



Sadie Rain Hope Gund

Catherine Gund '83 is an award-winning documentary maker and founder of Aubin Pictures, a New York based, not-for-profit company that produces films focusing on issues of social justice.

Gund's documentaries include *Motherland Afghanistan*; *Making Grace*; *On Hostile Ground*; *Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance*; *When Democracy Works*; *Positive: Life with HIV*; *Sacred Lies, Civil Truths*; *Not Just Passing Through*; the Emmy-nominated *A Touch of Greatness*; and her current work, *What's On Your Plate?* She lives in New York City with her partner Bruce Morrow and children Sadie, 12, Kofi and Rio, 9, and Tenzin, 4. Gund answered questions by email. She had more to say than space allows. Check out her full interview at [concordacademy.org/gund](http://concordacademy.org/gund). And learn more about *What's On Your Plate?* at [whatsonyourplateproject.org](http://whatsonyourplateproject.org).



**With so many moving stories and worthy causes in the world, how do you choose your projects?**

Each project has grown from a conversation, a bit of footage, or a great proposal that really sparked something in me. There are so many vital issues and subjects that concern me, but finding a charismatic character to tell the story is hard. My documentaries are driven by characters, not issues; by a person or people who are so compelling that they could be talking about almost anything and I would listen.

My most recent project picked me. For the first time, I was actually casting about for an idea, asking friends what subjects they felt were underrepresented, asking people about folks in their lives who fascinate them. Then, when my daughter Sadie became a vegetarian at nine years old, we talked about her choice and what it would mean for her diet. I told her that vegetarians can't just eat pasta and pizza, and she told me that some

of her friends do just that. I explained why it wasn't healthy for anyone to eat such an unbalanced diet. Sadie suggested we make a film about vegetarians gone bad. Although I could instantly picture the pulp fiction-style poster, we never made that movie. Instead, we started to work together on *What's On Your Plate?*, a documentary about kids and food politics. That was about two years ago. And that's the project I'm still working on.

**How do you maintain a sense of objectivity? Is that necessary?**

I find it amusing when people claim to be "objective" since the filmmaker is an inevitable filter. I definitely choose to represent people I believe in. One of my first feature documentaries, *On Hostile Ground*, was about abortion providers, and while we were filming, I recall being asked (often) whether we were going to "balance" the story or "show both sides," and I kept wondering what was the other "side" to a doctor doing her job. We did however include protesters at abortion clinics.

I do find it valuable to present material in an accessible and calm way so that viewers aren't turned off by strident, dogmatic, or didactic material—which isn't to say I don't feel opinionated. Challenging as it is, I want the broadest possible audience to benefit from engaging with the people, stories, and issues raised in my films.

**Have you made films in which you did not consider yourself an advocate for the cause portrayed? If so, please describe some differences between filming as an advocate versus as more of an observer?**

Advocate is too strong a word because I prefer to present a situation

or person as is and let the audience decide. That said, there are definitely projects where I do have a strong connection to the subject matter and want to open people's eyes. *On Hostile Ground* was one of those types of films. *Making Grace*, about a lesbian couple trying to have a baby, is another example. I make documentaries instead of mainstream Hollywood movies because I'm concerned with social consciousness-raising.

In *What's On Your Plate?*, the girls do advocate fixing the food system, but it's not done in a judgmental or presumptuous way. They ask a lot of questions first, and they learn as the year progresses to the point where they want to change the harmful business practices around food that they encounter. They participate in improving the school lunch program, and they commit to raising funds for more farmers' markets in East Harlem. And finally, they decide to continue working with the farmers they met during the planting and harvesting seasons. In this way, they're modeling what motivated people can do.

**What are some of the most difficult challenges you face as a documentary filmmaker?**

Raising money is the number-one challenge for independent filmmakers. Many social justice funders won't fund film projects, and many broadcasters—who commission work—want sensationalist, commercial material. The funding for the films I've made comes from many different sources, which range from foundations to government, corporations to individuals. I've also raised production money from early distribution deals, as well as in more creative ways, like auctioning things on eBay that people



From *What's On Your Plate?*: The Angel Family Farm in Goshen, New York



Chef Bryant Terry with Safiyah Riddle and Sadie Hope-Gund at the Union Square market in New York City

donate. If you're lucky, there are things you can't plan for, such as surprise anonymous PayPal donations.

**What's one primary message you hope people take away from *What's On Your Plate*?**

We are facing a crisis. My children are members of the first generation in history to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Much of that is due to diet-related illnesses such as diabetes, high cholesterol, heart disease, obesity, and some cancers. The food we buy and eat is less and less sustainable for our health, our environment, and our economy. Until people connect the dots—between underpaid farmers, lack of safe park and playground space, diabetes, confined animal-feeding operations, corporate advertising to children, urban sprawl, and accessibility of local, seasonal, organic food, among other things—this crisis will only worsen.

**When is the film's premiere?**

We intend to complete the film in early 2009. We will premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February, followed by a theatrical release, community-based screenings, and television broadcast. We're developing an extensive outreach campaign in collaboration with nonprofit organizations that are already active in the movement to improve what kids

eat. By spring, we will showcase an interactive Web site for kids and grownups alike. If any educators would like to contact us about our outreach plans, we would be happy to speak with them. And the DVD, complete with extras, excerpts, and study guide materials, will be available by the end of the summer.

**Could you share one or two moments during production of *What's On Your Plate* that were especially enlightening or inspiring?**

A farmer, Ana Angel, says that farming in New York State with her husband and four children is her way of merging her children's U.S. culture and her Mexican culture. Her love of family, her connection with the land, and her attitude toward life inspire me. She sees other options beyond assimilating or isolating. Her desire is to develop a culture in the United States that celebrates immigrant farmers, international cuisines, and health as a way to support families and strengthen communities, a culture that allows food to sustain us all.

**I read that for *Making Grace*, about the birth of a lesbian couple's child, you whittled 65 hours of video into 80 minutes. Is that typical?**

This time we're working with over 150 hours to make a 75-minute film. Luck-

ily for documentary filmmakers, tape is cheap. If you let a camera roll and observe more of the action, you'll capture wonderful, unlikely, and exciting moments that you might have missed if you had to conserve tape stock.

Also, a 30-second scene can be made up of images from many different tapes and audio from still other tapes. It's probably more accurate to imagine building a movie out of select pieces of footage than to think of it as being "cut down" from the whole lot that was filmed.

**When does the story or arc of a film become apparent to you? In the beginning? During filming? During post-production?**

Although you have a sense of the broad strokes, the magic of documentary is that you don't know what's going to happen or what will be revealed. I am committed to documentary because it's stranger than fiction and it's about remaining open to the creative process. Almost always, the footage you end up with will tell you more about the arc than any preconceived plan. The film ultimately will tell you what it wants to be.

**Which of your films makes you most proud? Why?**

I'm happy to say that I love all my films, like I love all my tattoos. [She has six.] Each presented its own

personal challenge and taught me a few things. Each one fired me up. But my current film is always my favorite.

**What do you consider the highlight of your career so far? Your 2006 Emmy nomination for *A Touch of Greatness* (about innovative educator Albert Cullum)?**

Sure, the Emmy nomination was certainly a highlight, but I also loved meeting Dr. Mojadidi, the ob/gyn in *Motherland Afghanistan* who has chosen to share his medical knowledge and expertise with doctors (both in Afghanistan and on Native American reservations in the States) who have limited access to training and up-to-date information and necessary resources. Also, showing my films to my children always makes me happy.

**How did you get into filmmaking?**

In college, I came into a group of activist, on-the-cheap videomakers who were using the media to teach media literacy; they were showing people to read between the lines, and I jumped right in. The collective was called Paper Tiger Television, and they're still around today. I feel very grateful to all the folks I worked with during those years for being among the best role models, co-conspirators, and fun people I've ever met.

Actually one tributary was Jon Harris at Concord Academy. He was my photography teacher (now he's a lawyer), and I loved taking black-and-white photographs and seeing what came across in a picture. Recently I met with his son, James Kienitz Wilkins, who is an aspiring filmmaker. I love that circle.

**Is there anything else on which you'd like to comment?**

Two years ago we started making *What's On Your Plate* and I am stunned by the awareness and sophistication of my daughter's generation. They're so pure in their ideals because they don't owe anything to any lobbyist or stockholder. They intuitively know when things are wrong, unfair, or lopsided. I am thrilled that my daughter and her friend Safiyah have taken on this project and pursued it with so much honesty, humor, and energy. That Sadie is doing this film with me now is the icing on the Tofutti Cutie.