

# 2021 SDF Production Grant Application

## 1. Project Description

### a. Logline

Black Voters Matter is a feature length documentary about the co-founders of the Black Voters Matter Fund, Cliff Albright and LaTosha Brown, the work they do to empower African American communities especially in the rural south, and the crucial role they played in flipping Georgia from red to blue in the 2020 Presidential election and the 2021 Georgia Senate Runoffs.

### b. Story Summary / Synopsis

“What is it going to take, America, for you to realize that the health and wellbeing of your country is not based on how the stock market is doing but on how your people are doing? What shall it take, America, for you to replace hate with love?” These are the first impassioned words we hear from LaTosha Brown, the cofounder of Black Voters Matter Fund, as a guest speaker at the Montgomery, Alabama memorial service for civil rights champion Rep. John Lewis. Clad in a bright yellow dress, she challenges the nation to reckon with its racist past (and present) and rise to its full potential. It’s her first time in public after 4 months of isolation and self- quarantine but as a daughter of Selma, and one of Lewis’ heirs apparent, she wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Pandemic be damned. She closes her speech by singing Precious Lord as we see her join her cofounder, Cliff Albright, as they walk with a large group of mourners to greet Lewis’ casket on his last journey across the infamous Edmund Pettus bridge in footage from earlier in the day.

The casket is loaded into a hearse and they climb aboard “the blackest bus in America.” On the drive, LaTosha shares how her deep and abiding love for Selma, the rich soil of the Black Belt, and African American people led to her lifetime commitment to centering, uplifting and empowering Black folks everywhere, especially those in the most oft neglected areas of the poor, rural south. Although she’d instinctively fought against injustice as a child, it was at the 21st Century Youth Program co-founded by Rose and Hank Sanders, the renowned civil rights attorneys of Chestnut, Sanders and Sanders that she found her life’s work.

Through their summer program, Hank and Rose, who represented Martin Luther King, Jr. whenever he came to Selma, gave young people an incredible opportunity not only to meet civil rights leaders like Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Touré), Coretta Scott King, C.T.E. Vivian, John Lewis, Jesse Jackson, Hosea Williams, and many others, but to spend quality time learning directly from them. It was there that LaTosha found both her people and her purpose when she met a brilliant young lawyer at their firm, April England, daughter of civil

rights attorney and Judge John England, Jr. and Cliff , a bright young organizer from the Bronx who'd come down to work at the youth program for the summer.

Inspired by the concepts of self-determination and self-empowerment espoused in The Autobiography of Malcolm X, all three had decided to commit their lives to helping Black people attain those worthy goals. Cliff and April fell in love (and eventually married and had children) and the trio of kindred spirits formed an unbreakable, lifelong bond firmly rooted in their shared vision of creating a better future for their people. Cliff adds his memories as archival photos, news articles, home movies and contemporary footage bring their shared history to life.

Over the years the trio had launched numerous initiatives to help their communities, including forming real estate and mortgage companies to deal with housing discrimination and running for political office, but their most successful venture was the co-founding of the Black Voters Matter Fund in 2017. This visionary, maverick organization, which is dedicated to building power in Black communities, distributed almost a million dollars to 120 black led groups in the deep South in 2018 and currently has an operating budget of over \$6 million and a staff of 30 employees across multiple states. In due course, we learn that although April has always been a “silent partner” of the organization, she'd taken a government job to create financial stability for their family which she will quit over the course of our filming to become the legal advisor and interim chief of staff for the organization. Finally free, she joins Cliff and LaTosha on the road whenever she can, sometimes accompanied by their 10-year-old son, Jalani.

At first, after Rep. Lewis' memorial, Cliff & LaTosha return home, doing everything they can to inspire folks from a safe distance – through virtual town hall meetings, press appearances, and even a hip hop summit – much of which we filmed. But knowing what a pivotal role Black voter turnout could play in unseating Donald Trump, when one community organizer after another begged them to come and help galvanize their communities, they couldn't resist. However, the last thing they wanted was to put their already vulnerable people at further risk, so they came up with a truly inspired game plan. They would launch a 30-day tour and travel to every one of the 10 southern states where they had previously focused their efforts as well as to Los Angeles, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Galveston and Houston. As part of the “We Got Power” tour, in addition to handing out masks and PPE, they would hold outdoor events at drive-ins and large parking lots that people could attend in their cars. Also, instead of canvassing door to door as they'd done in past years, they would form large caravans to drive through black communities, stopping on occasion to engage directly with folks and hand out t-shirts, masks and more PPE.

And in a true stroke of genius, knowing how much excitement their “blackest bus in America” had always generated with its messages of love and power and its powerful photos of Black people with their fists raised, they decided to wrap three additional buses

and 15 mini-vans with the same imagery to create “the blackest fleet in America” for their staff and community partners to use at their events. Traveling through some of the poorest communities honking their horns, waving signs, and pumping their fists to James Brown’s Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud they sparked excitement (and sometimes resentment) everywhere they went. But one way or another, they were going to do everything they could to get souls to the polls!

Black Voters Matter will chronicle Cliff, April and LaTosha’s rise from aspiring acolytes to game changing civil right leaders as the founders of the Black Voters Matter Fund (BVMF) and the pivotal role they and their staff and team of community organizers played in turning Georgia blue during the Presidential election and getting not one, but two Democratic Senators elected in the January runoff. These three smart, funny, charismatic leaders and brilliant strategists will lead us on the crazy roller coaster ride that was the “unprecedented” 2020 election year and the insanity of January 6, 2021.

The film begins just before the trio fearlessly head into the maelstrom of the 2020 election season on a 13- state tour in the midst of a global pandemic and the heated wake of a heart-stopping worldwide uprising and follows them all the way through election night and the immediate aftermath. Amidst the most overt voter suppression tactics seen in recent history, including removing mailboxes so people can’t cast absentee ballots, we chronicle how BVMF joins forces with the ACLU, NAACP and other entities to file legal cases to stop illegal voter purging in Georgia and throughout the country.

We also explore the ways in which both seen and unseen opponents attack them personally and as an organization - in an attempt to distract and derail them from their mission – all to zero avail. From a suspicious package left on LaTosha’s doorstep to a fire set at their Airbnb, a massive cyber-attack on their finances, black impersonators who co-opt their name and logos to hold a pro Trump rally, and a white woman who pulls a gun on their workers for wearing BVM t-shirts, their reactions range from outrage to indignation to outright fear, but the attacks only add fuel to their fire as they “feel the fear and do it anyway.”

Two weeks after the Presidential election we rejoin the trio at the BVMF staff retreat as they bring their Georgia staff together for the first time since the pandemic started to create a new strategy for getting Democratic Senatorial candidates Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock elected. Recalling the “blackest fleet” to saturate every county in Georgia with a significant black population, they decide to launch another tour called the “12 Days of Christmas,” holding large concerts and giving away much needed food and toys, as well as more masks and PPE to people throughout the state. Between Christmas and New Year’s Eve, they hold a series of “Collard Green Caucuses” where they offer free collard greens, black eyed peas and corn bread (and more masks and PPE, of course) so folks can have a traditional “good luck” meal to ring in the year. As they travel throughout the state, it

becomes clear that the way the BVM team frame the importance of the runoff by connecting it to issues which directly affect each community is so effective that one woman heads directly to the poll to early vote 10 minutes after meeting them!

As media savvy individuals who fully understand and utilize the power and importance of controlling the narrative, the BVMF staff have assembled an impressive, high-quality 4K video archive documenting their work. We will combine this treasure trove with our new verité footage, contemporary and archival news clips, interviews, home movies and stills, as well as zoom staff meetings, television appearances, strategy sessions and townhall meetings to create a rich visual tapestry as we follow their efforts to oust Donald Trump, flip as many Senate seats and empower as many rural African American communities as possible.

### **c. Topic Summary**

Ever since the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013, Republicans have been aggressively attacking the electoral rights of women, people of color, young people and other minorities. Between 2014 and 2018, more than 32 million Americans were purged from voter rolls nationwide—a massive rollback, disproportionately affecting voters of color, and overwhelmingly in the states no longer subject to the preclearance once called for in the Voting Rights Act. As a matter of fact, the very day that the Shelby decision came down, then Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott announced that a voter ID bill that accepted a gun license, but not a student ID, would immediately go into effect.

Unfortunately, voter suppression is nothing new. Ever since Reconstruction Republicans have tried to suppress the African American vote, but in recent years they'd become a bit more surreptitious about their efforts. However, Donald Trump's seven-million-vote defeat in last year's presidential race seems to have spooked them into a stampede of blatantly discriminatory suppression initiatives in Congress, the courts, and state legislatures. In lawsuit after lawsuit after the election, Republicans asked the courts to throw away votes that had been cast in predominantly Black communities. In Michigan, they literally singled out Detroit and threatened to refuse to certify its votes. The GOP's entire postelection strategy was to reinstitute race-based voter disenfranchisement all the way up to January 6, when 147 Republican lawmakers voted to straight-up overturn the election results. NYU's Brennan Center for Justice, which tracks such maneuvers, reports that by March 24th of this year the GOP had introduced 361 voting rights bills with restrictive provisions in 47 states. Fifty-five of those bills are zooming through state legislatures, 29 have already passed at least one chamber, and five bills have been signed into law, including the one in my home state, Georgia.

Georgia's Senate Bill 202 is so unabashedly discriminatory that it immediately spurred numerous court challenges, Delta, Coca Cola and other major corporations spoke out against it, and Major League Baseball pulled the All-Star games out of the state in protest! Amongst many other restrictions, the bill not only re-introduces ID requirements that harken back to the Jim Crow era, but it criminalizes offering food and water to people on voting lines. In a state notorious for forcing people in neighborhoods of color to wait hours to cast their votes, depriving them of food and water is a cruel but brilliant tactic. What's next? No bathrooms?

Terrified of losing (or having to share) power, a self-selected section of the GOP seems to have no limits on the extremes to which they will go to hold onto it. After they lost the Presidential election, Republicans in Georgia were so desperate to keep the two Senate seats up for grabs that they launched lawsuits in all 159 counties of the state claiming that thousands of voters who had moved without re-registering should be purged from the rolls. Their suits were mostly dismissed because they were filed less than 90 days before the election, the cut-off date for any changes to voter rolls by state law. No doubt they knew the suits would be deemed frivolous, but their intent wasn't to get voters purged but to intimidate them. However, based on the suit, the Muscogee County Board of Elections forced the 4,000 voters named in one of the suits to cast provisional ballots.

At its core, the Republican assault on open ballot access and fair legislative representation hinges on a simple offensive: wipe out competitive voting districts, and erect elaborate new requirements for voting, together with cumbersome new logistical obstacles to turning out on Election Day. In Sunset, Louisiana, for example, officials moved a precinct to the site of historical racial discrimination, where new Black voters felt uneasy and when two students at Prairie View A&M University, a historically Black college in Texas, decided to run for local office, Waller County moved to restrict early voting near campus. Some proposals target specific groups, such as preventing early voting on Sundays when many Black churches traditionally provide rides to the polls following services, and some are flagrantly autocratic, such as an Arizona bill which allows legislators to dismiss the voters' choice in presidential elections and name the winner themselves.

After President Obama was elected in 2008, Republican strategist Karl Rove outlined a strategy named the Redistricting Majority Project—REDMAP for short—which targeted 107 local state legislative races in 16 states, flooded these lower-profile races with negative ads, and duly defeated Democratic incumbents. GOP majorities in these critical states were thus empowered to redraw congressional district maps to pack as many Black and Democratic voters into as few districts as possible, creating a wholesale political resegregation along both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

Emboldened by the most precise partisan and racial gerrymanders this nation has ever seen, Republican leaders have chosen, consciously and at every turn, to place barriers

before voters they believe do not support them, rather than persuade those citizens to join their side. “It’s a sad thing to be a member of a party that counts on voter suppression to achieve its results,” said former South Carolina congressman Bob Inglis, a Republican. “We had a path to convince, say, Latino and Black citizens that conservatism would work for them. The path taken has been this raw grab for power.” And Bill Kristol, the neoconservative force behind a generation of Republican policy positions said, “We lost faith in democracy. We lost faith that we could compete for votes and win elections.”

Courtesy of the newly gerrymandered playing field that the state legislatures had created, GOP strategists successfully built a red firewall allowing them to retain a 33-seat majority in the U.S. House, and oversize and unrepresentative majorities in state legislatures. Today, more than 50 million Americans—nearly one in five of us—live in a state in which one or both chambers of the legislature are controlled by the party that won fewer votes. And yes, all of those people live in states where Democrats won more votes, but Republicans hold the power.

The sad truth is that Republicans don’t have to succeed in all of these blatant attempts to throw future elections their way. Despite Joe Biden whupping Trump by over 7 million votes nationwide, his margin of victory in the Electoral College came down to about 43,000 votes across three states because the college is already rigged to produce Republican victories despite the will of popular majorities. If Republicans can make it just a little harder for the multiethnic coalition united against them to vote against them, then the Electoral College will do the rest.

This is why the work done by the co-founders of the Black Voters Matter Fund to educate, inspire and galvanize voters to assert their rights and fight against these attacks no matter what is so important. Democracy is under siege not only in America, but across the globe and we must all do everything possible to stop this dangerous slide toward authoritarianism. After filming the many ways in which the co-founders of Black Voters Matter were attacked for doing their work last year – from a massive cyber-attack, a fire at their Airbnb, suspicious packages shipped to their homes, and a cop calling them “looters and rioters” on social media and posting the location of their hotel, to a group impersonating them and holding a pro-Trump rally – it has become clear that the stakes couldn’t be much higher and the need for the Black Voters Matter documentary couldn’t be greater. Not only will this film will uplift and inspire those who want equal rights and justice for all, it will serve as an important educational tool and guide for those who are ready and willing to continue the fight against voter suppression across the nation.

#### **d. Artistic Approach**

During the 2020 presidential election and the 2021 Georgia Senate Runoffs the co-founders

of the Black Voters Matter Fund gave us unprecedented access to their homes, lives and daily activities. Eventually we traveled with them to eleven states but at first, aside from LaTosha's June appearance Representative John Lewis' funeral in Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, we spent all our time shooting a slew of zoom calls and footage of them quarantined at their homes like the rest of the world. I worried the film would be visually boring because really, how many ways can you make a zoom call interesting?

But once they decided to hit the road and we joined them on their ambitious 30 day, and 12-day tours, our DP's filming became much more fluid, dynamic and responsive to the situations in which we found ourselves. Alternating between true, fly on the wall cinema verité style shooting and in situ, spur of the moment, as well as sit down interviews interspersed with – you guessed it, more zoom calls, we captured a truly amazing moment in American history as Cliff, LaTosha and their team helped turn Georgia blue. These visual elements will be supplemented by their personal photos, home movies, video chats, and social media posts along with news and archival footage to create an exciting, highly engaging film that will uplift, enlighten, challenge, entertain (and possibly enrage) viewers.

## **e. Project Stage and Timeline**

We began shooting in June, 2020 and are currently in the last stages of production, with only a handful of pickup shoots left to go. As soon as we secure the funding to pay our editor, we will begin post-production.

Our schedule is as follows:

Production: June 2020 – June 2021

Post-production: November 2021 – June 2022

Release: Fall 2022

## **2. Audience and Distribution**

### **a. Distribution and Marketing Strategy**

Black Voters Matter will premiere at a top tier festival in 2022 after which it will tour the festival circuit. Submarine Entertainment came onboard as the sales agent before we even began production. At first, we built our distribution strategy around selling the film to a streaming platform due to the pandemic. However, since we're heading to a more open US, we've introduced the idea of a theatrical release into the strategy and are looking to learn from the North American theatrical/streaming release of Boys State which won awards at Sundance and other festivals before being sold to Apple TV+.

We will also work with grassroots voting and civil rights organizations, especially the ones already engaged in working with the BVMF, to hold community screenings with a

particular focus on reaching rural areas that may not have theaters but do have access to streaming services. Our impact campaign will include various materials including a robust website, ebook and screening guide that provide viewers with information about how to become more actively engaged in the fight against legislative bills and other attempts at voter suppression.

### **b. Intended Audience**

Although Black Voters Matter follows grassroots organizers and not politicians, the film's audience will be similar to political films such as *And She Could Be Next* and *Knock Down The House*. Our audience will cut across class, race and age demographics since young, old, white, queer, and BIPOC people turned out in record numbers to vote last year. In addition to viewers who love political documentaries, activists and organizers and local and national politicians, we will aggressively target a Black demographic. Our film clearly demonstrates the vital role Black voters played in both elections, and we believe Black viewers would support a film about the vital role a Black organization played in ousting Donald Trump. We will reach out to Black groups, social clubs, HBCUs and alumni, and professional organizations to tap into the demographic through direct communication as well as also through social media, podcasts and events. These communities are quite engaged in the voting process like never before and due to the national conversations about the "future of democracy" we're clear that the film will be well received and word of mouth will build quickly.

### **c. Audience Engagement and Social Impact (IF APPLICABLE)**

The racial demographics of America are rapidly changing. It has long been projected that people of color will outnumber whites by 2045, if not sooner. Hell, according to demographer Kenneth Johnson white children will become a numerical minority by the middle of this year! Very soon BIPOC will make up the majority of the electorate for the first time in our nation's history. Even our government is beginning to reflect the shift. President Biden's cabinet is 45% female and 55% nonwhite and a quarter of voting members of the US House of Representatives and Senate are racial or ethnic minorities, making the 117th Congress the most diverse in history. But instead of embracing this diversity, the Republican party has become increasingly white and male. Only 17% of the GOP members are nonwhite.

Afraid this demographic revolution will wrest power and privilege from the few and distribute it more equitably, Republicans are working overtime to shrink the electorate and suppress votes not only of minorities but of young people. Luckily, the tide is turning against such regressive tendencies. Resistance to Trump's misogynistic, xenophobic and racist agenda fueled a wave of progressive political activism that reaches far beyond the political arena to average Americans - young people in particular - who otherwise considered themselves apolitical are now hyper-engaged in political discourse. Films like *Black Voters Matter* will



help keep them engaged by providing concrete examples of how they can make a difference in their own communities.

Black Voters Matter will be a highly effective tool for civil rights activists, organizations, and average citizens who want to help drive more voters to the polls. The film will provide viewers with the effective examples set by the Black Voters Matter Fund staff and leaders whose primary goal is not just to register voters but to support and empower them. The message that voters matter even more than their votes is one that can't be driven home enough. BVMF never has events without free food and music, which helps draw people in, and when discussing the importance of voting they always relate it to the issues and problems facing the individual or community they're addressing. For example, in Brunswick, GA where utility bills can run as high as \$800 a month due to de-regulation, they inform people that the Utility Commissioner is on the ballot, making a direct connection between their votes and the changes they want to see in their own backyards.

In Georgia the new American majority – people of color, those 18 to 29 years of age, and unmarried women make up 62% of the voting age population but only 53% of registered voters. This cannot stand. The ultimate goals for the film are to help increase voter participation in local as well as national elections, close the race and age voting gap, and boost grassroots efforts to reach every American in order to increase their participation in local, state and national elections by letting them know that the fate of our democracy is literally in their hands.

### **3. Key Creative Personnel**

#### **a. Bios of Key Creative Personnel**

**Daresha Kyi:** Director/Producer

Daresha Kyi is an Emmy award-winning director who writes and produces film and television in Spanish and English. A graduate of NYU Film School, she is currently in post-production on *Mama Bears*, her second feature documentary which will be released in January 2022. In 2020 she shot her third documentary, *Black Voters Matter*, which is also in post-production. In 2018 Daresha was commissioned by the ACLU to direct *Trans In America: Texas Strong*, which garnered over 3.5 million views online, screened at SXSW, and won two Webby Awards and an Emmy for "Outstanding Short Documentary." In 2017 she co-directed and co-produced her first documentary, *Chavela*, a multiple award-winner about iconic singer Chavela Vargas. Daresha's films have been funded by ITVS, NEA, NYSCA, NYFA, the Jerome Foundation, BPM (as NBPC) and have screened and won awards at festivals nationally and internationally. This former *A Blade of Grass* fellow was also a member of the Firelight Media Documentary Lab, Women In Film & Sundance Institute, Film Independent, Breaking Through the Lens, Chicken & Egg Eggcelerator Lab, and Creative Capital cohorts.

**Trevite Willis: Producer**

Award-winning producer, Trevite Willis, has produced digital content projects, shorts and feature films since 1999. She has produced 7 feature films, including Cargo (2017 Amnesty International Human Rights Prize), Blood Bound, Maya And Her Lover, and Children Of God which had theatrical releases in the US, UK and The Netherlands, won 17 awards, and sold in 24 territories.

Ms. Willis recently served as executive producer on the Sundance 2020 award-winning film, Forty Year Old Version and has a number of projects in production including Frank Bey: You're Gonna Miss Me and Listen To My Heartbeat. In 2018, Ms. Willis launched the Southern Fried Film Festival in Huntsville, Alabama with fellow co-founder, Kelley Reischauer.

**Tiago Bertrand: Director of Photography**

James "Tiago" Bertrand, III is an American Producer and Cinematographer from Pine Hills (Orlando) Florida, based in Atlanta, Georgia. Tiago's experience includes network and motion picture projects for ABC, BET, Netflix, WeTV, and TVOne amongst others. Additionally, he has been nominated and awarded accolades as a Director of Photography on projects such as Deus Ex Machina (2016); The Ruby Bridge's Story; and Grammy winning artist Beyonce's "Homecoming" opus. Black Voters Matter marks his documentary debut.

**Veronique Doumbe: Editor**

With roots in Cameroon and Martinique, Véronique N. Doumbé is both a narrative and documentary storyteller who wears multiple hats as producer, director and editor. She was the editor and co-producer of Imbabazi: Le Pardon, Rwandan genocide survivor Joel Karekezi's first feature. The film won the Nile Grand Prize at the Luxor African Film Festival in 2014.

She co-directed Woman to Woman (2013) with her daughter Malika Franklin. The film is a conversation between NY mothers and their teenage daughters. Her first feature documentary Denis A. Charles: An Interrupted Conversation about Free Jazz drummer Denis Charles won Best Documentary at the XVII Black international cinema in Berlin and the Audience Award at Detroit Docs in 2002. Her first short Luggage, which she wrote, directed, and edited, was screened at the Short Film Corner in Cannes in 2007. The Birthday Party, written by Sherry McGuinn, won the Best Micro mini Award at Reel Sisters of the Diaspora Film Festival in 2009 and the Dikalo Award 2009 for Best Short at the Pan African Film Festival in Cannes. She is currently developing Raising Zuly, a feature length documentary about a girl growing up with Down Syndrome in Barcelona with her mother, tap dancer Roxane Butterfly.

Veronique has also directed music videos and shorts films. Her latest music video, shot in black and white infrared, was created for the Soul Secrets EP by FaithNY and released on World Wide Vibe Records (2015).

#### **4. Fundraising Strategy and Grant Impact**

##### **a. Fundraising Strategy**

With our \$2 million budget, we structured an equity and donation/grant split with \$500K set aside for equity and \$1.5 million for donations/grants. To date, we have raised 625,000 and s have \$1.375M left to raise. Due to the hectic nature of production, we've only just started applying to granting institutions. We are waiting to hear from the Ford and are planning to apply to IDA Enterprise Fund, the Southern Documentary Fund, Chicken & Egg, Creative Capital, A Blade of Grass, SFFilm, and Women In Film Finishing Fund among others.

##### **b. Funding to Date**

Source Amount Status

Private Investments \$250,000 Secured

Donations \$275,000 Secured

Foundation (Loan) \$100,000 Secured

##### **c. Grant Impact**

Although we raised over \$600,000 for the film we are currently completely tapped out because of the Georgia runoffs. Initially we had planned to wrap shooting with the presidential election but when it became clear that Georgia had become the center of the Universe there was no way we could stop shooting. So we pressed on and used the funds we had previously allocated for post-production to cover the cost. Funds from SDF would be used to help us cover the costs of our last pickup shoots and to hire an assistant editor to start organizing our footage and preparing it for the editing phase of the project once we have additional funding.