ear to the very, very top of the organization to know are we aligned, where are we not aligned.

There was a documentary a few years ago about higher education and that's the person I asked to moderate the discussion. We didn't shy away from it; we went right forward with it. I love that Duke will do that.

**CM: I have one last question, which is: What advice would you have liked to have received when you were starting out as an artist leader?**

**DH:** It's not management. It's lonely. And never, never underestimate an office culture. Don't think you can change it just by being cheerful. Maybe those are the top-line ones. I do offer leadership advice to many of the people that work with me and it always varies, but what you say and what you don't say has to be thought out. I wish somebody had told me that there's actually homework to be done. You actually have to prepare just like a director prepares. As the leader, you need to prepare for every conversation you're having with your team and you need to be ahead of the team.

## **Epilogue**

Deirdre Haj follows her natural talents without settling, forging her path from actor to producer to film festival director. Lessons we can take from Deirdre include:

- **Know your allies.** They may see more in you than you see in yourself, opening doors you didn't think possible to move through.
- **Know yourself.** Be interested in and sensitive to your instincts. They provide unfiltered information as you navigate your career.
- **Know your priorities.** Personal values and life decisions may be as important as career aspirations. Find the balance that is right for you.
- **Know why you are leading.** Have a clear sense of purpose to create vision; and build trust to support others'
- **Know your audience.** Recognize what others' need to hear and shape your message to their needs, while also accomplishing yours.

— *Rob Kramer*