



Fund for Investigative Journalism

May News

FIJ Grantee's Documentary on Reproductive Rights in Prisons to Open Human Rights Watch Film Festival



For the better part of the last decade, FIJ grantee Erika Cohn, a Peabody and Emmy Award-winning director/producer, has worked to shine a light on reproductive and human rights violations inside the walls of California's women's prisons. In 2010, Cohn began following the work of Cynthia Chandler, an activist lawyer, and Kelli Dillon, a woman who was involuntarily sterilized at the Central California Women's Facility, as they fought to expose those abuses. The result is Cohn's film, "Belly of the Beast."

Set to debut on [opening night of the Human Rights Watch Film Festival](#) on June 11, the documentary follows Chandler and Dillon as they wage a near impossible battle against the Department of Corrections, and spearhead investigations that uncover a series of statewide crimes, primarily targeting women of color, from inadequate access to health care to sexual assault to illegal sterilization.



"It was modern day eugenics," said Cohn. "Even though I had hundreds of testimonials from people directly impacted, a lot of people couldn't wrap their head around the fact this was actually happening."

As a result of this skepticism, Cohn's film went mostly unfunded in its early stages.

But in 2013, Cohn said, Chandler's advocacy work along with increasing [media coverage](#) thrust the sterilization issue into a national conversation and helped validate the experiences of her sources. The mounting evidence also led to hearings in the state Legislature and eventually to the passage of a bill in 2014 banning sterilization as a form of birth control for the state's female prisoners.

Cohn received a grant from FIJ soon after to further investigate the extent to which these violations had occurred in prisons throughout the state.

FIJ's funding, Cohn said, came at a crucial time, and led to a wealth of new reporting that helped validate the experiences of hundreds of women interviewed throughout the film's production.

"This film required a different investigative reporting process that a lot of traditional film funders weren't supporting," said Cohn. "FIJ's support allowed us to take a deeper dive into the journalistic component."

More Recent Work From Our Grantees

Coca-Cola Skirts Restrictions as Cape Town Runs out of Water

At the beginning of 2018, Cape Town faced the very real prospect of becoming the first major city in the world to run out of water. As FIJ grantee Raymond Joseph and coauthor



Capetonians living under unprecedented water restrictions, descended on the city's natural springs to collect water. Credit: Steve Kretzmann

Steve Kretzmann report, city officials responded by dramatically increasing the cost of water to residents, fining anyone caught wasting water, and penalizing households that exceeded their daily 50-liter-per-person quota by installing water management devices that restricted the flow to their properties.

Yet despite these restrictions, and mounting anxiety within the city, the Cape Town-based bottlers of Coca-Cola continued using at least 44 million liters of water a month.

You can read the full investigation into how industrial corporations were given a free pass by Cape Town officials in [GroundUp](#).

InvestigateWest Wins First Place Award for FIJ-Funded Story, "Driving While Indian"

InvestigateWest recently earned a first-place award in the Crime and Justice reporting category of the Society of Professional Journalists' Northwest Excellence in Journalism Awards competition for their investigation, "[Driving While Indian](#)."

The story, originally published in December 2019, found that Washington State Patrol troopers search people of color at far higher rates than whites. Their investigation led the state Legislature to appropriate \$200,000 toward studying and reducing racial bias in the Washington State Patrol.

Getting to Know Our New Executive Director, Eric Ferrero



What are your goals as you lead FIJ into the future?

"FIJ has had a tremendous impact since the very beginning, 51 years ago. I feel a great urgency to broaden our reach and deepen our impact in the months and years ahead. That means increasing our capacity to provide more grants to more journalists, in every part of the country, and it means forging more partnerships to reach audiences through emerging platforms and to help increase diversity within the field of investigative journalism."

Why do you think organizations like FIJ are important?

First, I don't think there's any other organization quite like FIJ. The caliber of our board, and the level of their engagement in every grant decision, is unparalleled — and you see that in the quality of journalism we support and the impact our grantees' stories have once they're published. That said, we're part of a community of groups and people who are doing everything they can to support journalism, which is absolutely critical for ensuring transparency, accountability, fairness, and justice.

What do you think people might not know, but should know, about FIJ's work?

"I don't think people have seen the full impact of FIJ's work, and I'm really excited to help bring that to life more. You can take just about any one of the dozens of stories FIJ helps make possible every year, and see an impact at the local, state, or federal level. Just recently, stories funded by FIJ sparked reforms to North Carolina's sexual assault laws, helped reopen hundreds of tainted criminal convictions in Massachusetts, and ignited a national dialogue about universities benefiting from land taken from Native American people. FIJ funds high-quality, unbiased journalism that exposes wrongdoing or injustice, and that journalism often leads to meaningful policy change on a whole host of issues."

What about your work at FIJ inspires/motivates you?

"I'm inspired by the work our grantees do every day. In some of their grant applications, freelance journalists say that without FIJ's help they can't afford gas money to go interview a source or can't afford the fees to photocopy public records. With FIJ's help, they can dig deep and keep digging — and the stories they publish can make a real difference."

What do you like to do outside of work?

"I live in New York and I run several times a week along the Hudson River. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I've learned how to run in a mask (but haven't learned to love it). My husband and I have also been getting weekly cooking lessons from my mom via Skype, which have tested both her patience and our skills."





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