

Black Public Media Awarded \$610,000 At Annual PitchBLACK Forum



Black Public Media Executive Director Leslie Fields-Cruz with BPM Trailblazer Award honoree Sam Pollard (photo credit Ed Marshall, Ed Marshall Photography)

[Black Public Media](#) (BPM) awarded a total of \$610,000 to film and immersive projects and creatives at its seventh PitchBLACK

Forum – the largest pitch competition for independent filmmakers and creative technologists developing new projects about the global Black experience – at the PitchBLACK Awards on Thursday, April 25, 2024. The figure was the highest ever amount awarded at PitchBLACK. Sponsored by Netflix and PBS, the event – held at The Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse at Lincoln Center – was hosted by Baltimore-based comedian Sir Alex and included the presentation of the BPM Trailblazer Award to Emmy-winning filmmaker Sam Pollard.

The winner of the \$150,000 film award is *Zenón*, a documentary about the life of Puerto Rican fisherman and revolutionary Carlos “Taso” Zenón who spearheaded protests against the U.S. Navy’s occupation, exploitation, and environmental degradation of his home, the island of Vieques. Puerto Rican director Juan C. Dávila and producer Camila Rodríguez Estrada accepted the grant for their film about environmental racism on an island where the majority of residents are Black Puerto Ricans. Judges of the PitchBLACK Film Forum were Chloe Gbai, Chris Hastings, and Sabrina Schmidt-Gordon.

Image Frequency Modulation, an interactive memory broadcasting station investigating images, ancestral memory, oral transmission, and metaphors of radio technologies as sites of possibility for the African diaspora, won a \$50,000 immersive project award. Its creator is Ethel-Ruth Tawe and the producer is Elisha Tawe, and they are a Cameroonian brother and sister team. *The Museum of Black Joy: Ring Shouts, Rituals & Rising Signs* by Philadelphia creator Andrea Walls, received a \$25,000 immersive project award. It is a four-wall video installation conceived as a cultural embrace, resonating with a multi-media narrative that centers Black Joy as it emerges from history, triumphantly, with style, creativity, and grace. Judges of the PitchBLACK Immersive Forum were Errol King, Angela Tucker, and Jennifer Scott.

The PitchBLACK Forum was hosted by advertising futurist Tameka Kee.

“Every year, PitchBLACK serves as a reminder to our team, and to the wider industry, of the amazing pool of talent in our media-making communities,” said Leslie Fields-Cruz, executive director of BPM. “What this year’s PitchBLACK participants share is a commitment to novel storytelling. Their work is innovative, enlightening, and entertaining, a hopeful harbinger of the future of public media.”

The Jacquie Jones Memorial Fund award was presented to *American Sons*, a documentary project by Andrew J. Gonzales and Laura Varela. The \$380,000 award will assist the duo in completing their film, which follows a cadre of Marines after deployment in Afghanistan as they reunite over the loss of their brother and work to heal from physical and emotional wounds. The film is slated for a PBS premiere in 2025. Made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the fund supports makers in the tradition of the late Peabody Award-winning director and BPM’s second executive director, Jacquie Jones, who helped foster diverse content creators. For more on the Fund, visit [BPM](#).

The evening featured a Filmmaker Chat between NPR host Brittany Luse and Pollard, who spoke about his celebrated career, which includes acclaimed films and series like *Eyes on the Prize*, *MLK/FBI*, *Lowndes County* and *the Road to Black Power*, and *Mr. SOUL!*, and his editing of several iconic Spike Lee films. As part of PitchBLACK, a four-city retrospective of Pollard’s films and virtual screenings runs through May 5. In-person screenings took place in New York City (April 11-21) and more are scheduled for Los Angeles (April 27), Santa Barbara (April 30), and Baltimore (May 3). Some screenings will be followed by conversations with the filmmaker. The New York screenings were produced in partnership with ImageNation. For more information, visit [BPM](#).

Ethel-Ruth Tawe also received the Nonso Christian Ugboke (NCU) Fellowship, an award founded in 2016 and named after BPM’s late director of digital initiatives to support creative

technologists under age 30. The rising star has already received the Magnum Foundation 2022 Counter Histories Grant Program for her project *Image Frequency Modulation*, which competed in PitchBLACK and also was recently selected by the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) 2023 DocLab Forum. Tawe will receive a \$5,000 award.

With the 2024 PitchBLACK film and immersive grants, BPM – a Harlem-based national nonprofit that funds and distributes original content – has awarded more than \$1.8 million to 23 projects since launching PitchBLACK in 2015. Some of the projects selected in earlier years have gone on to premiere on PBS, WORLD, Create, and PBS Digital. Alumni of the program have gone on to produce film, television, and immersive projects for PBS, CNN, Showtime, Netflix, HBO, BET, NBC, The CW, and more.

Netflix's continued support is part of the company's Fund for Creative Equity, a dedicated effort to help build new opportunities for underrepresented communities within entertainment. Additional support for PitchBLACK comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; Acton Family Giving; New York Community Trust; New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; New York State Council on the Arts; National Endowment for the Arts; Shutterstock; Unity Charitable Fund, a fund of Tides Foundation; and Sonder Foundation.

For more information on BPM, visit blackpublicmedia.org. Follow BPM on social media at follow the organization on Facebook and Instagram @blackpublicmedia and watch the PitchBLACK events on the BPM YouTube channel.



Philadelphia creator Andrea Walls accepts the \$25,000 PitchBLACK Immersive Award.
Photo credit: Ed Marshall



Black Public Media executives Carol Bash, Leslie Fields-Cruz, and Denise A Greene congratulate Jacquie Jones Memorial Fund winner Andrew J. Gonzales, who won project funding for his documentary American Sons at Black Public Media's PitchBLACK Awards. Photo credit: Ed Marshall