

# WHAT A Legacy LOOKS LIKE

THE PGA FELLOWSHIP THAT HONORS THE LATE PRODUCER DEBRA HILL INSPIRES RECIPIENTS TO FASHION CAREERS IN HER SPIRIT OF GIVING BACK, OF NURTURING YOUNG TALENT, AND HER RELENTLESS COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY, SUSTAINABILITY AND CREATIVITY.





## Follow the path laid down by Debra Hill and this is whom you'll find along the way: Powerhouses who smashed box office records. Trailblazers who toppled stereotypes. Mentors who extended a hand to new generations of filmmakers, just the way they received help at their start.

It's a legacy that stretches from scrappy indies to massive tentpoles, from fearless studio heads to film school grads just about to hit their professional stride, and from a passion for making the best possible films to a determination to treat everyone involved in the best way possible. It's the legacy of Debra Hill.

"Debra paved the way for people like me to see that there was a place for me in the industry as a producer," says Pamela Abdy. "She was my mentor's mentor, so I feel that I got the benefit of learning about script and story from her."

Now cochair and CEO of Warner Bros. Motion Picture Group, Abdy began her career as an intern at Jersey Films under Stacey Sher. "She taught me about the nuts and bolts of producing, which I know was passed down," Abdy says.

When Sher began working with Hill in 1985, it was a trial run as director of development. "Debra taught me the philosophy of 'no is not an option,'" says Sher, who went on to produce critical and box office successes for the likes of Quen-

tin Tarantino and Steven Soderbergh.

The company that gave Sher her trial run was Hill/Obst, a partnership formed by Hill and Lynda Obst at Paramount. Obst had developed *Flashdance*, *Clue* and *Contact* for Peter Guber and was mentored by David Geffen while working on *Risky Business* and *After Hours*.

The film that had put Hill on the map was the first feature she produced: 1978's *Halloween*, which she also cowrote. It also marked the first feature film role for Oscar-winning actor Jamie Lee Curtis. During production, the two women became what Curtis describes as "absolute ride-or-die best friends."

Curtis was 19. Hill was 30. Despite the age gap, Curtis says, "We were just incredibly close."

Curtis describes Hill/Obst as a powerhouse. "They really were the first in a world of men who just didn't want 'em around. These two women said, 'Yeah, well, pfft, watch this,' and they did it. It's just a beautiful legacy."

Stephanie Austin had been producing long-form television when Hill asked

her to come on board as a supervising producer on *Heartbreak Hotel* in 1988. "That experience gave me the confidence a couple years later so that when Jim Cameron called, I could say yes to taking a big step into producing *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *True Lies*," Austin says.

Recently, Curtis helped usher into the fold Zofia Sablinska, another producer whose career has been boosted by Hill. Sablinska joins a group of more than a dozen others who never met Hill yet who have benefited enormously from her legacy of generosity, courage, integrity and creativity.

Curtis and Obst were among those who came together in October to honor Sablinska as the 14th recipient of the PGA's Debra Hill Fellowship. Established in 2005 after Hill's death, the grant provides a financial boost to filmmakers who have recently completed an accredited graduate degree in producing, helping them achieve their career goals while channeling their passion for film and TV into addressing important issues.

"Debra was passionate about everything she did," Jamie Lee Curtis recalled during the reception. At the top of Hill's list was advocating for producers' creative rights, female representation in entertainment, protecting the environment and promoting sustainability, and, Curtis added, "a commitment to teaching and mentoring generations of producers like our young Zofia."

### Investing in the Future

"There are many opportunities for writers and directors to be mentored and less so for up-and-coming producers," says Abdy. "The PGA fellowship is an incredible opportunity for young producers to break into the business, have their ideas heard and be mentored by other working producers."

The 2023 selection committee included longtime chair Austin, Abdy, Obst and Sher, along with Barry Bernardi, Candace Block, Candace



Debra Hill and Jamie Lee Curtis on the set of *The Fog* (1980).

Bowen, Jeffrey Chernov, Bruce Cohen, Hollace Davids, Shelly Hochron, Marion Rosenberg, Cathleen Summers and Scott Thaler. Prior fellowship recipients Deniese Davis, Monique Keller and Lucienne Papon also served on the committee.

Before his death last September, Paul Reubens was instrumental in his involvement with the Debra Hill Fellowship as an active and committed leader and member of the selection committee. He was also involved in the fundraising needed to continue the fellowship.

### Inspired Careers

"Zofia is a remarkable young filmmaker, and the material she chose to produce shows a surprising maturity," says Austin. Sablinska submitted films exploring conflicts between the values of a recently immigrated father and son, an experimental film about the

nature of the modern workplace with no dialogue, and a black-and-white progressive adaptation of work by Truman Capote.

"We do personal interviews at the end of the judging process, and that was the deciding factor in Zofia's case," adds Austin. "She has the personality, drive, ambition and communication skills to carry on the Debra Hill producing tradition."

Sablinska received her MFA in producing from the American Film Institute (AFI) in August 2023. She bolstered her experience under Ewa Puszczyńska, producer of the Oscar-winning film *Ida*, and Sean Bobbitt (*The Peasant*), along with internships at Match Factory Productions, FirstGen Content, HanWay Films and Paper Plane Productions.

But years before a self-described "crazy journey" took her from her home in Poland to the heart of Hollywood, Sablinska began her career in film with a needle and thread.

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"I started when I was 16, sewing in buttons as a costume assistant for free," recalls Sablinska. "I really connected so much with Debra because she did the same thing. She knew the set inside and out. It took me a few summers, each one on set, to figure out what I wanted to do, and when I landed on producing, something opened up."

2007 fellow Eleonore Dailly felt a similar kinship when she researched Hill's trajectory.

"Like her, I had a passion for cinema from a very young age and started producing and directing documentaries before moving to feature films and television," says Dailly. "When I later worked with Jamie Lee Curtis, we spoke of Debra Hill's fierceness and how she embodied the joy of willing a project into existence and building a community in the process."

Dailly was working in the story department at Amblin when her boss asked her to analyze the *Halloween* franchise as a model for developing sequels. "Some of the themes in those films felt incredibly relevant to me even decades after they were made," says Dailly.

2022 fellow Maggie Bailey grew up watching *The Fog* with her dad and felt familiar with Hill's early work, but it was at film school that Bailey learned more about Hill's career—and most importantly, her advocacy.

Bailey, who works predominantly within the Austin, Texas, independent film community, acknowledges that it was difficult to find mentorship within that small space. Hill's commitment to nurturing emerging producers deeply resonated with Bailey.

"I aim to seek out opportunities to mentor and uplift young producers," Bailey says. "I aspire to not only create compelling films but also to invest in the rich narratives and unique perspectives of my peers in Texas."

When 2013 recipient Rob Cristiano learned more about Hill while applying for the fellowship, he was moved by Hill's seriousness about the importance

of great storytelling and the confidence with which she stood behind her teams and projects.

"I would like to think that one of the reasons why I was selected for the fellowship when I was finishing grad school was that I was already beginning to follow those same principles,"

Cristiano says.

He adds, "It really hit me how much she meant to the filmmaking and especially the producing community when I sat down for my fellowship interview with two of her dear colleagues."

Fellowship applicants are asked to describe how Debra Hill and her legacy



COURTESY OF LYNDA OBST

**Above:**  
Debra Hill  
and Lynda  
Obst.

**Right:**  
Jamie  
Lee Curtis  
and 2023  
Debra Hill  
Fellowship  
recipient  
Zofia  
Sablinska.



PHOTO BY GRANT TERZAKIS



impacted them and their career. “It was important that the applicants really thought about it and gave legitimate answers because it’s so easy in this business to be forgotten,” Hurd says. “We felt it was important to continue her legacy with the next generations and to make sure that she continued to be remembered and celebrated.”

Adds Dailly: “Producing requires a relentless drive, commitment to an original idea, the ability to translate that unique vision to wildly different collaborators, and to continue to champion it, sometimes for years, from the initial lightbulb moment all the way to the first screening when you get to that finish line. Debra Hill made those qualities look effortless.”

When Deniese Davis was selected as the 2012 fellowship recipient, she described herself as “a very young aspiring producer from Las Vegas, Nevada, graduating at the age of 24 with very big dreams to tell stories that could change the world.”

“The fact that I was singled

out for this award gave me the utmost confidence in my skills because the largest producing organization in the world—successful, well-accomplished producers who I greatly admired—deemed me worthy of my ambitions,” Davis says. Bailey shares the sentiment, adding, “This kind of recognition holds immeasurable value for me as an emerging producer, affirming the support and validation of my work by a respected industry community.”

## Fruits of the Fellowship

One member of the selection committee offered to mentor Davis. Another gave her the opportunity to produce a proof-of-concept short film with their company. Three years after being awarded the fellowship, Davis produced her first television pilot for HBO.

During the decade that followed her fellowship award, Davis founded Reform Media Group and has produced two documentary films plus three series for HBO: the Emmy-nominated *Insecure*

and *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, and the newer music comedy *Rap Sh!t*.

Bailey is currently producing two documentaries, one with the support of Latino Public Broadcasting and the MacArthur Foundation, and the feature documentary *Our Body Electric* about women in bodybuilding. “It has been in production for over a year now, and, except for a few day players, we have exclusively worked with an all-female team,” says Bailey.

“My connection to the PGA has given me a wealth of knowledge and allowed me to ask many producers I respect for their advice when I’ve needed guidance—even when the advice is just a confirmation that, yes, fundraising is hard.”

Since 2007, Dailly has started two production companies and produced features and series across the globe, broadening her experience across genres, formats, continents and languages. “The award gave me the confidence to dive into independent producing and start pursuing my own projects while continuing to learn about filmmaking at

Maggie Bailey on the set of *The Lone Rider*, a student film at the University of Texas at Austin directed by Tiger Hill in 2019.



Sony and Disney,” she says.

“Following in the footsteps of a filmmaker like Debra has given me the confidence to champion these many projects in spite of the many systemic challenges.”

The first feature Cristiano produced after receiving the fellowship was *Bob and The Trees*, which premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival and won the top prize at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival the same year. His other producing credits include *Stay Awake*, which received a special mention as part of the 2022 Berlinale Generation 14plus program; Cannes Film Festival selection *Down with the King*; Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*; and 2017’s *Keep the Change*, winner of Best U.S. Narrative Film at the Tribeca Film Festival and the Critics’ Award at Karlovy Vary.

Each of these fellows is working to continue Hill’s legacy in their own way, intensely focused on their unique projects while standing for something greater—sustainability, diversity, set safety, unfettered creativity, and, of course, the importance of giving back.

“Producing is often the role that is the most influential but the most overlooked,” Davis says. “I hope that I can continue Debra’s legacy as an innovator within the film and television industry as a storyteller who champions the underrepresented while being a guide to those who aspire to do this work.”

Defining the Job

When thinking about Hill, *Halloween* is the title that most likely comes to mind, but she had many noteworthy titles to her credit. She produced *The Fog*, *Escape from New York*, *The Dead Zone*, and two *Halloween* sequels. Before the two went off on their own, Hill/Obst produced the Oscar-nominated *The Fisher King*. Films like *Clueless*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Big Top Pee-wee* reflected Hill’s zaniness and humor, traits that friends and colleagues remember fondly.

Hill’s command on the set was cultivated over a dozen-plus years in roles including production assistant, director, and second-unit director. She filled in wherever and however she could, no matter the task.

Austin’s career trajectory has mirrored Hill’s. “Having those experiences makes for an assured, decisive producer, and Debra was definitely that—a real straight shooter with a broad skill set,” Austin says.

“Debra always stood on the set with her legs straddled, her hands on her hips, ready for anything. I think of her all the time in that pose because she was both so comfortable on set and so ready to go, whatever the issue was,” says Obst. “Her posture represented that ability to jump into action or stay out of the action, whichever was best required for the moment.”

Oscar-winning producer Bruce Cohen describes Hill as “the ultimate producer, performing the job with excellence and innovation across every aspect of the filmmaking process from development through production to distribution.” A huge fan of Hill’s work, Cohen was thrilled to come to know and love her personally while producing the Producers Guild of America Awards for several years.

Many of those whom Hill worked with emphasize again and again that

the people behind a film were of utmost importance to her, whether crew, cast or characters. Hill was happiest being on a team of equals, serving in partnership with writers, directors and departments alike. “She was a whiz in production,” says Lauren Shuler Donner, who was at Paramount with Hill in 1985 when they were producing *Pretty in Pink* and *Clue*, respectively. “She had a great work ethic and loved her crews. I know that everybody loved working with her.”

At a time when the industry is driven by technological advancement more than ever, Hill’s friends know that she would have remained a steadfast humanist.

“The story and the characters always came first, and it was always about achieving whatever was in a scene in the best and safest possible way,” says Hurd.

Todd Black admired Hill’s no-nonsense approach. “If it was X budget, she would figure out how to get it there,” he says. “She was a big problem-solver. She was the kind of person who made you feel everything was taken care of.”

“Her whole thing was dealing with people directly and problem-solving with the person versus closed doors or emails,” Black adds. “She would make them feel a part of the solution versus sending out emails or texts. “It’s that personal touch. I hope that whoever gets these fellowships can follow suit.”

Hill’s generosity was matched by a fierce determination. “Debra and I both fought the studios for what our movies needed,” recalls Shuler Donner. “In both our cases we wanted to use a different film lab, but then Paramount had to deal with it. Dawn Steel was head of Paramount at the time and her head of postproduction would complain to her about ‘those girls!’”

It was Steel who suggested that Hill and Lynda Obst team up to combine their unique strengths in production and development. Obst recalls that while the idea was for one to teach the other, the experience revealed that each had great instincts that they were not

aware of until they began trading skills.

“Debra could put any prep together in the world in a minute under budget. But when I came to town on *Adventures in Babysitting*, she had to learn that you don’t always hire the cheapest hair and makeup people and wardrobe people, certainly when you’re on a studio film. She taught me logic and how to do a scary set piece,” Obst says.

“She was really great at talking to directors and about the tone and scale of a set piece. And that’s in the script, not just in production alone. Debra taught me that in development, so that I could better prepare my scripts for those kinds of moments that she was an expert in.”

Stacey Sher lives by two “Debra-isms.” Number one: no job is too big or too small for the producer. Number two: There is no above and below the line. “We’re all just one crew moving forward, trying to make our day and make a great film. Those are the things

that have guided and continue to guide my career today,” says Sher. She and Hill were working together to produce *World Trade Center* when Hill passed away in 2005.

Obst treasures specific landmarks in her partnership with Hill, especially when times are tough. In difficult moments on set or trying to push the proverbial boulder up the hill during development, Obst’s thoughts turn to lunch.

“When Paramount put our first movie *Adventures in Babysitting* into turnaround, we were so confident of setting it up elsewhere that we sent it to every studio. Then we went to the big lunch place that everybody went to at that time called Le Dome.

“And with everybody wondering if we were going to be OK, we both ordered steak tartare. We said, ‘Bring it on!’ Now, whenever I have a really hard moment during the struggle of getting a movie made, I go out for a steak tartare.”



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Eleonore Dailly on the set of Netflix's *Dangerous Liaisons*.

Gale Anne Hurd, who was among the group that established the Debra Hill Fellowship, was assistant to prolific producer Roger Corman when she met Hill. "There was no way that I could in any way advance her career, but Debra was there for every woman."

### Women Supporting Women

Hurd and Hill's relationship grew while the two served on the board of Women in Film (WIF). Hurd recalls that when WIF was founded in 1973, there were very few women in leadership roles in Hollywood. Since the roles open to them were so scarce, it was a matter of survival for a woman in power to withhold support for other female colleagues who might threaten their job security.

"Women in Film was founded essentially to provide networking and to show women that supporting other women was the right thing to do," Hurd

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## DEBRA-ISMS

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says. "Debra exemplified all of that."

Hurd credits Hill for helping define what was possible in science fiction, fantasy and horror film. "I don't believe I would have the career that I have had she not blazed that trail first," says

Hurd, whose film credits include *The Terminator*, *Aliens*, and *The Abyss*, as well as *The Walking Dead* for television.

"It was difficult at the time because the horror genre was not considered women's films. It was thought that we should stick to women talking in a room about men. Debra defied that first and better than anybody."

Hill gave of her time in many ways. She served on the Producers Guild board, and for several years she joined Lauren Shuler Donner in teaching a course at UCLA about the producer's role in filmmaking.

Notably, Hill championed the cause of environmental sustainability long before addressing the climate crisis became a corporate imperative. Alongside other leaders in film, television, music, radio, and advertising, Hill was a founding board member of the nonprofit Earth Communications Office (ECO). The group was created in 1989 to harness

the capacity of the entertainment industry to increase environmental protection awareness and action.

"She was the most positive, supportive, optimistic person I have ever known in this industry," Hurd says. "Her indomitable spirit to this day is unmatched by anyone else within or outside the industry."

## The Future Looks Bright

Hill's legacy will continue to enrich the industry far into the future. Future recipients, identified as trailblazers in Hill's mold, will no doubt evolve film, TV, and new media, continually optimizing how productions are run and the quality of stories being told. A feature documentary, *Hollywood Trailblazer: The Debra Hill Story*, is in the works, codirected by Jim McMorrow and Margaret McGoldrick. Jamie Lee Curtis has signed on as an executive producer.

During the event celebrating the 2023 fellow, PGA Executive Director Susan Sprung said, "What started as a collaboration with people who knew and loved Debra has blossomed into a diverse and dynamic community of the next generation of producers and production executives at a time when being a professional, creative person has never been harder in this industry."

Says Shuler Donner: "I hope that these filmmakers carry on Debra's commitment to her crews, her ethics, and her uncanny wisdom about production." Todd Black adds, "If these young producers could find half the drive and commitment and problem-solving capabilities that Debra had, it would be fantastic. I think the fellowship is helping us do that."

It's safe to say that every fellow is nothing if not committed. "Following in the footsteps of a filmmaker like Debra has given me the confidence to champion these many projects in spite of the many systemic challenges," says Dailly.

"I think often producers feel the need to succeed before they are able to support others who aspire to do the same work as them, but Debra continued to lift as she climbed," says Davis. "Her legacy was to support both ambitious projects and women, no matter the odds, and I only hope to do the very same."

Rob Cristiano dedicates himself to being an open, trustworthy, and positive collaborator to keep Debra's spirit alive. "It's about asking ourselves what we as the filmmaking community can do better, how we can be better to each other, how we can lift each other up, and to pursue those things even when it's hard or the path isn't clear," he says.

Sablinska, who will use her fellowship funds to develop a project in Poland, has thought a lot about the mission of the fellowship and the hopes invested in it—namely, that recipients might use the momentum to create work that might change the industry for the better in the many ways Hill did. "Those are huge shoes to fill," Sablinska says. "No one can change the world alone. We are able to change it together."

She adds, "I promise that when the time comes for me to give back, I will strive to give the same support and love that I was given." ■

## The Debra Hill Fellows

### Maggie M. Bailey

Director and Producer, *Moving Together* (2023 Dance on Camera Festival at Lincoln Center)

### Asia Coleman

Development Executive for Narrative Feature and Episodic Entertainment at Rodger Dodger Studios

### Rob Cristiano

Founder of Inside Voices, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Coproducer), *Bob and the Trees* (Producer)

### Eleonore Dailly

Owner, Autopilot Entertainment, Codirector and Producer of Sundance Film Festival official selection *Dirt! The Movie* (narrated by Jamie Lee Curtis)

### Jessica Daniels

Jessica Daniels Casting and former Vice President of Casting at Walt Disney Television

### Deniese Davis

Founder/CEO of Reform Media Group, Producer, *Insecure*, *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, *Rap Sh!t*

### Ashleigh Foster

Writer/Producer/Head of Development at Honora Productions

### Montserrat Gomez

Vice President of Drama Development at NBCUniversal

### Jacob Jaffke

*Pearl* (Producer, p.g.a.), *X* (Producer, p.g.a.), *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (Executive Producer)

### Monique Keller

Head of Development at Dreamchaser

### Diego Najera

Director of Narrative Films at Participant

### Lucienne Papon

Executive Vice President of Creative Affairs at ITV Studios America

### Zofia Sablinska

2023 graduate, American Film Institute

### Rachel Vine

Film/TV/Fiction Writer